

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *Paper Mario*  
**Platform:** Nintendo 64  
**Genre:** RPG/Action-Adventure  
**Release Date:** February 5, 2001  
**Developer:** Intelligent Systems  
**Publisher:** Nintendo  
**Lead Game Writer:** George Sinfield

## Overview

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Far beyond the clouds, wish-granting stars peacefully reside in the Star Haven sanctuary. With the power of the Star Rod and the seven Star Spirits, the world appears quite tranquil. However, the nefarious Bowser bursts into the sanctuary, claims the rod, and subsequently imprisons the Star Spirits. With his wish for invincibility, the Koopa King lifts Princess Peach's castle into the sky, taking her and several guests prisoner. As the building rises, Bowser knocks Mario unconscious and tosses him through a nearby window.

Upon awakening, Mario assumes the role of hero and embarks on an epic quest across the Mushroom Kingdom to free the seven Star Spirits and defeat Bowser. While traversing various unique environments, the mustachioed plumber encounters colorful, humorous non-playable characters, destroys dastardly villains, and gains unique companions.

## Characters

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- **Mario** – Mario is a mustachioed, Italian plumber who lives in a cottage with his younger brother Luigi. After an invitation from Princess Peach, Mario finds himself once again battling Bowser in order to retrieve the unlucky royal. Characterized by his determination, bravery, and kindness, this hero wholeheartedly assists in any pursuit, aiding those he encounters along his journey.
- **Bowser** – With an insatiable desire for the Mushroom Kingdom's female ruler, Bowser enacts a new strategy to accomplish his own evil aspirations. By claiming the Star Rod and imprisoning the Star Spirits, the Koopa King easily defeats

- Mario and subsequently hijacks Princess Peach's castle. Unlike in previous Mario titles, Bowser demonstrates humorous personality traits stemming from his interactions with his bumbling servants and the constantly escaping princess.
- **Princess Peach**- In many of the Mario installments, Princess Peach finds herself a prisoner to an imposing villain. However, *Paper Mario*'s version of the royal diverges from this stereotypical format. Instead of simply waiting for rescue, Princess Peach devises numerous beneficial methods to assist Mario and thwart Bowser.
  - **Twink**- A young star kid who left the safety of Star Haven to assist the captured, seven Star Spirits. When he instead encounters a wishing Princess Peach, he serves as the Mushroom Kingdom ruler's companion, relaying vital messages to Mario on her behalf. In the final chapter of *Paper Mario*, Twink battles Kammy Koopa, defeating the witch and joining the Star Spirits in nullifying the Star Rod's influence.
  - **Star Spirits**- The seven Star Spirits serve as the guardians of the Star Haven realm and the wish-granting treasure, known as the Star Rod. Due to their imposing strength, Bowser seals the celestial creatures and distributes them across the various landscapes of the Mushroom Kingdom. Each of these spirits has a unique personality and battle ability, which they subsequently bequeath to Mario after their release.
  - **Side companions**- As Mario traverses the Mushroom Kingdom he encounters various vibrant characters struggling with a distinctive narrative issue. After the problem's resolution, the individual allies himself or herself with the mustachioed hero. During battle, an active side companion rotates with Mario and attacks foes with their unique strengths. In total, Mario acquires eight companions including, Goombario, Kooper, Bombette, Parakarry, Lady Bow, Watt, Sushie, and Lakilester.

## Breakdown

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As the name implies, *Paper Mario* presents a distinctively flattened, two-dimensional Mario confined within the pages of a pop-up storybook. With such a heavy thematic emphasis on narration, this *Super Mario RPG: The Legend of the Seven Stars* successor provides enriching encounters, stunning settings, and humorous dialogue. While the game incorporates familiar Mario franchise elements such as reoccurring characters and the classic Damsel-in-Distress premise, the game provides an oddly insightful exploration into the nature of desire through various religious allusions.

From the outset of *Paper Mario*, the game establishes the overarching concept of "wishes." Regardless of race or motivation, all citizens of the Mushroom Kingdom share their yearnings with the stars above. This generalization includes Mario, who desires to liberate the kingdom, Princess Peach, who wishes to assist Mario despite her confinement, and Bowser, who longs for the power to defeat his archenemy. In fact, the central conflict involves Bowser trouncing into Star Haven, capturing the seven Star

Spirits, and stealing the Star Rod to grant his own unanswered desires. Interestingly, if perceived in a religious context, the *Paper Mario* characters' wishes directly correspond to prayer. Both aspirant actions involve the participant issuing a request to an omnipresent spiritual force. Various character animations bolster this parallel. At unique points in the game, Mario and Princess Peach separately wish to the Star Spirits for assistance. While undertaking this action, the sprites clasp their hands together, raise them to their chest, and close their eyes, subsequently, mimicking the classic posture of a praying individual.

Additionally, the stars and Star Spirits, tasked with listening and granting these "prayers," further perpetuate the narration's religious undertone. In the opening description, the textual dialogue claims the stars' home, known as Star Haven, is a "sanctuary... [in which] rest(s) a fabled treasure... [that has] the power to grant all wishes." By definition, "sanctuary" pertains to a safe "haven" within churches, synagogues, and other holy establishments. This word choice not only serves to cast a religious context to the game's Star Haven environment but also supports the theory that this sanctuary is in fact a representation of "heaven" or "nirvana." If this assumption were correct, the Star Spirits then warrant the "spirit" characterization found in their title.

However, regardless of this seemingly holy naming convention, other striking parallels enhance the Star Spirits' angelic similarity. For example, simply the number of Star Spirits themselves carries a deeply religious connotation. Biblically, "seven" signifies "completeness" and "perfection." In the *Paper Mario* storyline, Mario must find and free the seven Star Spirits one by one. When the mustachioed plumber gathers them all, he receives the ultimate force to halt Bowser and nullify the Star Rod. Effectively, Mario has "completed" his quest for the stars and subsequently reached "perfection" by achieving the game's greatest ability. Viewing the number of Star Spirits in this way reveals the potential reason Intelligent Systems chose seven stars instead of five, six, or eight.

The final evidentiary support for the Star Spirits symbolic nature derives from the *Bible* directly. Specifically, Isaiah 11:2 details the presence of seven spirits known as, "The Spirit of the Lord, Spirit of wisdom, Spirit of understanding, Spirit of counsel, Spirit of power, Spirit of knowledge, and Spirit of the fear of the Lord." This reference to seven spirits notably connects to *Paper Mario*'s "seven Star Spirits," if only in number and name. Nevertheless, there exists a deeper argument regarding each individual Star Spirit representing a corresponding biblical spirit. For example, Skolar, the highly intelligent Star Spirit, may relate to the Spirit of knowledge, Klevar, the studious Star Spirit, seemingly embodies the spirit of understanding, and Muskular, an active, bodybuilding Star Spirit, associates to the Spirit of power. However, these representations do not easily fit for each of the Star Spirits and the biblical spirits such as the Spirit of the Lord and the Spirit of the fear of the Lord are quite ambiguous.

Nintendo's *Paper Mario* initially appears as another stereotypical game reusing the same tired tropes from previous titles. Once again, Mario must save Princess Peach and the Mushroom Kingdom from the evil King Bowser. Even so, a deeper look into the narration reveals a startlingly complex story of desire highlighted by religious imagery.

Utilizing archetypal concepts originating with the *Bible*, *Paper Mario* awes and engages in praiseworthy facets. This game proves that with the right amount of effort and creativity, game developers can reimagine worn-out clichés and thereby develop new wondrous adventures.

## **Strongest Element**

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Thematically, *Paper Mario*'s narration revolves around the act of "wishing." Heroes, villains, and non-playable characters similarly desire and yearn, hoping for an occurrence beyond their personal capabilities. On the surface, this simplistic action appears as the primary means for achieving a goal, defeating a foe, or attaining power. By merely requesting, an individual can gain instant satisfaction without any physical effort. However, despite initial appearances, this role-playing game provides a respectable and noteworthy twist. Merely longing for something does not necessarily translate into a successful venture. For an individual to realize their dreams there must exist both desire and subsequent action. Mario, himself, serves as a representation of this notion. Fueled by his need to free the seven Star Spirits and rescue the Mushroom Kingdom, the plumber embarks on a journey of self-improvement. Instead of relying on another's assistance, Mario creates his future. Through faith in the stars and an unwavering determination, the mustachioed hero defeats Bowser by his own efforts.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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Despite *Paper Mario*'s startlingly complex narration and highly successful moral, the game unfortunately lacks in the development of Mario's side character companions. Throughout the plumber's journey, Mario assists uniquely colorful characters with some sort of struggle. Upon the problem's resolution, the creatures join Mario in his quest, battling alongside their new mustachioed friend. Through this process, many of the companions subsequently develop intriguing personalities. For example, Bow, the ruler of the Boos, actively appears throughout the entirety of 'Chapter 3: The 'Invincible' Tubba Blubba.' Due to Bow's involvement in the plot, the player develops an understanding of her disposition and respectable motivation. However, in contrast, Mario later frees Watt, a Li'l Sparky, from the confines of a lantern. This process is notably shorter than Bow's introduction and Watt's character development suffers. With eight unique companions, a considerable number of them never evolve an identity beyond their battling capabilities. Consequently, these characters are less memorable and quickly disregarded in favor of the better-developed companions.

## **Highlight**

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With the power of the seven Star Spirits, Mario attempts to nullify Bowser's Star Rod enhancements. However, noticing her master's issue, Kammy Koopa increases the evil King's strength. Subsequently, the Star Spirits' ability proves ineffective. In a final effort, Twink, Princess Peach's star kid companion, battles Kammy Koopa. As the cocky Koopa falls to the tiny Twink, Princess Peach composes a final wish on behalf of the entire

Mushroom Kingdom. Soft, tranquil music highlights the mysticism and encouraging aspects of the Princess' actions. At the conclusion of her prayer, Mario's Star Spirit skill morphs into the "Peach Beam." This transformation allows her plumber friend to extinguish Bowser's buffed defenses. Princess Peach's peaceful interlude conveys an optimistic instance in which the stereotypical Damsel-in-Distress assists in the saving of her own kingdom. Without Peach's efforts, the Koopa King would have stood victorious and the Mushroom Kingdom's wishes would be for naught.

## Critical Reception

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With its RPG-like elements, "paper-based" graphics, and lighthearted tone, critics and fans alike praise the Nintendo 64 *Paper Mario*. In particular, Matt Casamassina of IGN bestowed the game a 9 out of 10 rating, finding the game "fantastically deep, intuitively designed, and a wonderfully rewarding experience..." (IGN.com). Furthermore, he expands upon this notion by championing the game's purchase. Similarly, GameSpot critic Ben Stahl found *Paper Mario* truly fascinating, claiming a "game of this caliber is few and far between..." (gamespot.com). Impressively, Marcel van Duyn at nintendolife.com found, "[*Paper Mario*] to be well written..." perfectly scoring the overall game (nintendolife.com). A nostalgic classic, *Paper Mario*'s unique role-playing elements, deeply engaging gameplay and humorous characters certainly warrants the high praise.

## Lessons

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- Despite *Paper Mario*'s bright, light-hearted appearance, the game's narration presents complexities, which bolster the narration's depth and success. Traditional archetypes, such as those found within the *Bible*, serve as fantastic narration guidelines. These well-designed literary elements provide a memorable and enjoyable experience regardless of the superficial, silly atmosphere in which the plot unfolds.

## Summation

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Praised as a fantastic and unique RPG for the Nintendo 64, *Paper Mario* currently remains a fan-favorite. Under the guise of a stereotypical Mario title, the action adventure provides a richly rewarding experience filled with loveable characters, immersive environments, wondrous music, and a humorous atmosphere. The game's incorporation of a deeply symbolic storyline enhances the overarching moral. Timeless religious allegories further serve as strong thematic features. With three sequels, the original *Paper Mario* game forged an identity separate from its *Super Mario RPG* roots.

## Sources

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