

Review: The Super Mario Bros. Movie

By [Peter Glagowski](#)

For some inane reason, film reviewers usually fail to understand the appeal of video games. Whether it be the culture around how shoddy older adaptations were or because they believe film is a superior art form, we're still seeing reviews from professional writers about how something like the *Super Mario Bros. Movie* is a failure of the art form.

As a lifelong *Mario* fan, I didn't really know what to expect when I went to see the film. I had been excited since Nintendo was directly involved in this film, but we've also come a long way in the intervening 30 years from the original, disastrous *Super Mario Bros.* film. Now there are quality video games out there such as [Sonic the Hedgehog 2](#) and [Detention](#). Can Nintendo's plumber stack up?

Well, the answer is yes and no. It really depends on whether or not you still have a childlike wonder about film, which can be understandably hard to muster much enthusiasm for nowadays when everything is part of some corporate machine.

The general plot of *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* was thankfully not spoiled by all of the marketing pre-release. Instead of a story about Mario trying to save the princess like in the games, this time, we have a mixture of that original 90's *Mario* film and the world of Nintendo's classic franchise. Starting in Brooklyn, NYC, brothers Mario (Chris Pratt) and Luigi (Charlie Day) are plucky upstarts in the plumbing game after having just left their construction job from Spike (Sebastian Maniscalco) at Wrecking Crew. Spike believes the duo will fail and that is further beaten into their heads when even their own father tells them they are doomed.

After a job goes sideways thanks to a vicious dog, Mario is down in the dumps. When Luigi attempts to cheer him up following a family dinner, Mario sees a report on the news about a flood down in the streets of Brooklyn. The two race off to save the city, but wind up getting sucked into a mysterious pipe that transports them to the Mushroom Kingdom, the home of Toads, Koopas, Goombas, and the royal Princess Peach (Anya Taylor-Joy).

At a brisk 92 minutes of runtime, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* doesn't ever slow down to develop things much. While I'm skipping over some details -including a prologue where Bowser (Jack Black) takes over a kingdom of penguins-, there is a sense that Nintendo and production company Illumination (known for *The Minions*) aimed this film squarely at children. I don't say that as a negative, but more that viewing this as an adult, I find myself nitpicking some loose ends because the film has no answers for them.

There is clearly a story angle of Mario wanting to prove himself to his family and brother, but then that gets sidelined for Peach's struggle against Bowser. Luigi gets small bits of backstory about how his brother always protected him, but that thread goes nowhere. Before you think this is just setting up some payoff for the conclusion of the film, another wrinkle gets added when Peach decides to visit the Kong Kingdom and recruit the forces of Cranky

Kong (Fred Armisen) and his son Donkey Kong (Seth Rogen). There is simply too much going on for anything to really stand out.

That is except for Jack Black's portrayal of the King of the Koopas. Bowser is very clearly a highlight here, from his performance to his visual design and his lopsided view of romance. Taking an [angle from Super Mario Sunshine](#), Bowser simply wants a wife to rule the world with him. While he has a distorted view of how to get that, causing him to become a villain, it's hard not to feel sorry for the big guy. He really just wants to make life better for his underlings.

But a lot of that is inferred story. I wouldn't call it subtext, per se, but what *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* truly feels like is an overload of fanservice. I'm not going to reiterate talking points from other reviews where they can't understand why go-karts are driving on a literal rainbow because that is irrelevant. It's just a cool visual that was created in *Mario Kart* to differentiate the track design. What does become puzzling is why the Kong Kingdom thought driving karts was faster than using their barrel jets for traversal, especially on a road that Bowser already knows about.

Logic gets thrown out the window in this film to cram in as many references to the *Mario* franchise as possible. Some of these references are fun background details (I loved the pizza shop named "Punch-Out Pizza" and seeing some kind of Duck Hunt tavern), but others feel like inclusions simply for the sake of pointing to the games. Mario actually eating mushrooms, for instance, is kind of off-putting, but then it doesn't even really factor into the story. He uses them in a couple of scenes and that's it. The same goes for his cat-suit, which he uses to pummel DK into submission but then completely forgets about after.

Worse than that, Mario isn't even the main character in his own film. This story is truly about Peach's dedication to her kingdom and how far she'll go to protect it. As a fan, I love that this story doesn't portray Peach as totally worthless, but so much of the movie is dedicated to her that it feels like Mario is mostly going along for the ride. Luigi, too, has a prominent role in the beginning segments before disappearing for nearly half of the film. The brothers aren't all that important, I suppose.

You really can't look at the film the way I am, however. I'm not suggesting viewers turn their brains off and simply clap at the pretty lights. The animation is absolutely gorgeous, which is a major feat for Illumination. The studio typically does the bare minimum when it comes to gussying up its films, but *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* looks better than practically every 3D iteration of the series. No, when I say you can't look at this movie with a fine tooth comb, I mean that this isn't a movie meant for deeper analysis.

The best way I can put it is that *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* is the very definition of a popcorn flick. This is something you take the kids to, get a big tub of popcorn to share with your significant other, and just smile at all the fun references and such. Once you leave the theater, you put it out of your mind and go about your day. It's harmless entertainment that can be a little aggravating with how close it gets to being good, but that doesn't deserve any derision and hatred.

Children will absolutely love what they see and they'll likely be acting out some of the funnier scenes for months to come. I do think it's a little bizarre how many references there are to

killing in a PG-rated film (Bowser even says something about making Mario watch as he kills his brother), but then you get things like the gleefully depressed Luma and Bowser singing a love anthem to his Peachy.

I could bring up how the soundtrack doesn't really work, especially since Illumination just has to license out popular songs despite them having nothing to do with *Super Mario*. I'm not sure how A-Ha's "Take on Me" or AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" fit into this universe, especially when game composer Koji Kondo has a treasure trove of utterly classic songs that could fill out an entire saga of films, but that's more a symptom of this being a big Hollywood film. Even with a property as rich as *Super Mario*, the grubby hands of corporate filmmaking simply couldn't shy away from such an opportunity.

Still, as much as I may have left this film feeling indifferent, I spied a party happening in my theater as I was leaving. It was filled with children who had just seen the movie, some from my own theater, that were eating mushroom-shaped cakes, wearing Mario and Luigi caps, and jumping around for joy. To them, all of the plot inconsistencies and ham-fisted references didn't matter. They got to see their favorite gaming icons on the big screen in a film that at least paid respect to the legacy of the brothers.

The Super Mario Bros. Movie is not going to go down as an all-time animated classic. It's also nowhere even close to being the best video game adaptation ever produced. While you can poo-poo some of its story decisions and grumble about how the plot is about as deep as a puddle, it still possesses enough of *Mario*'s charm to be worth a watch. When there is much worse drivel out there for children that doesn't respect their intelligence or pay reverence to things they hold dear, something like *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* being just okay is perfectly fine.