

doors off at the Nintendo PowerFest and World Championships.

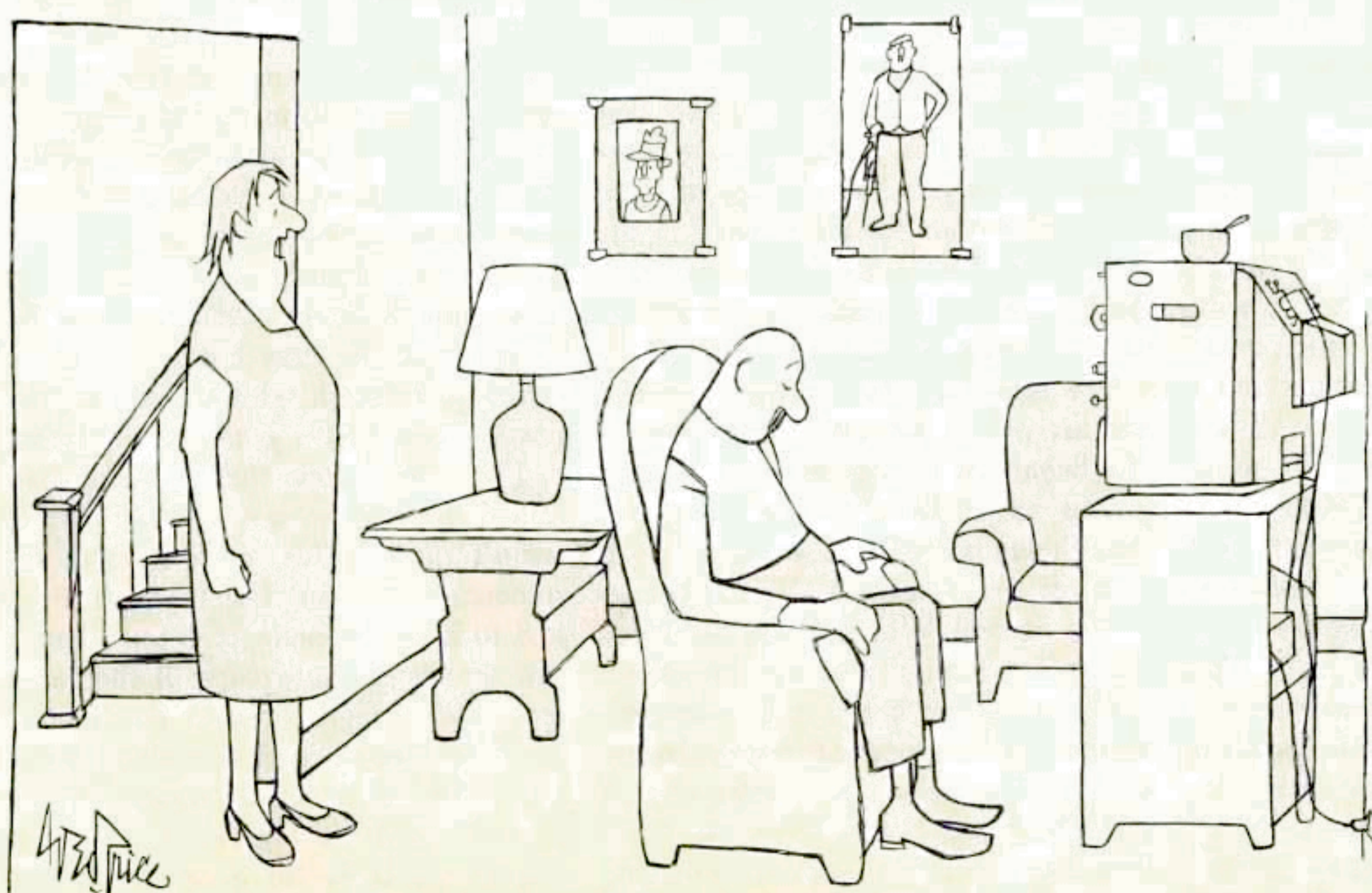
The Nintendo Company, Ltd., of Kyoto, Japan, began life in 1889 as a maker of playing cards, and introduced its first computer game in 1970. Last year, the company and its licensees sold close to three billion dollars' worth of video-game products, accounting for eighty per cent of the market. Nintendo games are now found in about twenty-five per cent of all American households. The company publishes game tips and news in *Nintendo Power* (\$3.50), has launched a new, handheld electronic game, called Game Boy (\$89.98), and employs more than a hundred and forty game counsellors who advise stumped players by phone how to find Princess Toadstool in the game called Super Mario Bros. (\$29.95), and other such arcana. This year, the company inaugurated the Nintendo PowerFest and World Championships, a video-game exposition and competition, which is touring more than thirty American and Canadian cities and will culminate in a televised finale at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, in December.

When the Nintendo extravaganza came to the Javits Center, some forty thousand people wandered over for a look. On the day we dropped by, the place was packed with video-game aficionados of every age and ethnic origin, all of whom seemed to be wearing Simpsons T-shirts and high-topped sneakers. With a jolt, we realized that the Javits Center, with its space-station structural elements and reflective-glass membrane, looks just like the fortress in the game called Air Fortress.

The devotees didn't mind lining up and waiting indefinitely to get at their favorite games. At the far end of one exhibition hall, World Championship competitors duelled on a stage equipped with six game stations and a "throne," a larger game station with a

Zombies

JASON ORLANDO has a terrific pair of thumbs. They are long and elegantly tapered, and he likes to show them off by curling his fingers into fists and sticking his thumbs out like bulls' horns. "When they say 'You're all thumbs' in this game, it's a real compliment," he told us the other day, fanning all ten of his fingers out for a good look. "I've definitely got Nintendo hands." Jason is a wan and reedy fourteen-year-old from Hopewell, New Jersey, who recently dropped by the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center and blew everybody's



"Yoo-hoo. Time to climb the stairway to paradise."

chair elevated in a spotlight. The players' faces were uniformly blank and their bodies stood slack, but their hands—their *thumbs*—furiously mashed buttons on little control panels attached umbilically to control modules. Above and behind the stage, two six-by-eight-foot screens showed games in progress. Nintendo has created a "triathlon" video-game cartridge for the World Championships. To get through it, a competitor must collect fifty coins in the Super Mario Bros. section, dodge green VW Beetles and negotiate a twisting race-track at over two hundred kilometres per hour in Rad Racer, and gain as many points as possible in Tetris, a game of strategy.

"This whole thing is great," Jason announced to us when we discovered him in the Parents' Oasis Room, under the escalators. He told us that he had placed third in the twelve-to-seventeen age group at the Philadelphia Power-Fest, in March—his first public competition. Then he went home and practiced Tetris an hour every night for three weeks. When he caught up with the tour in Worcester, Massachusetts, he flattened the competition, and became a Nintendo Wizard. He can't officially compete again until the finals, in December, but he had come to the Javits Center for a little extra practice. That's when it happened. Apparently without trying very hard, he set a new world record on the triathlon cartridge, with a points total that boggled even the most jaded Nintendo cynics.

"Most of the pros scored around eight hundred thousand points," a professional Nintendo player called Rick told us. "This kid got one point nine million. It's going to be real hard for anyone to touch him."

"Nintendo takes a complex, geometric mind to understand," Jason explained to us. "It's like chess, but it definitely takes coordination, too. Like, my mother knows where to put the pieces in Tetris, but she doesn't have the coordination to move them quick enough. I've been playing video games since I was five years old. For a while, I had the old Colecovision, but when I saw my friend's Nintendo I flipped out. The graphics and play are great. My mom secretly got me one for my ninth birthday, and now I have about fifty games—you know, Wrecking Crew,



"Martha and Lee are going to be doing our environmental hand-wringing."

Kung Fu, Duck Hunt. I usually play on my parents' wide-screen, when they're not on satellite. But my dad's kind of a health nut, and he's pretty strict about how much I play. He takes the games away on school nights."

As Jason warmed to his subject, his words began piling up on their way out of his mouth, and his eyes roamed around the room. "After Philly, I went home and blew my brains out on Tetris. Then I went to Worcester. The pressure was tough there. I was onstage, working on a one million two, but I crashed out in Rad Racer, which I never do. So I chilled out for a while. Then I went back onstage. It came down to a guy called Clint—or Cliff?—and me. I was in Station Two, he was in the throne—that was fine, I didn't want to be in the throne. I thought I was messing up, but when I looked over at his monitor I saw he couldn't take the pressure. Then the pieces began falling perfectly. I got a one million five and won! All my relatives were there watching me. I flipped out. Today, I was just practicing, getting one million fours, one million fives. No pressure. I beat Howard Phillips—he's Nintendo's Game Master—and then I played all the d.j.s from Z-100, and my

one four was three times their combined score. So then I'm, like, standing in line waiting to get up onstage, and people start asking me how to play. I figure, Hey, we got a great crowd here, I'm really going to show my stuff. I get up there, and, man, it was perfect. I got through Mario Bros. and Rad Racer to Tetris—no problem. I made a Tetris. I made another, and another. I just kept making them. The pieces were just dropping away. Finally, I got up to a million nine hundred and forty-nine thousand two hundred and twenty-five points. It was really cool. The crowd loved it. They say some guy in another city got a one eight, but no one's got a one nine before."

Jason stopped just long enough to catch his breath, and smiled. "I love this. It's like a dream come true. Maybe someday I'll turn pro. That's what I'd really like to do—get paid to play Nintendo."

We asked him what it felt like to compete onstage.

"I love it," he said. "But you know what's weird? Sometimes people tell me I look like a zombie when I play. Well, you have to think as hard as you can. I mean, you kind of *are* a zombie up there—a *thinking* zombie."