

## **A Nintendo Child**

By Frederick William Schroeder IV

*The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*

Nintendo 64

Released 1998

With blonde locks, a green tunic, and a wooden shield upon her back, Zelda was my first video game memory. She swung a sword at enemies and was seemingly unable to swing said sword without screaming like a lunatic. She was also actually a he, but a young Frederick was unable to make such a distinction by looking at the rather blocky 64 bit graphics. Besides, he was wearing a skirt! You can't blame me for that one.

Turns out that this skirt-wearing young boy was actually named Link. Zelda, a princess, was the one he was trying to save. I watched my cousin Frankie, five years my senior, control this character as we sat on his living room floor. Timidly, I asked Frankie if I could play, and he with only a brief hesitation, he passed me the transparent purple controller. I couldn't believe it. I was only four years old, and here was my chance to take over.

Unfortunately, without any video game experience prior to this, about all I could do was make Link roll around aimlessly in the massive polygonal fields. I had no real concept of my purpose in this game, and I didn't bother to ask, fearing it would expose me as an amateur. I couldn't even figure out how to unsheathe Link's sword, let alone fight. I stuck to rolling.

Frankie, ever patient, sat back and let me have my fun. I'm sure he was amused at how the simple act of rolling around a virtual field could provide me with so much entertainment. So much so, that I barely noticed when the wolves began to howl. Dusk had fallen upon the game world, and as the sun disappeared, the pleasant music of the daytime transitioned into a sinister rumbling of the night. As

the previously bright and expansive field was closed off by the darkness, skeleton warriors began to crawl up from underground. They started to attack me. Had I done something wrong?

Terrified, and without a clue of how to fight back, I rolled and rolled as fast as my poorly coordinated hands would make Link go, in hopes of finding a safe haven. I was out of luck. The drawbridge to the castle town of Hyrule had been closed for the night, and I was left for dead out in the fields. Soon I was surrounded. I ran in circles like a Cucco with its head chopped off, taking strike after unanswered strike. Link's health, represented by red heart icons, was being depleted by the second. When every heart had disappeared from the merciless beating at the hands of these undead foes, Link collapsed.

The screen faded into darkness and I was faced with the words, "GAME OVER". Ashamed, I handed the controller back to Frankie.

### *Pokemon Red Version*

Nintendo GameBoy

Released 1996

For what seemed like forever to five-year-old me, the only time I would get to play video games was at Frankie's house where he had his Nintendo 64 plugged in and ready to go anytime I came over. Sometimes, I got to watch someone play their GameBoy that they brought in during recess. I'd never actually get to play, as everyone was very possessive of their handheld video game systems, but it was still fun to watch. I'd give them tips on clearing a level, even though I had absolutely no idea what I was talking about, a fact that my peers were not shy about pointing out to me. I just wanted to feel helpful. It was the only way I knew how to deal with the frustration of being the only one throughout much of pre-K and kindergarten without a GameBoy. I explained my plight to my mom often, hoping to get some sympathy.

GameBoys came in all different colors that would have appealed to a child: Berry, Kiwi, Dandelion, Atomic Purple, Neotones Ice, Grape, and Teal. Playground debates about the coolest color for the pocket-sized device were common, but as far as what was the coolest game at the time, well, that was undisputed. Everyone, and I mean EVERYONE loved Pokemon. At the time, Pokemon came in three versions: Red, Blue, and Yellow. It was Frankie who first introduced me to the fantasy world of Pokemon. In one life-changing night, he showed me the video games, the cartoon, the toys, and even the trading cards. It was almost too much for my young brain to handle. In this world, Pokemon trainers captured colorful, powerful creatures and trained them to engage in battles with others. It didn't seem like such a dark concept to us then. As kids, the idea of collecting all 151 of the monsters to train and show off to our friends was enough to whip us into the frenzy known to some as Pokemania.

I got a GameBoy of my own towards the end of kindergarten. It was Kiwi-colored. For a while I only owned one game: *Pokemon Red Version*. That was all I needed. With that one red cartridge plugged into my Kiwi GameBoy, I could be just as cool as anyone else my age. My sisters, Carrie and Corinne, were too young to fully understand how big of a deal it was that I finally had my own GameBoy. They did, however, love the Kiwi color of my prized possession, and always asked if they could hold it. Like the children on the playground who'd all had GameBoys before me, I was too possessive of my new device to let them hold it. I was, on the other hand, generous enough to let them watch me play, as long as they didn't ask too many questions that I didn't know the answer to.

It didn't take me long to become a skilled Pokemon Master, and soon I was able to hold my own in playground battles with the other kids. Using a green link cable that had a tendency to get knotted up in multiple places, I could show off the strength and skills of my carefully trained team. Charizard, Pidgeot, Hitmonlee, and Nidoking came to be a feared combination of monsters that I could unleash at will. Mostly, my strategy consisted of spamming my obscenely powerful Charizard's Flamethrower move until my opponents were burnt to a crisp. Though this cheap tactic annoyed some of my friends,

my dominance in battle is what earned me respect among my peers.

Outside of battle, I had a multitude of other creatures that I had captured and was willing to trade in hopes of getting one even more rare. One of my most underhanded transactions was tricking my friend Luke into trading me his prized Blastoise for my useless Rattata. I told him I'd train his Blastoise for him and give it back soon. I don't know that I ever intended to actually give it back. I just really wanted a Blastoise of my own, and because Luke never explicitly asked for it back, I now had one.

*Super Mario Bros. Deluxe*

Nintendo GameBoy Color

Released 1999

Traversing the Mushroom Kingdom as a child was my first major challenge in the world of video games. This was only the second game I recall playing extensively on my GameBoy, and my hand-eye coordination and reflexes had not yet developed enough to overcome the virtual obstacles with ease. On my quest to save Princess Peach, the evil King Bowser sent everything he had at me: from hammer-throwing turtles to Mario-eating piranha plants to giant black bullets being spat from cannons. It didn't take much to send me to the Game Over screen. I often found myself just falling into pits after making a careless leap. I'd fight my way through to the end of a level only to be told that my princess was in another castle.

My friend Nick played through *Mario Bros.* at the same time I did. We'd go over each others' houses and slowly trudge through the game's increasingly tricky levels, while our moms would bake us brownies and cookies to keep our energy up. We pretty much kept an even pace throughout the whole game, each playing on our own GameBoy, and we made decent progress for eight-year-olds. That is until we both found ourselves on level 6-3. We referred to it as the "White Castles" because it was the

only level in the game that was completely monochromatic. Gone were the sunny locales and red brick castles we had gotten so used to. No more of the unimposing Goombas and Koopas toddling around, presenting no real threats. This level was pure, black and white platforming misery.

That summer, Nick was staying with my family a lot while his parents were going through a divorce. I didn't know this at the time; I was just glad that I had someone to hang out with besides my sisters. The best part for me was when we brought him to our shore house on Long Beach Island, although I don't remember going to the beach too much that week. Nick and I were much too focused on beating those damned White Castles. We spent entire afternoons on my deck, each with a GameBoy in our sweaty little hands, grumbling under our breaths and wondering how the world could be so cruel to us.

All the fresh lemonade and brownies in the world weren't enough to help us beat the White Castles that week down the shore. Eventually Nick had to leave the shore to stay with his mom. A few days later I received a phone call from him.

“I did it.”

“Did what?”

“I beat the White Castles.”

“No way. How?”

“Slow and steady wins the race.”

“Yeah, okay, but how did you beat it!?”

“Slow and steady wins the race.”

Nick said this with a chuckle as he hung up the phone. I stared at the handset in disbelief for a moment before grabbing my GameBoy from my bedroom to try going “slow and steady”. Sure enough...it didn't work. I kept at it for an hour before removing the game cartridge in frustration and playing *Pokemon Red Version* instead. With Charizard breathing fire over everything in my path, I

never would get frustrated in that world.

I never saw Nick again after that summer. I think he moved away after his parents' divorce was finalized. I never really asked about what happened, as I simply had other things on my mind, like the wonderful new video games that were coming into my life. I haven't even thought about him in 12 years. He was a smart kid, he probably ended up fine. I still don't believe that he actually beat the White Castles, though.

### *Pokemon Stadium*

Nintendo 64

Released 1998

A Christmas story. In the month leading up to Christmas, I made my case to my parents that all I had ever needed was a Nintendo 64. Unlike the hand-held GameBoy, the 64 was a home console that plugged into the TV. It had more memory, more power, bigger games, and most importantly, up to four players could get in the action at once. While just about everyone had a GameBoy (and at *least* one version of Pokemon), considerably fewer owned a Nintendo 64. They were more expensive, and not geared as much to our age group (5-8). Frankie was about the only person I knew who had one. I don't think anyone in my core group of friends had one, except for maybe Allan. Anyone who *did* own one, however, immediately became one of the cool kids in the neighborhood. Everyone wanted to go over *their* house for playdates and sleepovers. I guess that's why I hung out at Frankie's house so much back then.

As the oldest sibling in my family, I took it upon myself to remind my parents every waking moment that Christmas just wouldn't be the same if I didn't have a Nintendo 64. Carrie and Corinne, and our new baby brother, Jake, couldn't have cared less. My mom was hesitant. I was already spending so much time playing the GameBoy, and what did I need more video games for, anyway? I explained to

her again and again how much I needed the Nintendo 64 in addition to my GameBoy, and that it most certainly wouldn't take away from time spent doing homework and reading. My mom didn't seem convinced. Since she wasn't going to budge, and I didn't want to lose hope completely just yet, I asked my mom to make an extra special call to Santa at the North Pole to see if he could help a kid out. Bless her heart, she made that call for me, and told me Santa would keep it in mind, but only if I was really, super, extra good for the rest of the month.

I ended up getting coal that Christmas. Sure, it was only the black raspberry hard candy kind of coal that was used for gag gifts, but the note from Santa that came with it was downright mortifying. I guess I wasn't as good as I thought that year, and the big jolly man knew all about it.

I hid the note and the coal from my parents, in hopes that maybe they weren't quite as aware of my misbehavior as Old St. Nick. Surely they didn't notice me pinching Carrie for the hundredth time, or turning the lights off on Corinne when she was playing with her dollhouse in the basement. And there was *no way* that they knew anything about me teaching Jake to do the same types of things. They'd think I was deserving of a Nintendo 64, no doubt about it. I was an angel.

Fat chance. As the gifts under the tree were unwrapped, no Nintendo 64 was to be found. Just as I was about to sulk back up to my room with my slimmer-than-usual pile of gifts, my parents pointed out something peeking from behind the family room desk. What could it be? More dolls for my goodie-two-shoes sisters? Another truck for my nose-picking baby brother? No, it was too big of a box for any of those. When my parents asked me to help open it, my hope came back. Had Santa been playing me for a fool the whole time? He had to be! When I clawed through the wrapping paper, and saw the familiar faces of Charizard and Blastoise, I knew I'd hit the jackpot. Kris Kringle had pulled through, and I screamed with joy as I realized that I was now the proud owner of a Nintendo 64 with the game, *Pokemon Stadium*. I danced around in my plaid Christmas pajamas like a happy little chimp.

“Says on the note that this is for you to SHARE with your siblings,” my dad pointed out, trying

to spoil my moment.

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” I said, closely examining the box illustrated with the colorful creatures that I loved so much. Through careful inspection, I found that *Pokemon Stadium* was, indeed, multiplayer. “I have to go call Andrew!”

Andrew was easily my best friend in grades K-2. He lived in the house right behind mine, which meant that we could squeeze through a space in the fences to visit each other whenever we wanted. Our parents found this convenient because we wouldn't have to walk all the way around the block on our own, where untold dangers could grab us from Broadway Avenue. We liked it because it meant less time walking, and more time playing GameBoy.

Always a chatterbox, Andrew picked up the phone after the first ring and started rattling off his Christmas loot, as was tradition.

“...I got a Sega Dreamcast, a remote control helicopter, a nerf gun...”

“Yeah but I got a Nintendo 64!” I interrupted, a huge grin spreading across my face.

“Really!? Did you get any games?”

“Of course! I got *Pokemon Stadium* and some other game with a dude named *Glover*.”

“*Pokemon Stadium*? That game rocks!”

“You wanna come over and play it with me? I haven't started yet.”

“Sure!”

While my Dad helped me set the Nintendo 64 up with the tiny, 12” Zenith TV in the back corner of the living room, I imagined Andrew was going absolutely bananas in his house. To think, he was now living right behind someone (his best friend, no less!) who owned a Nintendo 64 and had one of the coolest games ever made. I'm sure that once his parents were told of the glorious news, they had no issue letting him come over. By the time he did, the Nintendo 64 was all rigged up. I showed it off with a sense of pride. I Since I'd met him, I'd been jealous of Andrew's extensive collection of

GameBoy games. He had everything, from *Pokemon* to *Spawn* to a weird game starring a squirrel called *Mr. Nutz*. At last, I had something that he didn't, and I was more than happy to share just as he'd always done.

Together we witnessed our favorite Pokemon being brought into the 3D realm for the very first time. We spent the rest of that day battling various creatures and experimenting with their beautifully rendered moves, Fire Blasts and Solar Beams. My younger siblings sat behind us watching in awe. Corinne kept begging me to battle with Eevee, her favorite. I told her no way, Eevee stunk. I'd only play with the most powerful Pokemon. Shut down, my siblings quietly held their other new Christmas toys in their laps, waiting for their turn on the powerful new machine that their big brother was so crazed about.

*Mario Kart 64*

Nintendo 64

Released 1996

Right in the middle of Hillsdale, on Broadway Avenue, stood The Game Zone. Themed with a checkerboard design reminiscent of the winner's circle in racing, The Game Zone held more video games and video game related paraphernalia than I could ever own. That didn't stop me from fantasizing, though. I wanted them all! From the stuffed Pikachu dolls to the Mario Party gummies to the hundreds of games on every video game system ever made. Unfortunately, as a seven-year-old without any income besides finding coins under the couch cushions, I didn't have the funds to make my dreams a reality. For the first few years of my video game life, I had to entertain myself with the small selection of games that I already owned. New games were few and far between.

One thing that the Game Zone had that went a long way to exposing me to new games was a system where you could bring in your school report cards for store credit. In the late 1990s and early

2000s, a lot of kid-oriented establishments encouraged good grades in exchange for something more fun. I remember Chuck E. Cheese's and SportsWorld would give us extra tokens if we showed them our report cards. This was perfect, because we were always going to birthday parties at those places, and more tokens meant more time in the arcade, which meant more potential for tickets that could be turned in for prizes. At The Game Zone, however, our report cards got us something much more valuable than Chuck E. Cheese tokens: Game Bucks! Printed on checkered slips of paper, Game Bucks could be saved and combined to make purchases on any pre-owned video games in the store. Suddenly, with a new motivation to do well in school, a new video game was always just a clean report card away. Throughout all of my elementary and middle school years, I never got anything less than straight A's.

Of course, having the thrifty mind that I did, I'd convince my younger sisters to bring their report cards, too, just as soon as they were old enough to actually have them (Jake was only a year old, so he was useless to me). This would work in all of our favor, I told them, as more Bucks meant more games, and *of course* we could agree on games that we'd all enjoy. Because they were younger and significantly less interested in video games, my sisters didn't get much say in the games we ended up buying with our pooled Game Bucks. I was able to easily persuade them into getting whatever games I thought seemed most fun. Every now and then they'd decide to throw a tantrum until they got the game they decided was the next killer app, and that's how we ended up with stinkers like *Rugrats: Scavenger Hunt* and *The Powerpuff Girls: Chemical X-Traction*.

One particularly successful negotiation I made was when I convinced my sisters to spend nearly all of our precious Game Bucks on one game: *Mario Kart 64*. Carrie was skeptical, as she had her eye on a Barbie horseback-riding game. Knowing that Carrie would probably play the game for ten minutes before going down to the basement to play with her actual Barbie dolls, I assured her that Mario Kart was the superior racing game. We might even be able to race horses in it, too! Corinne was already on board, knowing that she'd be able to race as Mario, Princess Peach, or even the adorable Yoshi. With a

huff, Carrie finally let me count up enough of our paper-clipped slips of video game money, and in return we got one of the greatest multiplayer games of all time.

When we returned home, we found that although there were no horses (what a shame), up to four of us at one time could race karts along imaginative race tracks, hurling red Koopa shells and tossing bananas in each others way. Mario Kart races and battles became highly competitive, not just over who got to play as Yoshi, but over who could win the most points in a given round of Grand Prix. None of us were coordinated enough to be able to keep up with the computer-controlled racers on 150cc, but against each other we were actually a pretty fair match. Carrie didn't play with us too often, but Corinne and I had some classic races that came down to a photo finish.

While I kept my grades in top form for the sake of earning maximum Game Bucks, my mom was not exactly delighted with how much time I spent on my GameBoy and Nintendo 64. To combat this, she ended up printing off a bunch of "Privilege Cards" and distributing them to my sisters and me. When turned into her, each paper card allotted the bearer 15 minutes on their video game of choice. However, when the cards ran out, that was it for video games until we earned more cards. We could earn more cards by doing extra chores, getting a good grade on a test, etc.

Fortunately, since I was burning through those Privilege Cards faster than I could earn them, I was able to figure out a few loopholes. One such loophole was that a Privilege Card was not necessary to play video games when we had friends over. I took full advantage of this, having friends over to play Nintendo 64 whenever I could. Luke and Glenn would always be up for some kart racing, and Andrew of course could be at my house in a minute's notice, whether to watch my progress in solo expeditions, or to assist me in dishing out some race-track justice.

I'll admit it, the second loophole wasn't exactly within the laws of the household. Whenever a friend wasn't available to come over to play video games, and I was in a serious pinch for Privilege Cards, I happened to know exactly where Carrie and Corinne hid theirs. Sometimes, I'd take one from

Carrie's hiding spot even when I didn't need it, just because she was getting on my nerves. Though I was taking them for a noble cause, I guess I still owe my sisters a Privilege Card or two.

### *Yoshi Story*

Nintendo 64

Released 1997

My whole life I've been a huge eater. It started when I was fed steaks and sausage as a baby, because my sickness required more calories than those wimpy jars of baby food could provide for me. Even after I was healthy, though, I never slowed down. While part of the eating is out of pure love for food, I also just get a rush from showing-off to friends how many plates of food I can put away in one sitting. Even when it comes to dating, I'm sure you can imagine how impressive it is when I can exhibit my ability to eat for a family of four. Perhaps this is why I connected so well with characters like Kirby and Yoshi, whose only goal in their games seemed to be to eat as much as their squishy little bodies could hold.

The object of *Yoshi Story* was to roam around as the titular dinosaur, completing stages by throwing spotted eggs at enemies, all while eating everything in sight, specifically a variety of tasty fruits. This wasn't a very difficult task, for the most part, as long as you were mindful of preserving Yoshi's life energy (represented by a smiling daisy). The concept of the game wasn't exactly brilliant, but it appealed well to the young foodie in me. I also appreciated the aesthetic of the game, which used an art style reminiscent of a pop-up storybook come to life.

This was Corinne's favorite game to watch me play. She used to love watching me explore the cushy landscapes of Yoshi's island, and even though I didn't need my baby sister's help to do so, she'd point out the hidden fruits for me to satisfy Yoshi's large appetite. There was one level that made her really nervous: a swamp where a giant fish stalked Yoshi, trying to eat him in an ironic turn of events.

If you got eaten, it was an instant Game Over. The Game Over scene was my sister's least favorite part of the game. A short clip would play of a crying Yoshi being carried off by three masked figures, into a foreboding fortress surrounded in gray mist. Corinne would get mad at me for letting such a thing happen to the poor Yoshi. Because she never wanted to actually play the game by herself, Corinne held me directly responsible for the well-being of Yoshi, and she took it really hard when I let him down. Carrie, who shared a bedroom with Corinne for a few years, used to get mad at me for letting her watch me play the game. Corinne would wake up some nights sobbing about the Yoshi, forgetting that it was just a video game. She still brings this up.

### *Wrestlemania 2000*

Nintendo 64

Released 1999

My passion for the art of professional wrestling began not with the popular television shows *Monday Nitro*, *SmackDown!*, or *Raw is War*, but with the video games. I'm not sure what first drew me to the games. My parents dragged Carrie and me to a flea market after a long soccer tournament we were both played in that weekend. Having been through the routine many times before, I asked my parents if Carrie and I could go over to one of the tables that sold toys while they looked at moldy antique furniture or whatever it was they were into. As someone that really didn't enjoy actually playing in soccer tournaments as much he did eating the fried food they sold there, getting a cool toy at one of these flea markets was usually a highlight of the weekend. Upon reaching what looked like a promising table full of toys, my heart leapt. I zeroed in on the familiar arched gray cartridges: Nintendo 64 games! They actually had them at a flea market? What luck! It was a small selection to be sure, but just catching sight of those games made me forget all about how tired and dirty and gross I'd felt from playing soccer all day. After shuffling through the games for a few minutes, I held up the one that I

wanted: *Wrestlemania 2000*. It came rubberbanded to an instruction booklet full of pictures of the featured wrestlers.

“Ew, that's the game you want? Those guys are so ugly,” Carrie sneered.

“So what? They're tough! They're cool!” I retorted, enamored by the larger-than-life, musclebound heroes. Guys like The Undertaker, The Rock, Mankind, and Stone Cold Steve Austin could not be denied. How could a game starring dudes like that not be incredible? I was so excited to start playing that I walked away with it in hand, until the man behind the table gave me friendly reminder that good video games don't come free.

I returned home that evening and developed a fanaticism that I never quite grew out of. The very next week in school I was asking my friends what they knew about pro wrestling, eager to learn more about these heroic characters that seemed so real at the time. Allan pointed me in the direction of *Smackdown!*, a Friday night show that got me hooked. I remember staying up past my usual bedtime, talking on the phone with him while we watched the matches. As he was lucky enough to be subscribed to the official WWE magazine, Allan was the go-to guy for all of my novice questions about the storylines and blood feuds that were developing week to week on television.

There were tons of wrestling video games in my childhood, some so bad and mechanically broken from a game play standpoint that it's a wonder how I was able to perform a simple suplex (here's looking at you, *WCW Backstage Assault*). Others, like *Wrestlemania 2000*, were incredibly polished gaming experiences that allowed me and up to three friends or siblings to simulate the hard-hitting ring action we saw on TV, without the fear of a broken arm or bloody nose from performing it ourselves (which happened anyway, but that's another story entirely. Don't try this at home, my foot). It was in these exhibition matches that I first built a close relationship with my baby brother Jake, who was six years younger than I. He was almost definitely too young for most of the violence and explicit content that was shown on the television show, but my parents were okay with letting him play the

video games if I was with him. We tag-teamed countless times, taking on all comers in brutal matches. One time, we held a triple-threat steel cage match with the world title on the line. It was me vs. Jake vs. Corinne. Somehow, somehow, Corinne managed to kick both of our asses and escape the cage for the victory. It was nothing but a fluke, and I ended up winning the title back from her soon after in our rematch. Still, whenever I'm acting cocky and need to be taken down a peg, Corinne still likes to bring up the fact that once, she beat me for the world title in a steel cage match. I fear that at the rehearsal dinner for my future wedding, when all of our family and my future wife's family is present, Corinne will give a toast, and that's the story she will tell.

Not only did *Wrestlemania 2000* have the deepest, most up-to-date roster, full of the time period's greatest superstars, but it offered something previously unseen by me in the realm of video games: the ability to create.

*Wrestlemania 2000* was one of the earliest video games to allow the player to create his own character. From wrestling move sets to cinematic entrances to flashy in-ring attires, nearly everything you could think of could be edited and tweaked with satisfying precision. I had the ability to give my character a top rope moonsault as a finishing move, as well as decide what weapon of choice he'd bring to the ring during hardcore death-matches. I could dress him up in a classic wrestling singlet, a blue camouflage muscle tee, or hot pink zebra print leggings. I could give him a buzz cut or a mullet, intimidating face paint or just some really cool shades. I spent almost as much time in the creation suite, tweaking the different elements of my character, as I did actually playing the matches. I could develop this alter ego of mine, known in-game as "Freddy Flamingo", without the fear of looking ridiculous, because in the world of wrestling, ridiculousness reigns supreme. The more over-the-top I could be, the better chance I had of going toe-to-toe with my heroes. It didn't matter that Freddy Flamingo looked like a total nut who was trapped in 1990; in *Wrestlemania 2000*, I could be a world champion and no one would question it.

In addition to building my own legacy as a wrestling immortal, I took great joy in creating characters for all of my friends, cousins, and siblings. Everyone from Frankie to Glenn to Luke to Andrew to Allan, to even Corinne, had a video game counterpart that I had decided was a good representation of them. Well, maybe not Luke. I made his character out to be a complete joke for whatever reason. Andrew and I thought it was hilarious that Luke's character was a tubby clown with a woman's moveset. Luke wasn't quite as pleased. He ended up playing as the actual default wrestlers, like The Big Show and Kane, instead of his custom character. Oh well. At least he never lost a steel cage match to a little girl.

### *Paper Mario*

Nintendo 64

Released 2000

One weekend when I was sleeping over at Frankie's house, he convinced my aunt to let us rent a video game from the Blockbuster in town. A nearly obsolete concept now, we'd go to the video rental store and scour the relatively small video game selection for something that stood out and rent it in an attempt to beat the game in a single weekend. The game that would hold that esteemed honor this particular weekend was *Paper Mario*, a role-playing-game whose premise was to take the iconic video game mascot and flatten him into a cartoonish piece of paper. In paper form, he'd then explore the Mushroom Kingdom in search of the seven star spirits. It goes without saying that Mario's motivation for all of this was to stop Bowser from taking over the Mushroom Kingdom and save Princess Peach, yet again. Storyline wise, this was nothing new from the previous 20 years of Mario games, but man, that paper concept was just so damn cool back then. We rented the game and I watched Frankie beat it that weekend, through back-to-back all-nighters that left me exhausted for the next week of first grade.

Later on, when I had a Nintendo 64 of my own, *Paper Mario* was one of the first games that I

purchased (via Game Bucks, naturally). I wanted to put myself to the test, to see if I could beat the game on my own, now that I had grown as a gamer. While the concept and aesthetic of the game was still just as fresh and fun as I remembered, I wasn't as good at the game as I had hoped I'd be. Let's just say it took a lot longer than one weekend for me to save Princess Peach and the rest of the Mushroom Kingdom.

After what seemed like a thousand times facing the Game Over screen thanks to that cheap-shotting tub of lard, Huff N. Puff, I finally beat the game. No longer needing to worry about them beating the game before me, I encouraged my younger siblings to try the game for themselves. They had watched me from start to finish, just as I had done years earlier with Frankie, and were itching to show me that they had what it takes to defeat the evil Bowser. Carrie lost interest in the game quickly, as she tended to do, but both Jake and Corinne ended up beating the game even faster than I did. This was the first game that I let them play alone, and I was suspicious that they had used illicit cheat codes while I was out of the room. Nevertheless, I was proud of both of them.

### *Super Smash Brothers*

Nintendo 64

Released 1999

I've only known one person who doesn't love *Super Smash Brothers*, and that, surprisingly, was Frankie. He thought the concept of the game was dumb: Nintendo characters from unrelated game series coming together for an all-star brawl in which they send each other flying off the battle stage. Truly a fantasy scenario for anyone who grew up with video games. No where else could you see Pikachu thunderbolt Mario relentlessly while Donkey Kong looks on, or wreak havoc on Link with Yoshi's barrage of spotted eggs. You could enlist the help of a friendly monster using a Pokeball, or swing for a home run with a baseball bat. The combination of situations that could arise in a single

battles were endless, and yet I could never convince Frankie to play this game with me.

Aside from him, my friends could never get enough of *Smash*. We all had our favorite characters whose movesets we knew better than our lists of vocabulary words in school. Andrew always had dibs on Kirby. Luke had Link. Glenn had Donkey Kong. I had Pikachu. Heck, even my mom enjoyed playing as Yoshi on rare occasions. We had favorite stages to fight on as well. I enjoyed the atmosphere of Sector Z, a space ship under constant airborne assault. There was also a lava-filled stage called Brinstar that Corinne absolutely refused to play on. She also favored Pikachu as her character, and I think she really hated to see him getting burned by the lava. She preferred the brighter, safer stages like Hyrule Castle.

*Smash* became the go-to game for my friends and siblings. There weren't enough Privilege Cards in the world for how much we played it. I remember one beautiful late spring afternoon, instead of riding bikes or going fishing, Andrew, Luke, Glenn and I spent all day duking it out with Nintendo icons. We were actually supposed to be drawing a poster up for some school project, but my mom couldn't get us away from the Nintendo. She ended up making the poster for us by herself while we traded wins and losses in stages across the Nintendo Universe.

As he got older, Jake got really good at *Smash*. We'd have epic, hour long encounters, and somehow he was almost always able to beat me. It blew my mind. I was six years older than him for God's sake. Amongst my friends, I was probably the best at *Smash*, but when it came to Jake, he just always found a way to eke out a victory at the last second. I couldn't even mess with his psyche by staging the fight at Brinstar. Unlike Corinne, Jake was a fearless competitor.

*Super Smash Bros.* was *the* game that made the Schroeder household the ideal location for sleepovers. Even after hundreds of matches, we never seemed to get bored of that game. Late into the night, we'd huddle around the tiny Zenith, straining our young eyes, mashing buttons on our controllers until only one of us was left standing, and then we'd do it all over again. Eventually, after a

disagreement over whether or not a final blow was a cheap shot or not escalated into a real-life wrestling match that woke up my parents, we'd get yelled at to go to bed. We'd camp out in my bedroom, air mattresses and sleeping bags spread across the floor, chatting about video games, telling ghost stories, and as we entered the dark times known as puberty, sharing which girls in our class we had a crush on.

*It's 2015, and I can't remember the last time I bought a video game.*