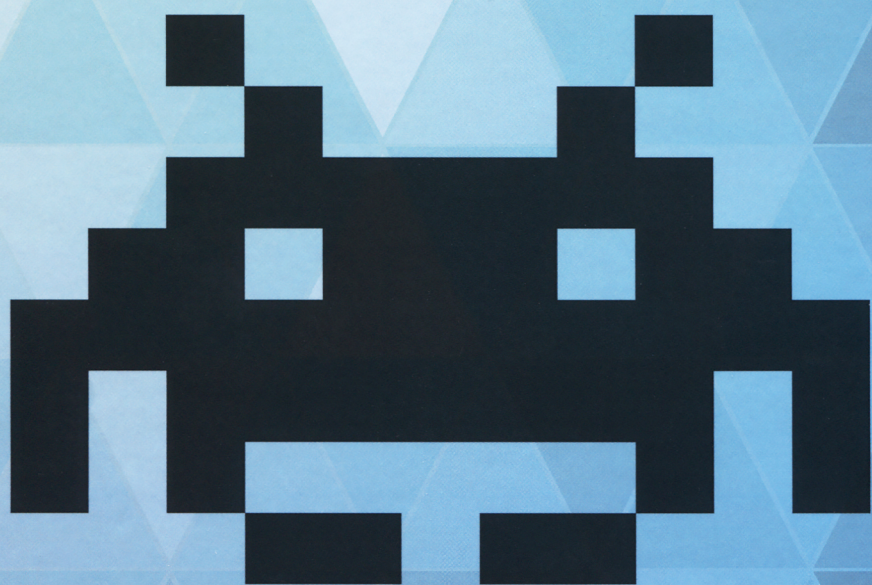# 100

GREATEST VIDEO GAME CHARACTERS

Edited by Jaime Banks,
Robert Mejia, and Aubrie Adams

two observations, we can see *Loom* as a mechanism that brings a character to life and makes all the magic happen. Interestingly, the initial inspiration behind the game's title was an advertisement in a computing magazine that used the metaphor of a loom to describe a microprocessor.[20] Furthermore, at one point in the narrative, Bobbin becomes the only person who can enter "the Void," a space outside the game's primary fictional world, while staying alive. In the Void, he can find shortcuts to places he has already visited throughout the game and seal all the gaps between the Void and the fictional world. Although the Void resembles a starry sky, it can also represent the meta-level of the game mechanics. The closing off of the entire game world can then be read as the final disconnection between a player and the player character at the end of any avatar-based video game and a closure of the particular story. Bobbin's relationship to the world therefore mirrors the player's relationship to the video game, making him one of the ultimate video game characters. Instead of being an expression or tool of the player, he is more of an equal partner.

Despite the positive reception of *Loom*, no sequel was made, and Moriarty moved on to work on *The Dig* (1995), later quitting Lucasfilm Games (by then renamed LucasArts). Due to its relatively short gameplay and forgiving difficulty, *Loom* tends to be dismissed by some "hard core" gamers as too easy. This, on the other hand, makes the game perfectly accessible to today's audiences. After all, *Loom*'s greatest achievement lies not in its puzzles but in its thoughtful and subtle reflection on the nature of the relationship between the player and the character.

Similar Characters: Amaterasu (*Ōkami*), the Kid (*Bastion*), Link (*The Legend of Zelda*)

—Jaroslav Švelch

BOWSER KOOPA

(est. 1985)
Franchise: *Super Mario Bros.*
Developer: Nintendo R&D4

Bowser is one of the most iconic villains in the history of video games. He does what he wants and doesn't care about the consequences, repeatedly kidnapping Princess Peach and causing trouble in the Mushroom Kingdom. Although Bowser is fearsome in appearance, he's always laughing, he loves showy theatrics, and he dials everything all the way up to eleven. Bowser was once merely the final boss, but Nintendo transformed him into a more sympathetic character with a charmingly bombastic personality—a flexible villain offering shades of personality from comic relief to fatherliness.

Bowser made his first appearance in *Super Mario Bros.* (1985). When producer Shigeru Miyamoto was given the task of developing a console-specific Mario game, he realized that Mario needed a well-defined world of his own; "If Mario was to be Nintendo's cynosure, he needed a constant narrative."[21] And what better way to cast Mario as a hero than to pit him against a suitable villain? Although

Mario must remain a clean avatar for the player, Bowser could take on specific character traits to flavor Mario's story.

In the first *Super Mario Bros.*, Bowser is a dark wizard who has turned the people of the Mushroom Kingdom into monsters and forced them to attack. In *Super Mario Bros. 3* (1988), however, Bowser commands an army of tanks and airships, as well as seven siblings collectively referred to as the Koopalings. The Koopalings are designed with a prominent rock aesthetic, and the American localizer who named them took his inspiration from musicians (i.e., Roy Koopa, after Roy Orbison, and Wendy O. Koopa, after Wendy O. Williams). Bowser, with his bright red mohawk and studded leather cuffs, also draws from punk rock and heavy metal influences, casting himself as the biggest and baddest of all the Koopa Troopas.

One of Bowser's purposes is to test what the player has learned. Fights against Bowser showcase the full graphic capabilities and mechanical possibilities of each Nintendo console, and challenging the Koopa king is just as thrilling an end-game reward as rescuing Princess Peach. Professional game critic Bob Chipman explains, "It really is kind of brilliant how this particular Bowser battle simultaneously makes him the most difficult boss in the game and reinforces him as a genuine threat, but also sets up a battle that neatly cements everything you need to know about the conflict between the two characters having it out onscreen."[22] Specifically, Bowser is invincible to Mario's attacks and must be tricked into harming himself, reinforcing his characterization as a powerful yet impetuous and hotheaded opponent while invoking the heights of the player's skill and creativity. Bowser was one of the first enemy characters to serve this function in a digital game, and he served as a model for how a game might be more meaningfully concluded by means of a climactic battle.

As the *Mario Bros.* franchise expanded to include sports games, party games, and role-playing games, Bowser became less threatening and more lovable. In *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars* (1996), Bowser teams up with Mario to save the Mushroom Kingdom from an alien invader; and in *Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story*, the player is allowed to control Bowser as he attempts to defeat the enemy army occupying his castle. The gradual revelation of Bowser's feelings for Princess Peach have also deepened his characterization as a sympathetic figure. He has occasionally rescued her from other kidnappers, and he even writes in his diary in *Paper Mario* (2000) that he has a crush on her. Bowser's misguided attempts to befriend Princess Peach and his grand pronouncements regarding his intention to squash Mario have become a reliable source of humor across all of the *Mario Bros.* franchises.

In *Super Mario Sunshine* (2002), it is not Bowser who kidnaps Princess Peach but his son Bowser Junior, who wants to make his father proud. The information that Bowser is a loving father coincided with the flourishing of online video game fandom, giving rise to all manner of theories concerning the Mario universe, including the supposition that Bowser and Princess Peach have been conducting a clandestine affair, as well as the argument that Mario is a sociopath. "So whereas I thought Mario was just showing up and destroying a kingdom like a terrorist, what you're actually saying is that he was murdering all those people and then stealing the coins from their corpses," notes one of the characters in the Cracked Web-magazine video series *After Hours* during a discussion of the Mario

universe.[23] Although Bowser is clearly up to no good, many players respond posi-
tively to his characterization as a single father adored by his son and respected by
his minions as he steadfastly refuses to admit defeat.

Bowser's image among fans as a doting parent and an indefatigable optimist has
become so pervasive that Nintendo has begun using him in publicity campaigns
as a stand-in for the fathers who grew up with Mario games and want to share
their love of gaming with their own children. In a Japanese television commercial
for *Mario Party 10* (2015), for example, a father sitting on a couch surrounded by
his family turns into Bowser and roars at the camera while his wife and children
squeal in delight. Bowser also makes a cameo appearance in the Disney movie
Wreck-It Ralph (2012), in which he is a member of a support group for video game
villains who want to remain true to themselves despite being misunderstood. For
both adults and children, the appeal of Bowser lies in his obvious enjoyment of
his unapologetically bad behavior.

Bowser is obnoxious and obviously not the sharpest tool in the shed, but the
player's interactions with him are always entertaining, if sometimes maddening.
Bowser's characterization as a "fun" villain allows him to maintain his status in a
continually evolving landscape of gameplay standards and gaming demograph-
ics, which have expanded to embrace multiple generations. Gamers don't feel bad
about trouncing Bowser because he always gets back up and tries again.

Similar Characters: Big Boss (*Metal Gear Solid*), Ganondorf (*The Legend of Zelda*),
Jecht (*Final Fantasy X*)

—Kathryn Hemmann

100 Greatest
Video Game Characters

Edited by

Jaime Banks
Robert Mejia
Aubrie Adams