

My mom never allowed me to have a video game console. A child of the 90s, I only got to play video games at friends' or my cousin's house whenever she would babysit me. There is where I became obsessed with Super Mario Bros on Sega. I was the baby out the crew; my older cousins loved to prank me into doing the most asinine things: going swimming in a ditch, being duped into drinking coffee, being thrown into a packing box to be shipped anywhere else. But in this game, nobody could see me. I was effective. I was intentional. I was unstoppable. I was particularly good at the infamous underwater level, with cousins throwing controllers at my feet wondering how me, a sheltered kid from an abusive household, could gain mastery over a game I only met with a couple times a month. As I grew older and my mom allowed me to have a Gameboy, unlocking levels became a sport.

In this game of life, consider that unlocking, unpacking, maneuvering each level helps you tap into who you're meant to become. Even in playing a game over or on a higher difficulty, there will always be levels to you that you'll forever unlock. Below are some tips on how to do so.

Power Up

Meeting yourself in your infancy - the version of you you've had to be in order to survive - takes some adapting. There may be anger there. The lists of unfulfilled and unrequited love and support may be long. The tools you carried with you to survive are worn, your hands grinded, your emotions frayed. With this knowledge, acknowledge all you've had to do to get to this point on the board without blame. Take a time-out and just sit with yourself. What have you learned? What's worthy of keeping? What needs to be shed? This process may take some time, so try not to beat yourself up because this level may require a few run-throughs.

Clear the Board

Surmounting levels in video games requires steady hands, impeccable coordination and the patience of a saint. You go in knowing the possibility of having to start from scratch, sometimes by no fault of your own or by your own error. Instead of rage-quitting whenever you have to restart, consider canvassing the terrain for items (lessons) you may have missed. You're back here for a reason. It's annoying and cumbersome and you just want to be done with this level. I get it. But don't trudge through with tunnel vision as that is how you'll miss the signs again. This same mindset benefits us in real life. How can we see and work with ourselves differently in order to clear this level? The trauma, upsets, failures, losses we have encountered in this life has formed us into who we are currently and how we operate. If we don't want to move forward being moved by just the heavy stuff, we are called to evolve. Head over to your settings - the space in you that acts as your ground floor. Where can you level up? What do you need to do in order to level up? Are you willing to adopt a different perspective, even if that means acknowledging that things are hard and you may not be able to handle this board right now? Understand that meeting yourself where you are, taking a step back to assess your progress, goes so far into finally passing those lessons that hold the key to unlocking your next level.

Beat the Final Boss

In almost every game, there's a final match that must be played and won in order to gain what's behind the door/other side of the gate/corner of the universe. Every opponent to that point has been a trial by fire: they've molded you into this warrior standing before us now. When the final boss is revealed, you realize that they aren't just some being that's been thrown at you to simply take you down. They've been watching you, studying your every move anticipating your next step. The hero's journey of self-discovery has its zenus here: the final boss is you. It's always been you - just one without evolution. Big, loud, destructive for the sake of being so instead of for the greater good. With this in mind, in life, you go up against yourself and the winner gets the spoils. You have to decide what side of the line you will be standing on when the smoke clears.

In a flurry of Sonic rings, we deserve to achieve all the things we desire to be. Unlocking the multidimensional, defining levels of you is a game that nevers gets old. The battle may be bitter, but the victory is always sweet.