

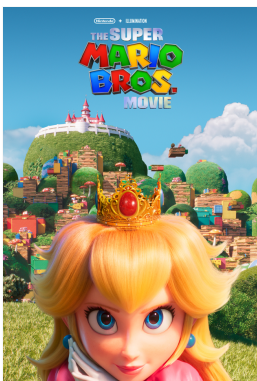
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Universal Solvent: Experiencing Mario

May 20, 2023 • By J. D. Connor



EARLY IN *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* (2023), Princess Peach is laying out her origin story—what little she



knows of it—when Mario speculates that she might be from his world (i.e., Brooklyn). She lets him down easy. “There’s a huge universe out there. With a lot of galaxies.” The [trailer](#) pulls that remark out of context and follows it with a line from

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LARB CONTRIBUTOR

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FOLLOWS IT WITH A LINE FROM

elsewhere in the movie—

“They’re all counting on us.” This is how the movie generates “stakes,” something endemic to Hollywood screenwriting and utterly irrelevant to the Mario universe. In *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, we are watching those domains collide.

Heard with Hollywood ears, Peach is invoking the Intellectual Property Sublime, the actual stakes of a modern media franchise. When execs strip-mine IP to generate reliable returns in an industry where that outcome can be elusive, they talk about “activations.” Creators making peace with their paychecks give voice to that sublime: activation means finding so many stories to tell in such a busy, buzzy universe. There *is* a huge Mario universe out there, and it can be exploited in both familiar and unimagined ways.

But the thing about Mario—and I mean *the* thing—is that everything about how it works is not about stakes but about niftiness, about fit, about flow, about the minor masteries of “hunh,” of “Thank you Mario! But our princess is in another castle,” of “Oh, right” and “Check this out, it’s pretty cool.” I want to try to get at the effect

of that affect on the franchise. It’s a ragged interaction, this meeting of corporatized exploitation and extended internalization, not ragged enough that it significantly impinges on the financial relentlessness of Mario but rather sets up a style or mode of consumption unique within the global mega-content system.

I want to call this Mario’s “experiential uptake,” the way that we get to know, and know our way around, all those galaxies that make up the franchise. Even if we can’t quite specify what that is in every case, I think we feel it when we sense that a particular installment or object gets it or does not, when an instance expands the palette or betrays the spirit. There are meta-franchises where tonal incompatibility is taken to an extreme—the difference between the R-rated *Joker* (2019) and the PG *LEGO Batman Movie* (2017). Then there are meta-franchises

J. D. Connor asks why Netflix spent \$450 million to acquire the “Glass Onion” franchise....

Disney’s Endgame: Corporate Stockholm Syndrome in the Age of the Mega-Franchise

While we crave traditional components like complexity, spectacle, and closure, we experience those things only as an endless flow of branded content....

Post-Shawarma:

On Avengers: Infinity War

Aaron Bady wonders: can you imagine how exhausting it has been to build the Marvel Cinematic Universe?...

How to Read Star Wars

“Star Wars is sacred to millions, and millions are blind to Star Wars.” M. W. Lipschutz on the 13 ways of reading the franchise....

where a rigorous enforcement of consistency stultifies the enterprise, something that seems to have happened with both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* on occasion. When people complain that the Marvel movies are now “all the same,” one thing they are lamenting is an insistent jocular workplace-comedy narrative.

And then there is Mario, where Nintendo’s own work and a kind of baseline knack among fans has meant that there is much, much less riding on whether the next instance hews to the canon or radically overthrows it. Mario emerges from a company with a unique—and uniquely durable—view of the compatibility of hardware and story. They are device and console makers; they are often thought of as not competing to make the highest-end graphics; over and over again, they have found the sweet spot of playability—the Switch, the Game Boy, the Wii, the Super Nintendo Entertainment System. When the movie plays along with the Nintendo program, we experience it as repeated beats of niftiness.

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New media analyst and consultant Matthew Ball has recently contended that the global center of narrative gravity is moving from Euro-American stories to Asian ones, that the referential given is no longer, say, Shakespeare or a fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm but is moving toward works like *Demon Slayer*. If that is the case, then Mario is an ideal candidate for a truly planetary solvent that would combine East and West. At its most basic, Mario is a rudimentary European chivalric tale (knight saves princess) that has Kiplingesque Age-of-Imperialism or mini-kaiju modules bolted onto it (the Kongs and Bowser, respectively).

Like all meta-franchises, Mario has a meticulously detailed [wiki](#) that will answer all your questions. But Mario lore is not subject to the same intense regulation as the *Star Wars* universe, or even the same intense fascination as Nintendo’s partner franchise *Legend of*

Pixar and the Brain Scientists

"Inside Out" is billed as a "major emotion picture," so it is not surprising that "thought" is pretty much a bad word throughout....

Zelda. Beyond the fan-driven [Wookieepedia](#) lies an official corporate continuity complete with a [Keeper of the Holocron](#) (Leland Chee) and levels of canonicity. (At one point, “G-canon,” the highest level, covered things George Lucas said about the franchise.) You can be serious about Mario canon if you want, but (to paraphrase) the canon won’t love you back. This has helped Mario avoid some of the worst fan excesses that have beset its rivals.

Nintendo’s resistance to cults of expertise has extended to the world of e-sports. Where other game companies have built out competitive leagues to drive interest in their flagship titles, Nintendo maintains an arms-length relationship with the Super Smash Bros. league. The results are that everyone thinks of SSB as grassroots and community-driven. This situation frustrates some players who are looking for a suffusive intensity in the league that would match the intensity of their gameplay. Yet, turning down the stakes of the SSB league has kept its doors open to more players and fans. Like all good Mario things, it’s *huh, check this out, pretty cool.*

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Right now, though, Mario-as-franchise is playing catch-up via Nintendo’s new partnership with Universal (i.e., Comcast NBCUniversal). After a paradigmatic [cinematic flop](#) in the 1990s and a constrained television presence, Mario has returned with a blockbuster that has easily cleared one billion dollars and may end up the most successful movie of 2023. It was produced by Illumination, which is tied up with Universal, and which is the animation studio behind *Minions* (2015) and *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016). Chris Meledandri, who runs Illumination, now sits on Nintendo’s board. All the players involved expect the relationship to last.

Illumination’s movies cost roughly half of what the Disney/Pixar movies do to make. They are all very profitable. The first 12 have brought in more than eight

billion dollars at the box office, a figure that does not include video revenues, merch, or theme park admissions. It is unlikely that Illumination movies get inside the subjectivities of children and occupy them as totally as, say, *Frozen* (2013) and *Encanto* (2021) have, but they also do not flop in the ways that *The Good Dinosaur* (2015) or *Onward* (2020) or *Strange World* (2022) did.

If Illumination's lower budgets make them better bets overall than Disney/Pixar's, the company insulates itself further by casting big stars as leads, even at the risk of casting bad voices. Jack Black is a roaring success as pining, ruthless Bowser; Chris Pratt is affectless as Mario. The studio may play it safe to a fault, but it clearly feels the industry pushback, and during the launch of *SMBM*, its representatives have been at pains to talk about how good-looking the film is. (It has very impressive stretches.)

More interesting, though, is that even if Illumination is a "story-forward" studio, its movies consistently feature maniacal, depressed, or truly misanthropic characters. These are not the mildly unpleasant, eye-rolling boomer parents of early DreamWorks animation who are ripe for redemption; this is no mere veneer of unlikability. Illumination has a habit of nesting something much, much darker in its much, much lighter fare. Among the hundreds of minor characters in the Marioverse, Illumination chose to prominently feature Lumalee, a sweet-voiced glowing star that cheerily yearns for death. The other characters joke about what a downer he is—and, yes, chirping "Fresh meat for the grinder!" panders to the performatively depressive adults in the audience, but that does not make the despair less real. When Marvel, by contrast, spun the Thanos story for the movies in the Infinity Saga, they took out his original motivation, which was his love for Mistress Death herself. Universal had to prove to Nintendo that it would be true to Mario's spirit, that the studio *got* Mario. But in "Illumalee," we see the studio signing its name to the adaptation.

What makes Universal an ideal partner for Nintendo is not just its animation studio but also its theme park business. Despite COVID-19 delays, there are now Super Nintendo Worlds at Universal Studios Tokyo and Universal Studios Hollywood and coming soon enough to Singapore and Orlando. The task is to manage this parkification without betraying Nintendo's unique experiential uptake. In its exquisitely detailed Wizarding World of Harry Potter, Universal caters both to design-obsessed adults and to young fans who want to experience the franchise's world as immersively as possible. In Super Nintendo World, Universal manages a different mode of immersion, one where you are *in it* but never *lost* in it.

That seems easier to do in Hollywood than elsewhere. Universal Studios Hollywood is squeezed between the Hollywood Hills and the studio lot, and its attractions, as a result, are overwhelmingly screen-centric "dark rides" in production-designed warehouses. There's a sameness to the place that gives it a slightly also-ran feel; at the same time, it *is* the actual studio lot, so there is a countervailing historical-dream-factory authenticity. To carve out Super Nintendo World, Universal tore down some soundstages as part of a massive construction effort. At a time when demand for studio space in Los Angeles is at an all-time high, and new construction is occurring all over the city, for Universal to sacrifice some stages for its park constitutes a first-level "strategic commitment." The company is all in.

When I visited Super Nintendo World, the area was open but still working out the kinks, especially on the centerpiece Mario Kart: Bowser's Challenge ride. In some ways, the beta testing—excuse me, "technical rehearsal"—phase is almost *truer* to the Nintendo spirit since those of us in our plastic Mario augmented reality headgear and the Universal employees in their Mario Kart racing suits were all figuring it out together.

The park section has been a tremendous hit for several

reasons. First, the level of finish is exceptional by Universal Studios standards. Second, its immersiveness is neatly procedural. You enter through a Warp Pipe; you work your way through a set of minigames to unlock a final one; you eat themed food at the Toadstool Cafe. Third, the designers have managed to solve the problem of scale, surrounding visitors with oversized Question Blocks and Piranha Plants to give us the sense of being (regular) Mario-sized. Standing at the bottom of the area, we are ephemerally miniaturized. Looking up, it seems as though we have indeed landed in the Nintendo World. *In it*, but not *lost* in it. The feeling of the World is not quite nostalgia, because it is present and ludic, but it is not uncolored by nostalgia. Crane your eyes up the walls of the land and you can see the studio beyond. Or decide not to. For now.

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Mario is not *simply* a franchise. It has been around so long that it forms a sort of background radiation for generations. As a result, it is closer to a universal solvent, and like the alchemists' dream of azoth, Mario points to the redemption of the fallen world. In anticipation of the movie and the park, it has felt like Super Mario Spring across Los Angeles. In Burbank, Pacific Opera Project restaged [#Superflute](#), its 2019 Nintendo-inspired production of *The Magic Flute*. *The Magic Flute* is light enough as it is, but the new English libretto restocks the opera with Nintendoverse jokes. Tamino is Link; Papageno is Mario; Sarastro is Donkey Kong armed with monkey puns. There was plenty of cosplay at [#Superflute](#), including a bear couple as Mario and Wario. Not reverence, not homage, just, you know, fun. Of course, the singers, even if they were having fun, were also *bringing it*: you don't half-ass your way through the [Queen of the Night aria](#).

Immersion, transcendence, a negotiation with depression and disappointment: it was May 2020, in the hard-lockdown phase of the pandemic, when a loose collective

of un- and underemployed editors, animators, artists, and even comics virtually banded together to create vaporwave remixes of movies that fascinated them. The project, captained by video editor Alex Jacobs, began by taking on *Speed Racer* (2008), a tremendous box office flop held dear by a certain strand of cinema studies academics, manga nerds, trans youth, and Wachowski obsessives. The opening of *speed vapor*, a segment built out of the

sequence in which Speed is racing the ghost of his long-lost brother Rex, is set to a remixed version of David Wise's "Disco Train" from the 1995 SNES game *Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy's Kong Quest*. It. Just. Goes.

The song was not being deployed out of a simple nostalgia but out of something like beatification. Why wouldn't there be a tremendous techno song inside a Mario game? Why not pull it out, strip out the game sounds, remix it to boost the bass, and dwell in that zone, that flow, that wave? Hidden in the cultural background radiation was semi-forgotten meaningfulness, ready to be redeemed.

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The Super Mario Bros. Movie doesn't have the assaultive transcendence of *Speed Racer* or the DIY revelation of *speed vapor*. At one point, *SMBM* needle-drops a-ha's hit song "Take on Me," reminding aging Gen-Xers of the landmark 1985 [music video](#) that blended cartoon and live-action in a *very Speed Racer*-esque story.

Unsurprisingly, *speed vapor* included the song too, but it was slowed and pitched down, given a submarine viscosity to underscore the sadness of Speed's failed reunion with his brother Rex and the endlessly deferred mourning of the brothers for their relationship. Which is to say that *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* is traffic and *speed vapor* is art.

Traffic can be enjoyable. When Mario's family picks on him, he consoles himself by playing *The Legend of Zelda*, a too-cute product-placement-for-itself that is also experientially right enough to feel recognizable. That little

moment points to a new, pervasive game consciousness at the edges of the Hollywood system. With the recent successes of *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020), *Uncharted* (2022), and *The Last of Us* (2023), there is a temptation to say that Hollywood has finally “figured out” games, but that is true only if we mean that it has figured out that different games work differently, and that some can be turned into prestige dramas from the creators of *Chernobyl* (2019) while others will be kids’ movies with space for Jim Carrey to chew the scenery.

When Pedro Pascal hosted *Saturday Night Live* in February, the show produced a *Last of Us*-style [trailer](#) for a grimdark HBO version of Mario, in part to show what we all should know by now—that games are not one thing and their adaptations are not one thing. Different instances spread through the experience economy differently. Studios seem to have learned that the activation of a games-first franchise in nongaming media requires more than screenwriter-fans. It requires an overarching sense of experiential uptake, or, to put it in more precise terms, a habituated knowledge of the modes and intensities of its autofidelity. We usually just call that its *vibe*.

Philosopher and music scholar Robin James has been working up a [theory of vibes](#) to match our cultural moment, where vibes are everywhere. The theory is nuanced and historical, but at the heart of it is a version of the split between suffusive power and experiential knack that speaks to what I have been trying to get at.

From the side of power, vibes have replaced the older mode in which individuals were disciplined, fashioned to (want to) hew to a norm of behavior. But in the era of vibes, individuals find themselves not disciplined but legitimated—authorized, certified, enabled, provisionally empowered, justified, unbothered—through their [“perpetually-reattuned adaptation to an evolving norm.”](#) On the model of a recommendation algorithm, where the next thing you are supposed to want is the product of all

that you and your taste cohort have consumed before, James calls this “algorithmic legitimation.” Where norms were a way for systems to circumscribe our potential, vibes are a way of serving us up to systems that want to predict us. Star Wars was a meta-franchise of norms; Mario is a meta-franchise of vibes. Fall out of step with the norm and the disciplining fans will chase you out of the director’s chair. Fall out of step with the vibe and be left behind. In my terms, you take Mario too seriously or disregard the background radiation at your (modest) social peril.

From the side of experience, [James points out](#) that “vibes are actually lay phenomenology.” Again, with Mario, the stakes are ratcheted down, but Mario and its offshoots have proliferated ways of coming to terms with the world—seeing the walls that might go unseen, finding new routes through the experiences we have already had in forms of demi-nostalgia, opening up what James calls “counterhegemonic” uses of media.

Both aspects of this dominion of vibes coalesce around *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* and its cultural surround. Even more, Mario’s durable, low-stakes familiarity makes it possible to *see* those complementary possibilities as ours,

or possibly ours. (In it, not lost in it.) A long-running franchise extends its reach into theaters and theme parks, speed-boosting corporate financial performance and promising intergalactic exploitation. Audiences go along, testing those new experiences against their sense of the world they have known, revising that sense, that world—fitting those experiences into their habits of uptake, or, if necessary, fashioning experiences of their own.

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