

From

Teen Anxt,

Nah...

by Ned Vizzini

NINTENDO SAVED ME

Yesterday, on a strange, sudden urge, I hooked up my old Nintendo.* Not the Super NES. The original, spawn-of-the-eighties, from-Japan-with-love, eight-bit Nintendo Entertainment System. It had been lying in a closet for years and was dusty and tough to get working. But when I plugged it in and hit that power button, I was back to being nine years old on the day we bought it.

We went on a Saturday morning after Christmas—my parents always waited for the January sales. Around 8:00 A.M., Dad loaded my six-year-old brother Daniel and me into our van. Our family never had a car, always a van, with two backseats so Daniel and I could space out and not kill each other.

Dad was convinced that Nintendos would be cheaper in New Jersey. He thought everything was cheaper and better in New Jersey, probably because he was born there, in Trenton, which he called “God’s Country.” We drove to Child World, one of those industrial-sized Toys ‘R’ Us look-alikes—silent

*I had to do that whole Nintendo player’s ritual: I blew in the machine until I hyperventilated. I snapped in the game cartridges. I even cleaned the games with Q-tips and alcohol. It took an hour to finish the job.

and frigid as a hospital. We headed to the electronics aisle, pulled a Nintendo off the shelf, paid the pimply cashier one hundred dollars (exactly what we would have paid in Manhattan), and drove back to Brooklyn.*

We triumphantly stomped through the front door, shaking snow off our boots. Mom was in the kitchen having breakfast with my sister, Nora. Nora was almost three. She sat on Mom’s lap, drank juice from a cup, and scribbled all over *The New York Times* while Mom did the crossword puzzle. Mom loves the *Times* crossword puzzles, especially the ones on Saturday, which are always hardest.** Whenever she finishes one, she writes, “100% Yea Mom” in the margins. It’s her thing.

“Daddy’s home!” Nora said, jumping out of Mom’s lap and hugging Dad’s legs. “What is it?” she asked, eagerly looking at the Nintendo box. I held it over my head so she couldn’t touch it.

“Jim?” Mom asked from the kitchen, not looking up from her crossword. “You might know this. Ah, Russian river . . .”

“Ob? Volga?”

*I lived in an apartment building in Brooklyn from ages seven to eighteen. It was a nice place, but in those eleven years, our family demolished everything: the walls had holes, the beds fell apart, and an electric pencil sharpener in the kitchen somehow became controlled by a dimmer switch in the hall.

**Early in the week, the *Times* crossword puzzles are easy, probably because the editors figure that no one wants to strain themselves on a Monday morning. By Saturday, however, those things are brutal. I can’t do one-twentieth of one.

"Volga looks good." Mom penciled in the word. (Later on, when she got even better at crosswords, she'd do them in pen.) "It might not be right, though . . . we'll see. Nora, come back here and finish your juice!"

But now Nora was intrigued. She wanted to know what was in that shiny box. I carried the Nintendo to the living room, sat on the floor, and ravenously tore off all the packaging. Daniel helped. Nora tried to help, but we pushed her away, so she sat on the couch with her stuffed animals.*

Even before she was two, my sister had invented an entire universe of stuffed animals. There were dozens—penguins, dolphins, rabbits—and they all had names that ended in *ee*: Pinky, Yellowy, Mazie, Popsy. They sat on the couch in silent witness as Dad came in, took off his shoes, and announced that he would now assemble the Nintendo.

This required his full concentration, so he told Daniel and me to go play. Hopeful and extremely obedient, for once, we sat on the couch with Nora as Dad connected wires. Within ten minutes, he had the thing working. Dad was a wizard back then.

"I got first game!" Daniel and I yelled simultane-

*As she got older, Nora became extremely protective of her stuffed animals. If you sat on one, she'd make you go to "jail," which meant you had to stand in a corner while she counted to thirty.

ously. I got it, of course. I was the oldest, and the oldest brothers get everything—that's why we're racked with guilt. For half an hour, Daniel watched, and then he started crying, which prompted a visit from Mom.

"What's this machine for? To make you cry?!"

"No, Mom," I moaned.

Daniel shrieked, "Mom, Ned won't let me play! He won't even let me have *one game!*"

"My goodness, Jim, *how* could you buy this? It's like having another TV!" Mom threw up her hands.

"Well, Emma," Dad said from his chair, "it keeps them quiet. They'll sit and gape at it all day."

Now Daniel was playing. That made me mad. I grabbed the controller; he grabbed it back. I hit him and accidentally toppled the Nintendo. It slid behind the TV.

"Aaa! Dad! Get it out! *Get it out!*" I screamed. "What if it's broken?" I sobbed.

Dad pulled out the Nintendo and hit the switch. It worked.

"Don't ever do that again," I told Daniel.

"Don't you *ever* tell your brother what to do!" Mom roared from the kitchen.

Nora scampered off the couch. "My stuffed animals don't like fighting, and they're having a *tea*

party!" She picked up Pinky, Whitey, Posey, and whoever and ran to her room.

"Okay, *shhh*," Dad said to me, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Let's not fight over the Nintendo. We don't need to make Mom mad, and we don't need to scare Nora, do we? Go on, just gape at that screen and be happy."

So I did. For the next five years.

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I first witnessed a Nintendo upstairs at my neighbor Todd's apartment. Todd, a Cool Kid, was a couple of years older than me. He always got the good toys first. I was instantly awestruck by his Nintendo; like television, it had the power to make you *happy*. Todd could plunk down in front of it anytime, play for a few hours, and be giddy when he stopped. He told me, "Nintendo's even better than TV, 'cause you can win."

Todd was right. Nobody wins at television. If you waste your life watching it, you'll end up on a nursing home couch, glued to a talk show, wondering, "What's it all worth?" But if you waste your life playing video games, you can stand up at the end and yell, "Yes! 500,000 points in Tetris!"* Video games give you purpose.

*Invented by Alexey Pajitnov, Tetris remains the best-loved video game of all time. It's a puzzle game; you arrange falling blocks to score points. Dad loves it as much as Mom loves crosswords. There's actually a whole interesting story behind the game, involving a licensing rip-off and the Soviet government. To learn more, check out: <http://atarihq.com/tsr/special/tetrishist.html>.

And I was a smart, purposeful kid. When adults asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said, "A cartographer or a civil engineer." Those professions were specific enough to sound smart but vague enough to conceal my real career goal: playing video games.

From ages nine to fourteen, Nintendo was my sole ambition, my prime motivation, and my best friend. I adopted a grueling schedule:

7:30—Wake up and sneak in a game before school.

8:15–3:00—Trudge through school, mumbling, "Boring, boring, boring" while walking the halls.*

3:20—Run home, place my bony butt on the living room floor, and indulge for a few hours.

6:30—Mom gets home. Do my homework, rewarding each finished assignment with a few games.

9:30—Climb into bed and discuss game strategy with Daniel. Fall asleep.

I even dreamed Nintendo. Sometimes I was Mega Man, clad in a blue jumpsuit, with a spherical helmet and a gun for a right arm. Other times, I was in Final Fantasy, the video role-playing game, slaying and getting slain by ogres. I was never Mario: Rebecca, the

*I was bored with school from third grade on. What I heard in class was just too far behind what Dad taught me in our one-on-one tutoring sessions. He used to sit me down at the dining room table every evening: "Tonight, son, we're going to learn about atoms...."

prettiest girl in my class, had told me that Mario was “stubby,” and I learned early on that this was a bad thing.

Mario, of course, was the short, fat Italian guy who starred in countless Nintendo games. His mission was always to save The Princess, a blond girl with a pink dress and large breasts. She looked kind of like Rebecca. In fourth grade, I picked The Princess as “the girl I would go on a date with if I absolutely had to ’cause everyone else in the world was dead.” I spent hundreds of hours saving The Princess. All that time, head aching, palms sweating, butt falling asleep—I’m a little ashamed of it now.

But only a little. You see, childhood sucks. I’m young enough to remember that. Starting in first grade, there’s pressure from all sides: to be smart, to make friends, to get teachers to like you. Kids develop different ways of coping with that pressure. Some find solace in books. Some play-act or play large and expensive musical instruments.* Others draw, or sing, or do math. Some watch TV or sit and stare. I coped with childhood by playing Nintendo.

Now, it’s been a few years since I’ve curled up with a jumbo toy catalog and drooled over the video games. When Nintendo 64 (the big next-generation

*I played saxophone for three years, until I left the thing on the subway. I played piano for a year, until I realized I hated it. I’ve played bass guitar for nine years—and counting—because it looks cool.

system) was released, I didn’t even care. Still, I have this future scene all worked out: me, age forty-plus, fat,* and balding, waiting at a bus stop or some other nondescript place. I start daydreaming and humming, and soon I’m whistling the theme to Super Mario Brothers. And the guy next to me, a lanky guy with a beard—he whistles, too.

*I’m skinny now, but over 50 percent of American men end up overweight, so I’ll probably be fat later on.

FIFTEEN MINUTES

I leave the house at 7:23 every morning. Well, not exactly 7:23—I wish I were that anal—more like 7:25 or :26. I take fifteen minutes (even if I run) to reach the subway. I spend two or three more minutes waiting on the platform. When the train comes, I run to the front car and try to beat out an adult for a seat. I usually fail. Then, I'm faced with the day's first problem: what to do on the way to school. I have fifteen minutes to kill.

Let's start with the obvious: I could read. At 7:45 A.M., a New York subway car is a remarkably literate place. The *Daily News*, the Bible, *Waiting to Exhale*,* R. L. Stine, a chemistry textbook—half the strap-hangers are reading. But I can't read on the train. Invariably, I get caught up in a chapter and lose my balance, falling into the businesswoman next to me, who's also reading. She closes her thick, important-looking book and glares at me. I cringe, shuffle away, and look at the floor. Bumping into men isn't so bad;

*A book about women waiting to get into a committed relationship so they can exhale. Very similar to my desires at the time.

they just *harrumph* and turn back to the sports section. Still, reading's out.

I could always fantasize, but come on. Cramped by some overweight banker, smelling b.o. that's just starting to stale, wearing a fifteen-pound backpack, and clutching my math notebook in my teeth, I'm going to think about the woman next to me?

I could scan the passengers, like Dad does. He's always analyzing strangers on the train, building stories around their imagined lives. "See those two? He's an architect, and he loves her, but he can't stand her cats." Never a dull moment for Dad. But I'm no good at crafting urban tales.

I could hum, but this causes problems, too. My humming inevitably leads to openmouthed mumbling, which becomes these horrible "Dun, dun, dada, dun, da" noises, which lead to full-blown, off-key singing in my corner of the subway car. Sometimes I belt out the entire "Spider-Man" theme song ("Is he tough? Listen, bud / He's got radioactive blood") before shutting myself up.

I experimented with a Walkman. I'd put on the headphones, hunch over, and wear a jaded, sullen face as I brooded in the back of the car. But I'm not sullen, and I can't fake it; the Walkman was eventually crushed by an unruly businessman.

Often, the idea of talking with my fellow strap-hangers has crossed my mind. There are two I recognize—the annoying woman with the sunglasses who never gets a seat, and the cute green-haired girl who actually seems intimidated by me. Many times, I've been ready to address them, but I always reconsider and pull out my global notes to study.

I could sleep, but how? A typical subway rider sleeps standing up, chin dropped to the chest, or sitting, head tilted back. These positions never work for me. The only way I can rest is by sitting with my backpack on my lap, and my head on my backpack. Bent forward, covered in my coat and sweatshirt, I look like a twisted midget escaped from rehab. My back gets bent up, and then hurts all day. I never actually fall asleep.

Sometimes, though, I fall half asleep. Being half asleep is terrific; my sense of time slows down, and I picture weird things. Sometimes I press my palms against my eyes on the subway to see whirling tunnels or flashing squares. Once, firmly planted in this zone, I saw a gray machine extruding strawberries through a little nozzle.*

But I can't be half asleep all the time, and I'm running out of options. I could stare and think about mysteries of the cosmos. Let's see . . . *Is there a God?*

*The strawberry image was crystal clear to me. If only I could draw, I'd draw it for you.

Please. *How can the universe be older than some of its stars?* Somebody screwed up. *Will we ever conquer disease?* No. *Will the universe expand forever, or will it stop at a point and implode?* Right then, when I'm on implosions, the train hits Park Place. One more stop before school.

My brain shifts modes. I do the mental homework checklist: math, global, English. Either I've done them, or I'll do them at lunch. The train pulls into Chambers Street.

It's 7:58, most likely—I'll know by sneaking a glance at someone's watch.* My back is aching; lint has already sneaked into my interstices. I'm tired and I'm headed off to Sequential Math, where I understand roughly 50 percent of the curriculum. But at least there I've got something to do. These subway trips are going to kill me fifteen minutes at a time.

*I never wear a watch. They always chafe my wrists. Also, I chew on them and lose them.