

The appeal of Cute Monkeys

Susana Pajares Tosca
Dept. Digital Aesthetics and Communication
Center for Games Research
IT University
Glentevej 67, 2400 Copenhagen, Denmark
+45 3816 8992
tosca@it-c.dk

ABSTRACT

If we agree with Sega and Nintendo advertising and look at the selling numbers of the game *Super Monkey Ball*, it seems that its characters, MeeMee, GonGon, Baby and AiAi would have to be some of the most successful computer game characters ever created. The game doesn't have any story, but the monkeys have personality and are ever so cute. Is it possible that the "aesthetics of cuteness" so prevalent in many Japanese consumption and entertainment products has also now conquered Western hearts? This paper examines the construction and reception of the four characters, and reflects about the relationship between the pure visual design element of a game and its success as an entertainment product, including a qualitative study conducted with a number of test subjects exposed to the game.

Keywords

Characters, Character Design, Reception, Cultural Value, Cuteness

INTRODUCTION: *Super Monkey Ball's* Characters

The characters in *Super Monkey Ball* are marketed as one of the main attractions of the game, with an explicit exploitation of "cuteness" as a compelling design quality:

"*Super Monkey Ball* challenges players to control cute little monkeys who run around in transparent balls not unlike hamster balls".¹

The relationship to hamsters, that was also remarked on by our test subjects (see test description below), takes the game into the realm of childhood and communicates softness and a certain meaninglessness of the life of creatures that spend their time running inside a ball that goes nowhere. Here, however, the cuteness and the running have a purpose, as Sega advertises:

"Adorable, heart-stealing characters make gameplay addictive".²

This is a tricky argument. If we listen to most game designers (for example in 11³), gameplay becomes addictive exclusively depending on how good gameplay itself is, and

¹ http://www.nintendo.com/games/gamepage/gamepage_main.jsp?gameId=617

² From Sega's website about the game:

http://www.sega.com/games/gamecube/post_gamecubegame.jhtml?PRODID=823

compelling characters, while a bonus, are not always necessary for a game to triumph. Sega's statement concedes high relevance to the design of the game world, and it is the purpose of this paper to explore this argument further: how important are the characters in shaping our experience of *Super Monkey Ball*?



Image 1: From left to right: Meemee, Baby, Aiai and Gongon.

Sega makes an effort to present the four characters as four independent and different entities with their own personality, even though they all have the same in-game abilities:

Meemee- “She’s adorable and sweet in her little mini-skirt and bow, but don’t be fooled by her dainty demeanor, she’s a serious contender (...)”

Baby- “While the other monkeys run full throttle, Baby sports the fastest crawling you’ve ever seen. Complete with pacifier, this little chimp can wipe out the competition with the best of ‘em.”

Aiai- “He’s the frontman for Super Monkey Ball, but he hasn’t let it go to his head. Aiai keeps his focus on the two important tasks at hand, bananas and winning.”

Gongon- He grunts, he jumps un and down and claps, he’s Gongon the gorilla. (...) Put him to the test and you won’t be sorry.”

The differences between them are only sensorial: appearance, movements (running and in the final victory dance/tears of defeat), and the sounds they produce. In the second version of the game, they even have a personal story, as we will comment on in the last part of this paper.

Construction: Character Creation

Cuteness is a design choice that mainly appeals to children and their parents, and in this case agrees with the popular perception of the *Gamecube* console as oriented towards the

³ No page number as I have used the Internet version.

younger market. According to game design theorists, Rollings and Adams, cuteness causes empathy and makes players relate to game characters in a similar way as they would to a pet or a baby. They think that *Super Monkey Ball* uses cuteness “to good effect”:

Compared to fully grown animals, baby animals have large heads and eyes with respect to their body sizes. This can be exploited by a knowledgeable designer to create a ‘cute-appeal’. Usually, this approach is aimed specifically at the younger game players. The monkey characters follow Morris’s super-sense guidelines –large heads; large round eyes; and comparatively small bodies (1, p 124).

They also warn us that cuteness works only if the games are good, like in the case of Sonic. However, another designer, Jason Rubin states that, “if the character fails, then the game fails” (11), suggesting that character design might be more decisive than we would initially think. Toby Gard’s theory is that character design has become more important as technical limitations have diminished. In the early days of computer games, a character could be a tiny human-like blob of only a few pixels (4), but as graphics have become more and more sophisticated, this simplistic approach has stopped being acceptable, so that players expect sophisticated graphics, a change that has nothing to do with gameplay.

However, advanced character design doesn’t obligatory mean realism. *Super Monkey Ball* has chosen the way of humour and caricature: a cartoon aesthetics. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud explains that the more “cartoony” a face is, the more universal it becomes, or the easier to identify oneself with it (8, p. 31). According to him, Japanese comic conventions depict negative characters in a hyper-realistic way, so that the reader cannot identify with them, while the “good-guys” are drawn with simpler lines (8, p. 44). As an example, we could say that Donkey Kong is a more realistic monkey than our SMB monkeys (a gorilla in this case), and he definitely looks more menacing than them. But even if we consider a humoristic cartoon approach to a monkey, such as Paul Frank’s, the body is longer and its shape more closer to reality than in the case of our monkeys.

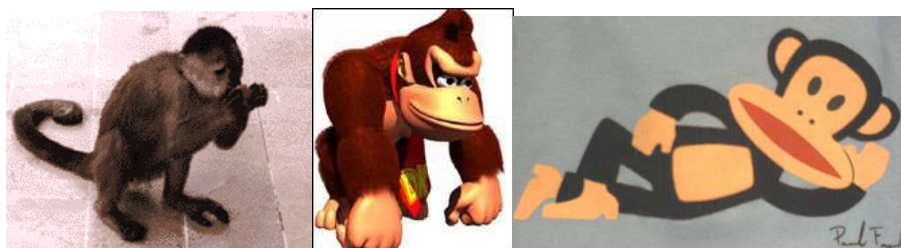


Figure 2: A real monkey, Donkey Kong, the Paul Frank monkey

When considering graphic representation, simplicity means selection. If we compare the SMB monkeys to real monkeys, stylization occurs by using exaggerated monkey heads (where the ears are very distinctive) and indeterminate baby-like bodies that could just as well be hamsters or any other small animal. There is no doubt that babies are cute. According to Pease and Pease, in their popular book about gender differences, the cuteness could go further than just invoking empathy:

Progesterone is released when a woman sees a baby and research shows it is the baby's shape that triggers the release of the hormone. A baby has short, stubby arms and legs, a round, plump torso, oversized head and large eyes, and these shapes are known as 'releasers'. The reaction to this shape is so strong that the hormone is also released when a woman sees these shapes in an object like a stuffed toy. This is why toys such as teddy bears and baby animals sell so well to females and long, gangly-shaped toys don't." (10, p. 172)

We will see later what our test subjects think about this in respect to their gender. After the baby shape, the most characteristic visual trait of the SMB monkeys is their caricature-like displays of emotion. When they win, they each have small victory dances and shrieks of pleasure; when they lose, they have their own way of crying and expressing dismay. This emotion is perfectly codified according to Japanese cartoon conventions, and it works strongly even if it isn't realistic.

We could wonder if Japanese aesthetics can be codified and appreciated by a Western audience, and we indeed have some very good examples of this aesthetics crossing frontiers, for example with the massive success of Pokémon. According to game designer Tsunekazu Ishihara, the success of Pokémon is not entirely due to the visual appearance of their characters (also popularly labelled as "cute"), but to the fact that the game is based in competition amongst the different monsters. Preferring one monster or another is not a matter of looks, "for each Pokémon there is weight, height, effective offense/defense and other attributes" (11).

This doesn't apply to the SMB monkeys, who all have exactly the same features pertaining to gameplay. On top of that, they have no history, no catchphrases, no apparent motivation other than to win, they only have *a look*. I stress this because I think they belong to a special kind of computer game characters that I will call *iconic*⁴, more related to products such as Hello Kitty⁵ than to any other kind of computer game character. The connection with Hello Kitty is not only the cuteness, but also their complete emptiness (no story, no gameplay differences), other than a "story" given by the producing company, that cannot be perceived in any direct way when interacting with the product. These characters wouldn't adjust to Meretzky's recommendations for good character creation (9), and don't fit in any of the categories proposed by Gard:

"The Avatar is simply a visual representation of the player's presence within the game world. The Actor is a character distinct from the player, with its own personality, characteristics, and, to some extent, mind." (4)

The SMB characters are more than an avatar (that could just be a hand or a pointer), but they are not really actors, as they don't have any characteristics apart from the visual. They just happen to be a humorous addition to the balls, but their presence is not unimportant, as our user tests seem to suggest.

⁴ As it will be explained, *iconic* doesn't refer to characters who can become media icons, in the popular use of the word, such as like Lara Croft (whose name and appearance have become a brand name to sell clothes, accessories, films, etc.); Lara Croft would be an *actor* in Gard's terms.

⁵ <http://www.sanrio.com>

Reception: the tests

These qualitative questionnaires were conceived in order to explore a fuzzy domain area (that of the reception of computer game characters) by gathering qualitative information about the specific perception of *Super Monkey Ball* characters. Whereas the results here cannot be considered valid for all players of SMB, they confirm some of our hypotheses and suggest interesting directions in the reflection about the importance of characters for the game experience, and the use of “cuteness” in videogames.

The tests were based on a set of questions both before and after playing the game⁶, directed at finding out people’s opinion about the characters. I interviewed four groups of people of both genders, ranging from age 10 to 29, all of Danish nationality. The informants were divided in the following way:

- Group 1. Five inexperienced players in their twenties, 2 female and 3 male.
- Group 2. Four experienced male players in their twenties.
- Group 3. Six experienced male players (from 10 to 14 years old)
- Group 4. Three inexperienced female players (ages 11 and 12)

The first part of the test was aimed at finding out how the test subjects related to computer game characters in general, and also to register their first-sight impression of the Super Monkey Ball characters before having played the game. This first part also helped estimate the subjects’ knowledge of computer games (if they knew many of the characters or used established genres to classify them) and their credibility as informants (for example by considering how they responded to non politically-correct characters such as Lara Croft). The questions were intended to be as open as possible in this first round, letting players come up with their own classification and express their ideas about various computer characters:

1. Sort out the given computer game characters⁷ in groups (2, 3 or 4) as you choose, and specify your sorting criteria.
2. Write 3 adjectives describing the following characters according to what their pictures suggest: Pikachu (Pokémon), Lara Croft (Tomb Raider), Super Monkey Ball, Hitman.
3. Why would you say that character X is (insert adjective)? (Here I would ask them to explain one of the adjectives used in the answer to question 3, usually I would try to make them explain the use of the word “cute” or “sweet”, adjectives often applied to Pikachu or the monkeys).

⁶ For more information about some of the test sessions, please refer to Klastrup’s article.

⁷ They were given unnamed pictures of the following characters/games: Crash Bandicoot, Super Monkey Ball, Sonic, Monkey Island, Mario, Zelda, The Longest Journey, Lara Croft, Hitman, Grim Fandango, Everquest, Donkey Kong, Crazy Taxi, Pikachu, Final Fantasy X.



Figure 3: The main game

The second part of the test intended to see if their perception of the monkey characters had changed after playing the game for a while, and to find the connection (if any) between their enjoyment of the game (was it fun, would they play it again) with their perception of the characters. The questions were:

1. How would you describe the four monkey's personality? (Tests subjects were given a picture of each monkey with their name on it)
2. What is your favorite monkey and why?
3. How important (if at all) do you think the characters are for the experience of playing this game?

After the tests, many of the subjects would often voluntarily continue the discussion about the importance of characters in computer games, cuteness, etc. offering significant insights that we also recorded. The questions themselves yielded interesting results that I will summarize here due to the lack of space:

- All test subjects showed a remarkable ability to sort out the proposed character pictures into regular piles, experienced players after game genres, inexperienced players after visual appearance.
- Describing computer game characters seemed very tied to knowledge of computer game genres, and an attempt at being politically correct (few subjects dared describe Lara Croft as "sexy" or similar). Some subjects had a neutral or negative opinion of the monkey characters before playing, that turned into a positive one after having played.
- The four monkeys were described mostly as: cartoonish, sweet, cute, Japanese, childish, small, and in some cases irritating/boring.
- There seemed to be an opposition cute-cool.
- The adult subjects were not too attracted to the characters' look in the first round (or even manifested clear hostility), one said: "I don't find them cute, but I can recognize that they are meant to be so". In the second round, however, they reported they had enjoyed the character's "crazy appearance", and accorded them a high "kitsch value".
- When girls were asked why they had used the word "cute" (which was nowhere in the questionnaires so as not to force this meaning on the test subjects), they were very conscious of the appearance of the monkeys: "they

have big eyes and funny mouths”, “they have big eyes and ears, they have a big head and body and small arms and legs”.

- About the personality of the monkeys, most test subjects thought AiAi and MeeMee were generic, not very interesting, characters: a typical male hero and a typical girl. They all had more adjectives for Baby or Gongon, whom they found interesting for opposite reasons: Baby for his smallness and cuteness, and Gongon for being crazy and always angry. They thought these two were more humorous than the others.
- The favourite monkey was Baby, followed by far by Gongon, a result that was initially somewhat surprising taking into account that there were more male test subjects, as one player puts it “it is cool to win with baby because he is so much smaller, it is sort of worse for the others”.

We can summarize the results of the test and relate them to the previous discussion by saying that the test subjects didn’t really find a lot of difference between the characters themselves, and the value they placed on them was always tied to how they had performed in the game and which character they had played with. The characters were thus a “joke” to be played against the other players. When winning, it was fun to win with a small character (Baby), with a bully (Gongon), a girlie one (MeeMee) or a happy one (AiAi), not because of the characters themselves, but because their movements and sounds gave a running commentary (of one kind or another) on the player’s performance. That is, reception of the monkeys was always tied to gameplay, as they were perceived as bringing humour to an otherwise rather simple (but very enjoyable) platform game. In this connection, the test subjects found them excellently designed, and two subjects reported that it could have also been another animal (hamster, chickens) if drawn in the same way, “but not people, with humans inside the ball it wouldn’t have been such fun”.

It was interesting to find that there wasn’t a genre divide as one might initially expect (except for the girls’ higher conscience about the baby-like appearance of the monkeys making them likeable).

When asked if the characters were important for the experience of the game, the test subjects were clear: the characters are very funny and attractive, but if the game wasn’t good, it wouldn’t matter⁸. They thought that the characters made the game comically original, although there wasn’t usually time to look at them, except for the part where they got up the podium after having won and people could see how their character had done in the game (and their cries of victory and small dances). The same characters in a bad game would be disastrous, but they were convinced that the monkeys were so funny that it could make a difference, for example about preferring one good game to another, that is, they have more than an illustration value.

Playing the game was in a way *performing* the characters, as some of the players, especially the younger groups, adopted their monkey’s personalities when playing (loud and bully-like or shrieking and teasing, for example). This basic roleplaying, and even its simpler adult version of “look how happy I am” (commented about the monkey’s victory dance on the podium), reveal the SMB characters as stereotypical masks that

⁸ One of the adult subjects was explicitly unhappy with being tested about his liking or disliking the characters, as he felt the questionnaire gave too much importance to something that was accessory to the game.

players can wear in order to give some frames to otherwise shapeless⁹ fun. In order for the frames to work in this realm of playful meaning with no real consequences, the characters have to be extreme caricatures in order to succeed, and their very emptiness is thus an advantage.

Discussion: On Cuteness/Kawaii

In our tests, “cute” was the more often used adjective to describe these characters. Cuteness is a controversial subject that has been discussed in relationship to Japanese culture, as it is seen as something that goes beyond a fashion statement, and invades all areas of life:

“Kawaii style dominated Japanese popular culture in the 1980's. Kawaii meaning 'cute' in English essentially means childlike, and by association: adorable, innocent, simple, gentle, and vulnerable. Cute style saturated design and the mass media whilst they were expanding rapidly in Japan between the mid seventies and the mid eighties. Cute style reached its height of saccharine intensity in the early 1980s. Cute fashion gradually evolved from a pretty serious, pink, romanticism of the early 1980s, to a more humorous, kitsch, and androgynous style which began to fade in the early 1990s - before making a return in the mid-nineties as Japan celebrated its own version of the seventies-retro. In the mid- nineties Japanese cute returned as the more kitsch and knowing 'super- cute' (chou-kawaii).” (6)

Following Bremmer, who has looked into the cuteness matter in relationship to Japanese feminist writing, cuteness is not innocent, but rather about the cultural domination and exploitation of young women, encouraged to act submissively and innocently rather than maturely and assertively. Bremmer cannot see the appeal that this could have for adults: “I get the part about Hello Kitty being cute, innocent and sentimental. (...) I just can't understand why this would be of interest to anyone beyond the age of 10.” (2)



Figure 4: Victory Dance

But Bremmer misses one important point that our adult test subjects were eager to establish from the beginning: childish cuteness has a very clear kitsch value that happens to be fashionable now. This means that the same product can appeal to both children and adults for very different reasons, but not all cute characters enjoy this

⁹ Shapeless as in “devoid of story”, not devoid of rules as there are many in this game.

double target group appeal, indeed very few, for example the Teletubbies are only for children, while Snoopy was also for adults in the 80s (with a clear kitsch value). However it is not clear why some images manage to attract also adults and why some others don't; one of the test subjects mentioned the fact that Japanese was "cool" right now in Europe¹⁰, and that might have something to do with our appreciation of the four monkeys.

For Kinsella, Japan is Europe's object of desire, and our fascination with some Japanese cultural products is a sign of this (6). For her, Japanese youth have identified maturity with boredom, and cuteness with childhood and therefore freedom. She relates the triumph of cuteness to a loss of political ideology, as people prefer to be comforted with images of dependence and passivity, a thought echoed by game businessman Gaku Kawaguchi (5), who however doesn't see any harm in the "innocent" comfort that cuteness provides.

The question of contemporary and cross-cultural changes in youth ideology is too big for the scope of this paper, but I think that we cannot entirely import the Japanese discussion in order to consider the reception of characters from a particular game, because as we have seen, cuteness in Japan goes beyond specific design and into all areas of life: clothing, behaviour, etc. from the mid seventies, according to Kinsella. However, maybe due to the influence of this point of view, cuteness itself is perceived as dangerous and pernicious in most of the (few) papers dealing with the use of cuteness in the West. For example, in "The Cult of Cute" (7), Aaron Marcus identifies a cuteness trend in the West, like the transformation of the original, rather rodent like, Mickey Mouse into something cuter and cuter (7, p.32). He also thinks that cuteness "appeals to the child in each of us, and like comfort food, we seek out cute things when we need reassurance during stress" (32). But the dangers of cuteness are always there, namely those of turning adults, specially young women, into "powerless children" (7, p. 32).

In my opinion, Marcus' theory places consumers in a role of near dupes that unquestioningly adopt the ideology of the products they consume, or are entertained by, while the reality of consumption is much more complex than that. Fogarasi takes this a step beyond as he relates cuteness (Hello Kitty) with an effacement of the self and materiality. For him, kitsch is an answer to boredom: we create artificial desire/stereotypes that represent "the commodification of cultural otherness" (3).

While Fugarasi's analysis is quite appealing, I would like to stress again the active role that consumers play in relationship to the decision of what will be transformed into kitsch (often against the product's designer wishes). This is particularly true in the case of computer game characters, since people's interaction with them goes beyond *consuming* and into *playing*. Our impression of Hello Kitty wouldn't be at all the same if our only experience of that character came from the Hello Kitty 3D football computer game¹¹. It is difficult to see computer characters exclusively as passive and weak (unless they are just part of the stage for example to be "saved" by other characters). If they are main characters controlled by the players, they move, act, and usually go through traumatic experiences such as death and coming back to life.

¹⁰ Indeed, women in their twenties and thirties can be seen in the streets of such different places as Copenhagen or Madrid wearing small tight T-shirts with manga illustrations printed on them.

¹¹ <http://www.sanriotown.com/footballcup2002/>

This is proven in our test sessions, as the characters were met with near-hostility in the first round by most adult subjects (childish, silly, “I am 25, for God’s sake”) and with enthusiasm in the second round after having played with them. Younger players were never hostile, and found it easier to identify themselves with soft, small and likeable characters (also in the first test question when they had to sort out computer characters). For the adult players, cuteness can be initially annoying, as they project their opinions of cuteness on the design of the characters (very much in line with the theories examined here). However, after playing the game the characters’ cuteness is evaluated in another, more positive, way, by stressing their sense of humour and the kitsch value of adults enjoying something so obviously infantile. In this connection, cuteness is emptied of negative ideological meaning as it is situated within the frame of a game, a “non real” space where liking childish things is all right for a while, and where the appearance of the characters becomes subordinate to their more important function in the game.

Conclusions: How Iconic Characters Work

One of the things that has become clear during our work in this paper is that character design in computer games cannot be considered according to the same parameters we use to judge design (and consumption) of other kinds of products (entertainment or fashion). The perception of the monkeys’ cuteness in a game context is different from their perception as isolated illustrations, so that the same subject would respond differently to the same characters if they encountered them printed on a T-shirt or while playing a game such as SMB.

From the point of view of game character design, we have argued for a category of “iconic characters” reserved for those playing characters which have visual design, minimal personality and no specificity of in-game actions. Players don’t relate to this characters in the same way as they relate to avatars or actors (after Gard), or to their characters in a roleplaying game. Avatars are a non-intrusive representation of ourselves, actors are always part of a story (or have a story, albeit minimal sometimes), and roleplaying characters have very different abilities that we can raise according to our performance.

Iconic characters are only a bit less open than avatars, in that they provide a frame/mask that the player can choose to use in order to add another dimension to the social interaction in the game. They are used by the players to provide a humorous relief to the competition sessions, as they decide to play along the caricature victory/sadness parade, and even sometimes to take on the personalities of their “masks”: hero, girlie, bully, baby. This playful value is not necessary for the game to take place, but it is appreciated and brings the groups together as we have observed in the sessions.

Iconic characters don’t necessarily have to be cute, but cuteness successfully plays with humour and caricature and can appeal to children (direct way) and adults (indirect way: kitsch) at the same time. It is very difficult to imagine another approach than cuteness in order to create successful iconic characters as we have defined them here, because humorous characters who were not somehow visually appealing (cute) might not generate so much acceptance.

In this way, a pure visual design element (cute characters) provides a very special and appreciated game experience that is constructed around the actual gameplay but is out of it, as players can also choose not to join it and it wouldn’t be active in single player

mode¹². At the same time, the possible negative values assigned to cuteness by adult players are neutralized when the characters are interacted with during gameplay, so that the consciousness of the characters being silly or childish is rationalized through the appeal to kitsch.

A very important condition for kitsch to function as such is that it has to be recognized by a community. Thus, iconic characters are perceived as such by the player community of one game, who can share their appreciation of something that the people outside the community cannot probably understand. This is usually quickly picked on by the game companies, who start producing merchandising in an effort to cater for the kitsch-thirst of their fan communities (in the case of children players, merchandising wouldn't have an ironic function, they really play with the game character dolls).

Sega has noticed the iconic value of the monkeys and produced (or licensed) a lot of related products, an example is the "Sega watches"¹³, or watches customized with your favourite characters. Here players can make their own watch with the monkeys, choosing their own clip art, and there are models for children and adults.

However, the game designers haven't quite understood the function of these iconic characters in relationship to the game experience itself as analyzed above. In the second instantiation of this game, Super Monkey Ball 2, the same characters are integrated into a similar main game and even more party (social) games, with the addition of a "story mode", which tries to turn these iconic characters into actors, "the all-new story mode gives even more personality to the lovable monkeys". The main game is framed into this "story mode" where the four monkeys have to fight the evil Dr. Bad-Boon, who has stolen all the bananas from Jungle Island and plots the monkeys' destruction. The cutscenes between the worlds (each world has 10 "levels" or tests) are embarrassingly badly scripted and have much worse graphics than the game, featuring the monkeys pursuing Dr. Bad-Boon across different worlds in order to recover the bananas he stole from their island. This story doesn't add anything to the game experience, quite the opposite as it tries to force a narrative into a game that doesn't need it, but worse still, the characters are somehow deprived of their iconic function as they are turned into bad actors in a bad story¹⁴.

They were much more successful characters in the first game, where visual design was exquisite and the monkeys represented perfect stereotypes for the players to toy with. Contrary to what some game designers and producers seem to think, there isn't always a need for a story in a game. Iconic characters provide the perfect avenue for player expression, as they graphically (and in exaggerated caricatures) represent the most important outcomes of a game session: winning and losing.

¹² Single playing of SMB doesn't create any attachment to the characters, as I have observed in my own (and others) playing sessions.

¹³ Sega games, http://ewdc.ewatchfactory.com/ews_sega_list2

¹⁴ In the instruction booklet included with the game we can read about the monkeys' life story: AiAi and Meemee liked each other, but Dr. Bad-Boon (who was in love with Meemee) sent Gongon to separate them and take control of their island. Therefore, Baby, who in a few years will be born out of AiAi and Meemee's union, has come back from the future to prevent Gongon's victory and therefore collaborate in his own future birth in a simian version of *Back to the Future*. However, Gongon has changed sides now and the four monkeys are united against Dr. Bad-Boon.

Fortunately, hardened SMB players have ignored the story-mode of SMB2 and continued playing as before, some even incorporating the iconic characters into their normal day activities. As a friend and fellow-player of SMB told me the other day when disagreeing about the practicalities of arranging a dinner:

“Stop being Gongon and try to collaborate”

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