

The Mario Game That Wishes It Didn't Exist

It Was a Dark and Stormy Mid-Afternoon

The year was 2021, mid-March. I was sitting in my college dorm, bored out of my mind. Rain had been pouring across the windowsill for hours now; clearly not an outside kind of day. Not that it mattered, because I didn't know anyone at school anyways. Not that that mattered either, because lockdown was still well underway at that point, meaning there would be very little to do with these hypothetical people.

So that was that. What a perfect opportunity, I thought, to finally crack open the 3DS I had brought with me, and boot up *Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam*, the only Mario RPG I had yet to replay in any capacity. It's not like there was anything else to be doing around here.

I didn't get far. A little over three hours in, I could feel my mind start to wander, my eyelids drooping, the yawns per minute increasing sharply. It was about the time a random Toad requested I dawdle around to look for some more Paper Toads that I finally gave in: "Wouldn't it be more fun to just replay *Dream Team* instead?" I wondered, starting up another playthrough on Hard Mode for a game I had already beaten four times over. Though my mission to replay *Paper Jam* had ended in abject failure, the experience stuck with me. What happened? I've handled way worse, way more tedious things than *that* before. It wouldn't be until over three years later that I would ascertain the true nature of my boredom, committing myself to an actual, honest-to-goodness replay. During that replay, I would make a groundbreaking, foundational realization about *Paper Jam*....

It's just not very good, is it?

It's difficult to fully understand why *Paper Jam* is the way that it is. A crossover between the two Mario RPG series seemed like a perfectly great idea on paper (yes, yes, whatever), but it's clear that the result failed to capitalize on anything interesting a crossover of that nature would entail. Many have speculated that *Paper Jam*'s use of only the most standard assets and characters from the Mario universe was a smaller piece in a more sinister mandate, a plan for the series that sought to standardize the franchise and make Mario more consistent and brand friendly.

I suspect, however, that the truth of the matter is far more mundane than people believe. *Paper Jam* is clearly a much more budgeted title than its predecessor. In an [Iwata Asks](#) interview with the *Dream Team* leads, in addition to discussing how the team

wanted to make the biggest *Mario & Luigi* game yet when hopping into the 3rd dimension, they also discuss some of the herculean efforts they went through to make the 2D sprites look good in a 3D world, something even Iwata exclaims would create a “staggering workload” for the team. Consequently, it makes sense why *Paper Jam*, despite its emphasis on paper characters, ends up using a lot more 3D assets than its predecessor, and why the game reuses a lot of the sprites already created in *Dream Team*. Though I have no direct evidence, my guess is that it was simply too expensive a task to go full throttle on *Paper Jam*.

But this reasoning might not just be for budgetary concerns. In the same Iwata interview, Hiroyuki Kubota, *Dream Team*’s director and eventual co-director for *Paper Jam*, mentions how he felt “like a white sheet of paper” after the creation of *Bowser’s Inside Story*, agreeing with Iwata that he felt “burnt out until he was blank,” but that he “had to get moving on the next one.” If that was the feeling moving into *Dream Team*, I can only wonder what Kubota was feeling when he was approached to make a *fifth Mario & Luigi*.

These working constraints seem to bleed out into the game creatively as well. According to a [GameInformer](#) interview, the idea to base the Paper Mario side of things mostly on *Sticker Star* was not because of some personal interest in the title, but the very practical fact that they could “base the game off the latest data.” Oh, and also, while we’re here, you can apparently thank *Paper Jam* for introducing the white outline to Paper Mario, not *Color Splash*, as indicated by AlphaDream. Furthermore, a [Miiverse interview](#) hosted by the developers of *Paper Jam* indicated that fitting in Paper Mario was difficult as they “had to work from the Mario & Luigi base,” and that they’re original story for the game had to be pared back after devising something [far too ambitious](#). Given what we know so far, these considerations make sense. New locations means new assets, new characters means new sprites, all of which adds an incredible workload to what seemed to be a fairly exhausted team of people. Rather than a top-down scheme at Nintendo, *Paper Jam*’s unoriginality seems more likely to be a case of limited time, budget, and energy.

Understandable as many of these reasons are, they ultimately don’t change what *Paper Jam* is: a deathly boring game. Truthfully, though, I think there’s actually quite a bit more to say than that, and very little of it good for *Paper Jam*’s reputation. *Paper Jam* is more than just a boring game, it is a surprisingly mean-spirited and unpleasant experience, congealing into a bland mess that I would dishonorably designate the very worst the Mario RPGs have to offer.

Destination: Dull

If there's one thing you've probably heard about *Paper Jam*, it's that it is deeply uninteresting. This is correct. Just looking at the opening image of the Mushroom Kingdom really tells you all you need to know. Grasslands, Desert, Beach, Forest, Snowy Mountain, Lava Castle; there's no surprises here. But while most might be content to say that *Paper Jam*'s overworld is boring, I think it's worth seriously unpacking that statement; It doesn't do the issue justice. *Paper Jam*'s overworld is boring, yes, but it is also the most singularly dull rendition of the Mushroom Kingdom the Mario series has ever devised, playing out less like an actual representation of standard Mario tropes and more like the faded recollection of an embittered *Paper Mario* fan.

There's a common talking point against *Sticker Star* – and the *New Super Mario Bros.* series – that these games lacked fun setpieces and unique environments to explore. But this is only *kind of* true. *New Super Mario Bros.*, especially with *New Super Mario Bros. U*, was at least able to throw in some neat little variations to common themes, like sunken ship ghost houses, starry night ice levels, *Starry Night* van Gogh levels, sunset cloud levels, and a transmogrified Peach's Castle. *Sticker Star* featured many stale Mario setpieces, but still found time to include Goomba Fortresses, Yoshi Sphinxes, Desert Towers, Wiggler Tree Houses, Beachside Shipwrecks, Gondola Rides, Minion Amusement Parks, River Rapids, Chain-Chomp Jungle Temples; this is a non-exhaustive list. Yes, these games are lacking in originality *relative* to the likes of other Mario games, but it's not correct to suggest they're lacking in originality *completely*. On the other hand, one only needs to take a cursory look at *Paper Jam* to see how much lower the bar really is. *Paper Jam*'s Mushroom Kingdom has quite literally *zero* locations of interest, aside from some so-called villages composed of nothing but copy-pasted Toad Houses, and... some prison cells, I guess?

In one scene, the Bowsers suggest taking the Peaches up to a villa they have on Mt. Brrr. A villa sounds like a fun location; I can only imagine what creative ideas a large, resort-like luxury mansion run by Bowser's minions could bring to the table. I can only imagine it, because this is what the villa actually looks like. It's just so... *painful* to witness. Why would Bowser ever even *go* here – so he can get snowed on? There doesn't seem to be much in the way of amenities or customer service or... furniture. I guess it's a "bring-your-own-lawn-chair" kinda deal at Villa Bowser. If this were any other game than *Paper Jam*, this location would easily be one of the highlights of the adventure.

Fortunately, *Paper Jam* offers a vast selection of caves to break up the monotony. Doop Doop Dunes features a prolonged segment underground, while Mt. Brrr is speckled with a few along the path to the mountain's summit, painted with a nice blue finish to really

complete the experience. If you're bored with the sunny beaches, you can take a stroll around the underground prison, which looks conspicuously like the Dunes caves, and which comprises a whole 13 of the 20 total screens in *Twinsy Tropics*. Did I say "fortunately"?

Even the names of the areas don't do much to inspire confidence. Mario area names have always been pretty silly, but at least in *Mario & Luigi*, they've usually followed some kind of theme, like *Superstar Saga*'s laugh-related names or *Dream Team*'s sleep-related ones. Nothing remotely as interesting has been attempted in *Paper Jam*. I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to gather from the name Mt. Brrr other than "it's cold." Sunbeam Plains is just too generic a name to get excited about, and the final area is named Neo Bowser Castle, which was already done in *Dream Team*. That last one could even work, if Bowser explicitly mentioned the events of *Dream Team* as his inspiration, but as we'll soon see, *Paper Jam* has a particular problem giving meaningful context to what's going on in the game. As it is now, it feels almost like *Paper Jam* is hoping you'll forget the previous game existed. And a glance at *Dream Team*'s world map is enough to see why – for the most part, this "game-at-a-glance" gives you several locations of interest, immediately sparking curiosity before you even get past the start menu.

The worst part though, is that it's difficult to say these standard areas have been rendered particularly well. One of the major mechanics of the game is a dash button, allowing you to run through the world at a faster pace while also letting you jump with all three characters at the same time. The level design has clearly taken account of both the dash and the additional playable character, because the individual screens in *Paper Jam* are gigantic compared to any of the series' prior. This is *not* to the game's benefit; since there's nothing of interest to populate these giant screens with, the result is a lot of them feeling like a barren smattering of random elements, or at worst, a giant monotone field of nothing. It means the environments are less detailed, too. Even the most basic screen in *Dream Team* had loads of little environmental features tucked into its corners, from tile configurations on the floor, to carefully placed plants and flowers around the tiles, to overgrowths and patterns on the grass itself. But now that same level of detail needs to be stretched out to accommodate a larger space, so each screen feels less distinctive. *Paper Jam* has comparatively fewer screens per area, but I'd argue almost none of them are engaging enough to remember.

And good music can only do so much. Yoko Shimomura tries her best to invigorate the game with some life, but there's not exactly a lot to work with. Since the areas have no theming other than their generic biomes, it's hard to muster up any greater sentiment about the soundtrack other than, "well, that sure sounds like a pretty good desert

theme.” Not to say Shimomura was phoning it in, or anything. There are of course some exceptions, like the Forest Fairy Melody and especially Mountaintop Secrets, which deserves better than to be pasted over any area in *Paper Jam*. It appears I’m in good company in that opinion. Still, if Mountaintop Secrets can’t even make me jazzed about *Paper Jam*, it’s probably not the music’s fault.

Searching over the entire game, I feel the Lakitu Info Centers, the buildings where we’re given most of the game’s Paper Toad Rescue missions, are about the only interesting locale *Paper Jam* offers. Fashioned after an amateur newsroom, the Lakitus rush across the desk, pencil and notepad in hand to bring the latest info to the citizens of the land. Papers strewn about the floor, the info centers bustle and move with energy in a way the rest of the Mushroom Kingdom feels devoid of. The Lakitus exist in a nexus of their own, gathering data and intel from people the game never bothers to think about in locations the game never attempts to realize. Then again, there is something depressing in the fact that the most interesting idea *Paper Jam* can muster is doing a laundry list of the Lakitu’s literal paperwork. After all, what is the name *Paper Jam* if not an office supply joke? And a paper jam is not a thing to be enjoyed, or to look forward to; it is a blockage, an error, something you want done and over with as fast as possible.

Tragically, *Paper Jam* is anything but short. Sitting between 25-30 hours for just the main story, *Paper Jam* is the second longest *Mario & Luigi* game, despite having the least to say. How can this possibly be the case? The answer is simple: *Paper Jam* is the king of contrivances, gorging itself only on the most asinine and lame roadblocks imaginable to pad out the runtime. *Paper Jam* is little more than an arbitrary series of obstacles doled out at specific intervals. Understanding this aspect helps to illuminate the true nature of the game’s most common criticism: the Paper Toad missions. In actuality, there are not as many of these as some of *Paper Jam*’s detractors would have you believe. The most egregious missions happen early on, where the game decides to stop dead in its tracks to have you rescue some Toads in the Plains and Dunes, but other than that, there’s a fairly large amount of time between anymore such missions reappearing, a trend which continues throughout most of the game. But while the case of the Paper Toads may be slightly exaggerated, the underlying criticism it’s hinting at is certainly not. The reason why people dislike the Paper Toad missions is because they feel like mindless filler, their purpose only to keep you playing for longer. The problem is that this feeling of doing blatant busywork persists throughout most of the game, not just while you’re doing these missions. It thus creates the illusion of there being more than there actually are; *Paper Jam* itself essentially feels like one long Paper Toad mission.

Doop Doop Dunes contains a frankly laughable sequence of events to help constrain you within the area for longer. After a chase sequence with Nabbit, you attempt to cross

a bridge to the other half of the desert. However, two giant pokeys knock you off the bridge into a cave, leading to an hour-long diversion involving escaping the cave and doing the aforementioned Paper Toad rescues. After crossing the first bridge, you get into a Papercraft battle, followed by Bowser launching a cannonball which destroys a *second* bridge you come across. This leads to Mario and company getting kidnapped and being put into the Twinsy Tropics cave. There is no story being told here, it is just a perfunctory sequence of events that need to happen in order to justify Doop Doop Dunes' existence.

To cross the Gloomy Woods, you need to figure out a way past the magic Playstation glyphs Kamek has erected across the Woods. The local Wiggler is capable of such a task, but he won't help because he's hungry, so you need to spend some time feeding him. Eventually, after the game's had enough of the glyphs, Bowser's minions somehow manage to erect a few electric fences preventing access to the furthest recesses of the woods, something Wiggler can do nothing about. Later in the game, when you need to reach Mt. Brrr, the game contrives a reason to go through Gloomy Woods again by throwing roadblocks in front of the entrance of the mountain, an entire extra hour of game just to get past a literal piece of cardboard. Neo Bowser Castle is an utterly interminable area, beginning with a *thirty* minute Nabbit chase for no reason (how did he even get up here?), more broken bridges, and backtracking to collect some ore as well as for a cannon minigame they throw in at the last second. There are no less than three separate occasions in this dungeon where they throw an extended sequence of mob battles at you in addition to the regular mobs in the area proper.

This is a meager list of the ways in which *Paper Jam* loves to waste your time, but I must re-emphasize that the *entire* game is like this. And I'm not trying to suggest that *Mario & Luigi* games have never had filler before, goodness knows that's not true, but it has never been as pervasive as it is here. The real problem is a matter of context and story progression – getting through an area in *Paper Jam* should feel like you're making headway, not just in terms of levels and Bros. Attacks, but also in terms of narrative as well. Previous *Mario & Luigi* games have done this fine. In *Dream Team*, to reach the summit of Mt. Pajamaja, you first need to go to Wakeport to find a tour guide for help. This makes sense: of course we'd find a tour guide in Pi'illo Island's major tourist town. Now, you could accuse this section of being filler – after all, it's easy to imagine a version of *Dream Team* where you head straight to Pajamaja right away, and find the tour guides at the base of the mountain. But I would argue this wouldn't make *Dream Team* better. Wakeport is an exciting little area that sells the culture of the island in terms of its sleep-related fixations and its dependence on tourism. Furthermore, it feels narratively satisfying. You go into Wakeport with a goal, finding a tour guide, and you come out of Wakeport having completed that goal. Similarly, the purpose of Somnom

Woods is to reach the temple of the Zeekeeper. The Woods are the only place on the island untouched by tourism, and the game properly represents this, the mystical woods the only area not overrun with buildings, people, or construction equipment. *Dream Team* makes sure to place each area in context within the specific setting of the game; Somnon Woods is not a random forest, it is a forest with a specific meaning to the setting of Pi'illo Island, and *Dream Team* brings us there to fulfill a specific purpose.

But this is not at all how *Paper Jam* goes about things. Notice how the purpose of every single area in *Paper Jam* is simply to get to the next location, and never because there's something important about the location itself. The reason we go to Sunbeam Plains is for no other reason than to get to Bowser's Castle at the end. The reason we go to Doop Doop Dunes is to get to Bowser's Castle at the end. The reason we're in Twinsy Tropics is because we need to get back to Doop Doop Dunes so we can get to Bowser's Castle at the end. When we learn the Peaches get taken to the villa at Mount Brrr, the reason we go to Gloomy Woods is to get to Mt. Brrr at the end. When we fail to rescue the Peaches at Mt. Brrr, and they're taken *back* to Bowser's Castle, we go to Doop Doop Dunes to get back to Twinsy Tropics so we can get to Bowser's Castle at the end. Why does Mario cross the road? Quite literally only because he needs to get to the other side. There is no reason, no specificity to any of the areas we're asked to visit; the events that occur within each are almost totally interchangeable. Why does Bowser have a villa in Mt. Brrr, and not in Twinsy Tropics instead? Why does Bowser have a dungeon in Twinsy Tropics, and not in Gloomy Woods? I dunno. There is no justification, no attempt to contextualize the world. They just happen to exist there. And that's the difference between a game like *Paper Jam* and a game like *Dream Team*: each area in *Dream Team* exists for its own sake, and not as a mere means to an end.

It's important to point out that this lack of context exists both on the macro and micro scale. I was blindsided by boss battles on several occasions during my playthrough, because they seem to sprout up at random. This is usually not a problem, because games typically have a pretty good language for communicating when a boss fight is taking place. If you visit an area to collect a special item, you can bet there's probably a boss fight right before you collect said special item. See a large room with a save block? Probably a boss. But because *Paper Jam* lacks any specificity or context whatsoever, it's often difficult to ascertain where these signs are. At one point, before entering Bowser's Castle, the game repeatedly spells out that a boss fight is about to happen. They need to do this because there's nothing else indicating it otherwise. The arena you're standing on is just a bland patch of sand with a generic green pipe sitting next to it. *Paper Jam* removed save blocks entirely, and the heart blocks that refill HP and BP don't always appear next to bosses. And once you beat the boss, you just move on to the next area, with little or sometimes no fanfare or debrief whatsoever. An area's boss

appears not because it represents a turn in the story, but because in the language of video games, standard operating procedure dictates that an area ends with a special battle to mark all the skills you've learned. *Paper Jam* is closer to a Mario activity book at Barnes & Noble than it is a narratively-driven RPG.

It's frustrating that the game can't seem to grasp the basic concepts of what makes a game interesting. People rag on *Sticker Star*, but *Sticker Star* does this correctly. You need to travel to each of the five worlds because a Royal Sticker has fallen into each area. There. We're already doing better than *Paper Jam*. Each area has a story reason to go to it, with a built-in natural ending point. That's literally all you need. On a micro scale, though, *Sticker Star* is actually fairly interesting. The segmented level structure allows the game to organize the layouts of each area to match the context of that specific world. World 2 sees you go back to previous levels to find tower scraps to unlock Drybake Stadium. The fact that you can find the tower scraps in any order simulates a sort of archaeological investigation, scouring each of the four prior levels to uncover their secrets through your own research (an idea so good, *Origami King* would seemingly return to it). Now *Sticker Star* often undermines itself with the specifics of some of those levels, but the core concept is neat, generating a reason to backtrack concomitant with the experience the world is trying to simulate. World 3 is by far the largest world in the game, a maze-like poisonous forest. Unlike everywhere else in the game, World 3's layout is a three-by-three grid, maximizing the number of possible pathways between levels, in turn maximizing the number of secret exits that can be placed in each level. Like before, World 3's layout embodies the spirit of its design, creating a confusing, web-like structure that the player progresses through non-linearly, having the player backtrack to previous levels to find new routes to previously unexplored parts of the forest. The Bafflewood, a level at the beginning of World 3, makes the statement of intent fairly explicit: a forest maze, the game's equivalent of *Zelda's* Lost Woods, foreshadowing the world you're about to enter. *Sticker Star's* level and world design adds meaning to the game where its story often falters; they are not made up of interchangeable roadblocks in the way that *Paper Jam* so frequently is, but are intentional events that map onto their specific location and bolster their World's respective themes and atmospheres.

To be fair, there are some fleeting examples of *Paper Jam* trying to do this. Unlike the Trio Moves and Bros. Attacks, which are given to us at seemingly random intervals for no other reason than that we've progressed through the requisite length of time for a new move, the overworld moves are learned more naturally. The trio will find themselves stuck in a novel dilemma, like behind an unbreakable block, or see an out of reach object, or need to reach a too tall object, and discuss a way to resolve this situation using Paper Mario. They're cute little scenes which explain why we didn't

obtain the move at a point earlier in time; the Bros. didn't know they could do it, and never had a reason to either. That's all it takes, *Paper Jam*, just a little bit of context.

I hope by now I demonstrated that "boring" and "uninspired" don't really capture the problems with *Paper Jam*'s Mushroom Kingdom. "Stupefying" and "intolerable" may be better terms to describe it. If *Dream Team* was a celebration of the *Mario & Luigi* series, then *Paper Jam* is its funeral march; a game that hits the beats when it needs to, but at no point actually enjoys doing it. At no point does it do anything in a way that might make you care. *Paper Jam* is in some ways a genuinely impressive achievement: they managed to make a 25-hour game where absolutely nothing happens.

Luigi Bad

Unfortunately, *Paper Jam*'s world is arguably the lesser of two evils. *Paper Jam* may be aggressively boring, but every so often, it becomes something more than that. *Paper Jam* is, at times, a surprisingly nasty and vindictive game, smugly announcing its presence before falling comatose for three more hours.

The *Mario & Luigi* series has always made fun of Luigi. That's not a theory, the developers are quite aware that Luigi is the punching bag of the series. Yet, in defense of the series, I think the games have made its intention with these jokes clear: there's always been an unironic opportunity for Luigi to shine, a point at which the game reaffirms Luigi or gives him a boost in confidence. *Dream Team* fared best in this regard, giving Luigi a plethora of moments to show off, not the least of which being a series of kaiju boss battles.

With that said, *Paper Jam* is just... unnecessarily mean to Luigi. The game constantly belittles and insults him, chastising him for his incompetence and clumsiness. "Stop messing around!" "Luigi, do you have any idea what's going on? No, of course you don't." "Did Luigi mess something up again?" "Oh, of course, I must be dreaming! That would also explain why Luigi's looking so capable." "You can't find the book? The book that's Paper Mario's home? No, even you couldn't have messed up THAT badly!" "What's that you're saying now, Luigi? You're worried about all the Toads the Bowsters have kidnapped? You can picture them wringing their nubby little hands with fear? And their shouts of 'Oh, please save us, Luigi! We need your help!' Wow, Luigi, that's a terrible scene you're painting. Luckily, it's not very realistic. After all, I'm pretty sure they would be calling for Mario's help, not yours." "If your Mario is anything like the Mario from MY world, I'm sure they're both fine. They are very capable, aren't they? And so caring, especially toward Luigi, who, let's face it, is... Luigi. "Oh, I hope Luigi can keep it together." "I know it's scary, but we've got to make our way through this forest. Bah, I've

got nothing to worry about. We've got two Marios!" "Luigi, be quiet!" What the hell is wrong with this game? This is not a complete compilation, mind you!

After a while, the jokes start to take on a different character. A sense in which the game just genuinely doesn't like Luigi. *Paper Jam* isn't so much teasing Luigi as it is bullying him. There's a section in the Gloomy Woods where Luigi gets to be by himself and save the day, but even this is laden with insults. Starlow attempts to convince Luigi not to be scared in an obviously insincere speech about having a whole year named after him, which ultimately concludes with Luigi falling face-first and Mario standing on his ass. If this was meant to be a moment of triumph, it's certainly Luigi's least graceful. I mean, my goodness, even the *box art* can't help but make fun of him! "Can you stop two Bowsters... rescue two princesses... and manage one Luigi?" This feels like a caricature of *Mario & Luigi's* humor. "Green man of mustache. For all that I have forced you to endure, forgive me. You see, I know the truth. Your heart is like a gemstone; multi-faceted and beautiful. I see how it sparkles. There are places that need polishing, but you are vital to your companions." It's worth pointing out that though this door ostensibly made this test to see if Luigi was worthy of passing, the test was in reality meant to assess *Mario*; specifically, his loyalty to his brother. It was, in effect, a test of the series itself, an opportunity for it to lay down a declarative opinion on the character of Luigi. What a clever and heartfelt scene. *Partners in Time* passed with flying colors. *Paper Jam* forgot its own history, and replaced it with a bilious facsimile.

But it's not just the poor treatment of Luigi that leaves a bad taste. Its story is the foul frosting slathered over the undercooked cake. No points will be awarded for guessing that *Paper Jam's* main narrative thrust is an all-too-generic "Bowser-kidnaps-Peach" plot. The fact that there are now two Bowsters and two Peaches doesn't change the equation; a nothing story multiplied by two is still nothing. Unsurprisingly, *Paper Jam* can't even do this simple story satisfactorily. Several seemingly major storylines go nowhere and serve no purpose. The game spends most of its narrative beats with Bowser's Minions – because those are by and large the only actual characters the game introduces us to – primarily the Kameks and Bowser Jrs. At the end of the Dunes, the Koopalings come into possession of the book that contains the world the paper characters come from. Theoretically, this is *supposed* to be raising the stakes, one of the few times *Paper Jam* attempts to do such a thing; with the power of another universe at their hands, the Bowsters could theoretically bring any creature they want from the Paper world. This never happens. The Bowser Jrs briefly plan to dispose of the book against their fathers' wishes, so the Paper Bowser Jr. never has to return, but they decide against the plan in the end. And a big deal is made of us having to leave the book behind after our initial visit to Bowser's Castle, but this never has consequences down the road. There's even a cutscene where both versions of Bowser and Kamek

concoct a plan in secret to betray the other versions of themselves, but these plans never materialize; the Kameks don't even mention it again. It's all very strange; this book and its location are one of the plot's major preoccupations, yet it feels like a nonentity for most of the time. Similarly, the game spends a large chunk of the first fifteen hours with the Bowser Jrs., but after beating them up in Bowser's Castle, they outright vanish, never to be seen or mentioned for the rest of the game. There's a certain sloppiness to the whole thing, and the final results reeks of dropped storylines and drastic rewrites – consistent with what was said in the Miiting by the developers.

The most egregious offenders are by far the Peaches. The story constantly teases that it might do something interesting with them, only to whiff at the last second. During the first fifteen hours, we see several cutscenes of the Peaches hatching an escape plan to spring at just the right moment. At the end of Bowser's Castle we finally get to see their plan in motion... only for them to get immediately captured again. What was even the point of hyping that up? And why wait to pay off that storyline moments before Mario and company made it to the top of the castle, thus rendering the plan pointless since Mario's here to free them anyways? An infuriating scene in the villa has the Peaches discuss how routine they're lives have become. They think of ways to add some nuance, to change things up a bit and make life exciting again. It's clear *Paper Jam* has absolutely no interest in this conversation, despite subjecting us to it. The game never attempts to do anything new with the Peaches. Or anything at all, much less new, for that matter. Even after the Peaches are rescued at the end of Bowser's Castle, they effectively vanish for the final third of the game. Somehow, they had *more* of a role in the story when they were locked away in a metal cage! Maybe it was better when *Paper Jam* *didn't* try to pay off its storylines....

But the real problem with this Great Value-brand Mario story is that *Paper Jam* is all too aware of its shortcomings. In fact, the game's deficiencies are quite often the source from which *Paper Jam* mines its humor. The first few hours of the game leave a remarkably bad impression. Beyond the chiding of Luigi and the wafer-thin motivation for the adventure, the first few hours or so are populated with self-deprecating little jabs. When the Bowsers finally come to invade Peach's castle and kidnap them, the Peaches' response is, "I guess it's that point in the story." "Ugh. Not again." So if you know it's boring, why continue to do it? Awareness of the problem and fixing it are two entirely different things.

Later, in the Twinsy Tropics dungeons, Starlow and Luigi have a conversation about a door, apropos of nothing: "You think we should remember this exact spot because it might be important later? Because the sort of adventure we're on always has some kind of foreshadowing device?" Just... what? Maybe I'm completely off base, but aren't the

kinds of foreshadowing devices you'd find in the "sort of adventure we're on" be reserved for something important, for some major turning point in the story? Not for a random wall that signifies nothing but another arbitrary roadblock? Like, seriously, you just stick a coin macguffin in the wall, and it lowers to some more caves that lead to Bowser's Castle – that is the significance of this wall. If the game is going to poke fun at common RPG tropes, it could at least try to find an actual example of what it's talking about.

The sequencing of Bowser's Castle is simply awful. After making your way to the boss room of the area, the Bowser Jrs. run away after revealing that they're in possession of the book. To chase them, you have to go back down a floor to engage in a random stealth-minigame they pulled out of thin air, to which the Bowser Jrs. respond by running... back to the boss room. Once you make your way there a second time, the Bowser Jrs. ask themselves "Hey, buddy! Why did we even run away the first time? Fighting is more fun, don't you think?" Oh, trust me game, I know you wasted my time, you really don't have to rub it in.

Even the music can't seem to refrain from taking some pot shots. The Twinsy Tropics theme, a relaxing, chill-out kind of piece, is called "Epic Story," a title which describes precisely zero parts of this game or the area it plays in. I cannot for the life of me explain this name, except for it being some kind of poisoned irony, fully aware that there's nothing epic about this story at all.

The first visit to Gloomy Woods is the perfect example to see how little *Paper Jam* takes itself seriously. On the surface level, it contains many similarities to World 3 of *Sticker Star*, featuring a Wiggler as the central focus and Kamek mucking up the place. But that's about where the similarities end. In World 3, *Sticker Star* attempts to show the full extent the poison has had on the forest. Vistas of an ominous island show a stream of poison leaking onto the shoreline. The Wiggler Segments accompanying Mario can only become enraged at the state of their home and the intractability of the problem. Kersti notes to one segment that it's the "useless kind of mad," one that doesn't direct itself towards any kind of positive outcome. This same segment – drenched in poison – runs to Surfshine Harbor to seek assistance, but finds no one really cares. The only Toad with a boat isn't willing to sail to the island. The segment starts to perk up with rage, but it knows the truth: that won't do anything. Instead, it folds itself in dejection and lets Mario walk it home. Crude drawings in Wiggler's Tree House show Wiggler attempting to make sense of what he's seen and how it made him feel. It puts a face on the stakes of the situation – Wiggler is clearly not capable of solving this problem on his own. Left unchecked, one could imagine solitary, unaware Wiggler scavenging for edible food

until the poison slithers into any and all of the forest's roots, at last engulfing every tree and leaf in sight. *Sticker Star* at least tries to evoke a genuine emotion.

Meanwhile, *Paper Jam* mocks the very *idea* of a genuine emotion. After beating a possessed Wiggler, a sequence plays out where it looks like the Wiggler is dead. Sad music starts up in the background, as the Wiggler rises into the heavens, never to be seen again. ...Yeah, of course that's not what happens. "Why are you so sad?" Wiggler yells, immediately after. I truly don't even know what this scene is going for. Neither funny nor sad, it's a pithy throwaway gag that belies anything actually meaningful about what we've done. It doesn't even last long enough to work as a fake out. Of course, at this point, it shouldn't be surprising to learn that *Sticker Star* once again outperforms *Paper Jam*. In World 4, we learn that Mister Blizzard used the power of the Royal Sticker to create a body for himself that wouldn't melt; and when the Royal Sticker is peeled off of him, he dissipates as he was meant to, hoping to be recreated again at some point. This isn't a trick, or a gag, or an elaborate ruse, it's a moment that's allowed to be played completely straight. Not coincidentally, it's also one of the rare scenes even the most ardent *Sticker Star* haters seem to like.

Paper Jam does eventually try to do something serious. In an only-too-predictable outcome, these moments fall embarrassingly flat. In one scene, the Bowser Jrs. express their sadness at the prospect of being split apart. The game transitions into flashbacks of their earlier conversations. The sad music plays in the background once again. They might have had something here, but it's impossible to take this scene seriously as is, mostly due to the fact that this supposedly somber moment is juxtaposed with the Bowsers Jrs. screaming "It's stinky garbage time!" "It's stinky garbage time!" over and over again. Did they just... forget the contents of the scene they decided to flash back to? This is an alien's understanding of human emotions.

So, what's the connection between all of these so-called "jokes"? Between all the self-deprecation, the tedium, the irony, the hamfisted and halfhearted emotional moments, you, the player, remain the common thread. *You* are the joke, and *Paper Jam* is having a laugh every time it forces you into another annoying minigame or tricks you into thinking you should care. *Paper Jam* cannot conceive of a reason why someone would actually want to play this game unironically, a game so formulaic and devoid of personality, the only thing it can do is joke about itself. It's not like it has anything better to do.

Genuine emotion is beneath something like *Paper Jam*. It's too lame, too cringe, too "Luigi-esque" to even consider doing; it's really no wonder why the game finds it so enjoyable to make fun of Luigi. Luigi always expresses exactly what he feels, as loudly

as he possibly can. He doesn't care that it's often embarrassing for him. Luigi is a genuinely earnest person, the one thing *Paper Jam* loathes.

The Quality of Boredom

Look, *Paper Jam* is not some evil spawn of Satan or anything like that; it doesn't ruin everything it touches. Despite my general disdain for its story and humor, it's not like the game can *never* have a good joke or character in there. I generally like the interactions between the different forms of Bowser and Kamek, and Toadette as the mad scientist character is very charming. *Paper Jam* is even able to make some general improvements over *Dream Team*. Most notably, the cumbersome tutorialization, which plagued that game start-to-finish. The guidebook is a great solution for both novices and experts, and even little things like searching Peach's Castle for Paper Toads is a big step up in teaching the player how to play the game without becoming overly intrusive.

The problem is that it's difficult to fully endorse any singular aspect of *Paper Jam*, even its pretty excellent combat, which – mechanically speaking – might be the best in the series. Yet it still occasionally feels like the game is wasting time. Some enemy patterns feel trollish in nature, sometimes making Expert Challenges a chore to complete, and some of the Trio Attacks go on for far too long. So long in fact, they literally made a boss fight about finding the special moves with the quickest animation times, which is... an *interesting* idea for a boss, let's put it that way. Probably not what I would've done.

There's a common conception regarding *Paper Jam* that its most disappointing aspect is that it failed to capitalize on the potential of a *Paper Mario* and *Mario & Luigi* crossover. I can't deny that – *Paper Jam* doesn't even think about scratching the surface of this crossover's potential. But that's not the issue with *Paper Jam*. The issue is what they chose to make instead; an overlong, shapeless pile of pablum. Rarely is playing *Paper Jam* enjoyable, and often, it's downright unpleasant. Neither will I deny that all of the issues I've outlined here apply to *Paper Jam* only. For as much as I've defended *Sticker Star*, it has more than its fair share of mean-spirited moments. What I will argue, however, is that I think there's something more to *Sticker Star* than just its worst moments, something worthwhile to grab hold of and examine. I have trouble making a similar argument for *Paper Jam*, a game that doesn't fail as frequently as *Sticker Star* only because it never really makes an attempt in the first place. A game which doesn't exist beyond its most sour, sardonic moments.

In the end, *Paper Jam* ends as it was. After Paper Bowser is sucked back into the book, we're thanked for our courage and bravery, and every one returns from whence they came. It's a completely lifeless and incidental final few scenes, which fails to offer any specifics or reflections on the journey we've been on. Just compare it to the singular

scene in *Bowser's Inside Story* where Peach bakes Bowser a cake as a way of saying thanks. Now *that's* an ending, and it's because it's the game reaching for sincerity. The cake isn't a lie; it's a genuine expression of gratitude – a feeling so authentic, even Bowser cannot deny it. *Paper Jam's* credits are overwhelmingly uninspiring; while *Dream Team* gave us cute artwork of Peach spending her vacation across Pi'illo Island, *Paper Jam* only has some reused assets slowly move across the screen while they suck up Bowser's paper minions back into the book – a *Paper Mario* ending parade this is *not*. As usual, *Sticker Star* – even the exemplar – made more of an effort than this! I suppose we should only be so lucky the game doesn't force us to return the Paper enemies back ourselves – it would do wonders for the game's runtime, that's for sure.

To put the difference between *Paper Jam* and *Sticker Star* in a very reductionist way, we might say the problem is whether something boring is worse than something bad. The answer, I think, is something boring, because something boring is really just another kind of something bad. The kind of bad that lacks any sort of respect, that defies substantive analysis, that skips and parades around taking a bona fide interest in something. It's the kind of bad that makes you sigh and say: "you didn't even try."