

# Dots, Fruit, Speed and Pills: The Happy Consciousness of *Pac-Man*

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## ABSTRACT

Spanning 30 years and 40 individual videogames across a range of platforms, *Pac-Man* is one of the most recognizable of all videogame characters and a pop-culture icon. In spite of its widespread popularity, the game receives little sustained academic engagement or analysis. In an attempt to address this, the paper argues that in its classic iterations *Pac-Man* generates complex notions of space and time which are indicative of changing cultural, ethical and political considerations in wider society. This is explored through recourse to Borges' work on labyrinths, Bauman's discussion of the ethical position of videogames, Poole's rejoinder and Ritzer's critique of consumerism, ultimately arguing that the dynamics, themes and leitmotifs evident in *Pac-Man* are experienced by gamers, consumers and citizens described in Marcuse's *One Dimensional Society*, whereby the welfare and warfare state coalesce to generate the Happy Consciousness.

## Keywords

*Pac-Man* • Videogames • Space • Time • Consumption

## INTRODUCTION

As the dot-munching, pill-popping fruitarian, the yellow pie-chart of *Pac-Man* is instantly recognizable to gamers and non-gamers alike with a trans-medial influence which spans 30 years of franchises, popular culture and videogame lore. In the past three decades, *Pac-Man* and his four ghostly enemies have appeared in over 40 individual videogames on practically every hardware platform ever released, manifested themselves in variants as diverse as augmented reality(1), board-game, fruit machine, pinball, card-game, iPod and cartoon iterations, and at the height of their popularity were supplemented by musical homages waxed onto 1980s single and album releases then remixed by UK dance artists in the 1990s as a backdrop to rave culture. *Pac-Man* has been adopted as the ring-name for boxing champion Manny Pacquiao and is the unofficial moniker given to a region of the Cassiopeia constellation, which bears a passing resemblance to *Pac-Man*'s shape. This widespread acknowledgement of *Pac-Man*'s influence makes it one of the few

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videogames to achieve something approaching the hallowed transmediality (see Juul 2005; Jenkins 2007) enjoyed by other significant cultural artifacts.

These examples of transmediality demonstrate the importance of *Pac-Man* to the sociological and cultural study of videogames and yet the game's popularity has not been reflected in sustained academic engagement, where other, more recent and less iconic games have been subject to extended academic discourse. Therefore, in keeping with my own aim of providing a critical and historical context for the study of videogames, this paper will focus on *Pac-Man*, examining how, in spite of its apparent simplicity, its grid-like structure produces complex notions of space and time where a range of ideas incorporating consumption, entertainment, play and gender are transmitted throughout its labyrinth. This is achieved through recourse to current thought on consumption, the constituent nature of a technocratic society as demonstrated by Bauman and Marcuse and to Borges' work on labyrinths, while keeping the form, content, presentation and play of the game to the foreground of the analysis. As becomes apparent, *Pac-Man*'s popularity transcends traditional notions of reading to become emblematic of wider social and economic transformation, illustrating the dynamics of change between our relationship to space and time and the objects and practices of the quotidian contained within it.

## WHO IS PAC-MAN?

Pac-Man is an enigma. On the one hand the yellow pie-chart is immediately recognizable and iconic, even to non-videogamers. Yet he is also a superficial character, effectively no more than an automaton. This is best seen when the player starts a game and it is left to run with no input from the player: Pac-Man will start moving autonomously and will continue to move along his original path until running up against the wall of the maze. In the classic iterations such as *Pac-Man* (1980) and *Pac-Man: Championship Edition* (2007) Pac-Man doesn't have any eyes and therefore relies entirely on the player for his survival, his myopia compounded by the lack of any other distinguishing characteristics, that is, apart from his gaping mouth. Although there is some dispute over the true inspiration of Pac-Man's shape, it is clear that Pac-Man is a 'game about eating' as developer Toru Iwatani wanted to 'build his game around the Japanese word *taberu*, which means "to eat"' (Kent 2001: 140). It is widely asserted in videogames lore that the 'actual figure of Pac-Man came about as I was having pizza for lunch. I took a wedge out and there it was the figure of Pac-Man' (Iwatani, cited Kent 2001: 141) although this has been disputed in subsequent interviews, as Iwatani revealed that Pac-Man mimicked the Japanese symbol for mouth *kuchi* (口) (Lammers: 1986).

As with any symbolic culture, while the meaning appears obvious in the first instance, it is open to an array of interpretation, as the symbol also connotes 'mouth' with 'opening' and 'hole' in Japanese, meaning that as well as a cavity for entering the body, *kuchi* could also represent an orifice for exiting the body: the incessant chomping of Pac-Man intimates digestion and defecation as well as mastication. These universals of quotidian existence, which every living thing must partake in if it is to survive, interlaces with the development of *Pac-Man*, which attempted to appeal in equal measure to both sexes (Kent 2001: 141). The opening of the game-world to females had a remarkable impact upon the financial success of *Pac-Man* and the culture surrounding it, as males and females became one of a kind. Addictions and afflictions usually reserved for teenage videogame savants suddenly bridged the gender divide. As Amis observes, where a mature businessman was dragged 'screaming from the [arcade] console' similarly a

female player was so obsessed by *Pac-Man* that she developed ‘Pac-Man hand’ so acute that that ‘her index finger looked like a section of blood pudding’ (Amis 1982: 57).

This widespread appeal is achieved in a multitude of ways, many of which overlap. First, *Pac-Man* is a simple game to learn but difficult to master. This is a significant predicate of other tactically pure games such as chess, boxing and *Tetris* (1985) where the rules are straightforward and all of the requisite information about the game’s status is available to the player at any given point in time.

Second, there is an avowed commitment to nonviolence in the game, which, as Nintendo have demonstrated throughout their videogame history, is a precursor to financial success and mainstream respectability, as can be seen in relation to their current Wii and DSi hardware. This is evident in *Pac-Man* too: the ghosts literally get the colour back in their faces by visiting their ‘den’ at the centre of the screen and Pac-Man himself tends to wither away like a dying flower rather than exploding in the pixelated glory of *Missile Command* (1980) or *Galaxian* (1979). As I show below, however, this theme of non-violence in *Pac-Man* is something of a non-sequitur as it only extends to relatively superficial aesthetic considerations, not ethical ones.

Third, this nonviolence is mapped onto a game-world which is classical in its structure, making it instantly recognisable to any player. The grid is reminiscent of the labyrinths of ancient Greece or the mazes of early modern England, where the role of the female is of crucial importance to the outcome of the quest. In ancient Greece the thread given by Ariadne to Theseus allows the latter to slay the minotaur and safely escape the labyrinth. In early modern England the conceived space of the maze generated a ‘safe place’ where a woman could engage in a courtly chase with little negative effect on her reputation or status (see Munroe 2008). As well as conjuring comparisons with classism, the 244 dots contained *within Pac-Man*’s grid are evocative of the breadcrumbs in fairytale *Hansel and Gretel*, thereby lending the experience of play ‘a childish whimsicality’ (Amis 1982: 56), of bedtime stories where monsters or ghosts are vanquished by innovative tactical maneuvers. The ability of *Pac-Man* to ably span these familiar, timeless and childlike references, through evoking ‘unashamedly cheerful’ (Fox 2006: 302) memories is a key psychological factor to its success.

Fourth, as discussed in greater detail below, as well as being a site of antiquity, the game-world is hyper-modern, reflecting the sheen of the homogenous spaces of shopping centres and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century consumer society where the aim is to consume irrespective of financial cost. Circulation through these spaces is primarily based upon tenets of speed and need which are common tactical elements if the player is to successfully traverse the game. This is especially pertinent to Japan as it was at this point that it became recognised as a viable – and potentially threatening - economic power of which the 1980s is a key epoch in its development (Poole 2000: 192)(2). The drive towards ‘small is beautiful’ electronics was beatified in the mass production of PCBs (Printed Circuit Boards) which carried the code for so many successful arcade games and ultimately, home consoles such as Sega’s Master System and the NES(3).

## **DYNAMICS OF PAC-MAN**

The straightforward grid of the game portrayed as labyrinth or maze is a familiar structure as seen in classic narratives, modern spatial practice and contemporary modes of everyday life. Yet the complexity of the game’s structure extends beyond the perceived

space ‘reading’ of *Pac-Man* and into the conceived space of ludology, where the game is constructed and thus makes sense to the player (Wade 2009: 81). This conceived space and its impact upon the game and player dynamics is the focus of this section.

The onset of the original (1980) release of the game presents the player with an attract mode which, in keeping with ghostly character of the game first introduces the ghosts before showing Pac-Man pursued across the screen until he eats a power pill, thus turning the haunted into the haunter. This inventive use of the attract mode seamlessly introduces the player to the most important facets of the game: the scoring system for dots and power-pills while outlining the exponential increase in score for each subsequent ghost eaten. With each ghost given their name and nickname, Bashful (Inky), Shadow (Blinky), Speedy (Pinky) and Pokey (Clyde), there is an element of empathy between player, Pac-Man and enemy, the bright bold colors unrepresentative of the gridiron maze of the state of nature, where the aim is to eat or be eaten. So, when the player is presented with the grid, it becomes apparent that the maze is both conventional and unconventional.

Its conventionality stems from the grid being a multicursal labyrinth, in that there are two routes of ingress and egress to the left and right hand side of the screen (with a total of six in Iwatani’s ‘true’ sequel *Pac-Man: Championship Edition*). The conceit of having an unseen space ‘behind’ the screen had been used to great effect in the seminal *Asteroids* (1979), with more sophisticated versions employed in contemporary platform games such as *Braid* (2007). *Pac-Man*’s trans-spatial short cuts have been given a variety of names, from the shopping mall vernacular ‘Wraparound Avenue’ (Amis 1982: 57) to the spatio-temporal shifting ‘warp tunnel’ (Gallagher and Ryan 2003: 1), but are widely known as escape tunnels, or just simply tunnels, as they are open to use by ghosts too.

The unconventionality of the maze is held in the premise that there is precisely *no* exit from the labyrinth. This is seen when the grid resets after Pac-Man has eaten the last dot of one level and it is interminably replaced by another identical in content (if not strictly form), ad infinitum. This structure is therefore closer to a Borgesian labyrinth, from which there is no exit, the escape route acting as ‘one of the free sides’ which ‘leads to a narrow hallway which opens onto another gallery identical to the first and to all the rest’ (Borges 2000: 78). However, as is well known in videogame lore, level 256 of *Pac-Man*, the so-called ‘spilt screen’ level, is fundamentally different from all of the preceding levels in that the space that it revealed was unknown - even to the developers at Namco – as it was believed that the game was too difficult to be ‘beaten’ and would continue forever. However, the legendary level 256

Displays the left half of the maze correctly, but the right half is a jumbled mess of randomly colored letters, numbers, and symbols [resulting in] a confusing series of open areas, tunnels, one-way intersections, lone walls, and pass-throughs—all *invisible* to the player

(Pittman 2009)

Namco’s ignorance of this final level ‘labyrinth of symbols’ (Borges 2000: 50) when assumed to have fallen into chaos, or nonsense, (Borges 2000: 84) makes it difficult, or impossible, in normal play to traverse the final level to turn the level count of the machine over. This is in distinction to the player of *Space Invaders* or *Asteroids*, who can, hypothetically at least, carry on forever, ‘there is no final victory waiting for Pac-

Man, only an empty half maze full of ghosts . . . there is nothing left to do but sacrifice Pac-Man to a hungry ghost' (Pittman 2009). This is entirely consistent with the Borgesian labyrinth where the hero dies just a few leagues from where he was born, in a manner befitting of the withering of Pac-Man 'my body will sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind' (Borges 2000: 79).

The release of *Pac-Man: Championship Edition (Pac-Man: CE)* in 2007, which is regarded as the de facto sequel to the original *Pac-Man* as it was the only subsequent *Pac-Man* game where Iwatani was involved directly in the development, tended to defer to the finitude evident in level 256 of *Pac-Man* as 'Championship' mode limits the game to five minutes of play, in which the aim is to garner as many points as possible, through consuming dots, power-pills, ghosts, fruit and other paraphernalia. The effect upon the game is an intensification of the compulsion towards consumption which is a key component of the game. The overlapping tenets of speed and need, familiar to anyone who has experienced trolley rage in a supermarket, or desperately looked at the last sausage at a breakfast buffet, are essential to tactical and ludic success within the labyrinth of *Pac-Man*. In the following two sub-sections I will discuss their impact upon the game dynamics of *Pac-Man* and *Pac-Man: CE*.

## Speed

In *Pac-Man: CE* speed is key to the interaction between player and game. As the player successfully progresses, the speed of the ghosts increases, making it more difficult to avoid their advances. Within the labyrinth, there is an increase in spatial pressure, as Pac-Man's potential area of escape is limited.

This spatial squeezing does not completely disadvantage the player of *Pac-Man*. One of the most innovative elements of the original *Pac-Man* program was the innate ability of Pac-Man to move quicker than his pursuers through the maze, and was part of the reason for the relative failure of the much vaunted screen-scrolling of Namco's *Rally-X* (1980) and clones such as *Radar Rat Race* (1981), which placed the player's avatar at a relative disadvantage to the enemies as they were as quick as the player's avatar. Closely linked to this, and a possible contributing factor in their accordant lack of popularity, is that their multiple-screen scrolling architecture shifts away from the tactical perfection found in *Pac-Man*, thereby suggesting that even in the 8-bit era where graphics were comparatively crude, a cool medium is sometimes preferential, at a technical level, to a hot medium. The speed advantage provided by the game to the player is something of a leitmotif in Namco games as *Ridge Racer* (1993) awards the player with an increase in speed when negotiating a corner with aplomb, a prize similarly bestowed upon the player in *Pac-Man: CE* where subtle manipulation of the joypad results in Pac-Man emitting sparks as he grinds against the side of the maze, showboating his cornering proficiency.

While this boost in speed appears to make the game easier, as with all classic arcade games, the game is balanced so that while there is give in one area, it consolidates difficulty in another. In *Pac-Man: CE* the inclusion of music throughout the five minutes of the game is primarily designed to have a psychological effect upon the player. Beginning with dreamlike, ambient sounds echoing through a cavern, as the timer at the top of the screen counts down, so the music becomes more urgent, increasing in tempo. The melody, as it progresses, replicates acid-house ditties from the late 1980s and early 1990s best evidenced by house music from Detroit in the US and rave music from the UK. This has two effects. First, it acts as a Lydian stone to the zeitgeist of the 1980s, the

epoch of *Pac-Man*'s apotheosis. Second, it meshes perfectly with the psychedelic colours in the maze which are triggered by Pac-Man eating bonus objects to open new areas of the Borgesian labyrinth, which theoretically titillates at escape, but in practice totally homogenises. The bass-line to the tune which becomes ever more pronounced, is pitched towards the player's own heartbeat, imitating the biorhythms of the player's body, supposedly mimicking a concurrent increase in heart rate and blood pressure as the game reaches its speedy, inevitable conclusion of rendezvous with zero-hour. It is therefore interesting to note that a range of research into the effect of videogame play upon gamers' cardio-vascular system has concluded that both blood-pressure and heart-rate drop during play, contrary to the perception by gamers that videogames can be a source of physiological anxiety (see e.g. Stahlman (2005); Ballard et al (2006)). The role of music in *Pac-Man* is analysed in greater detail below.

## Need

With any iteration of *Pac-Man*, there is only one requirement for the player: the need to stay alive. Without this, chomping the next power-pill to eat a ghost, the desperate dash for the next piece of fruit in order to unlock the next level, the race on the scoreboard towards the next '1UP', through to attaining of the highest score on Xbox Live's Leaderboards, becomes irrelevant. In this regard the past only matters in that it has orientated the player within the current space of maze. Any time not spent in acquiring the perfect tactical advantage over the maze and therefore the ghosts, is essentially a missed opportunity and practically a waste of time. Need acts as the catalyst behind all other actions within the game, for veteran players of *Pac-Man*, or *Pac-Man: CE*, the loss of a life has little bearing on whether the 'end' of the game can be reached, but prevents the achievement of the perfect score; whereas for a novice player it is absolutely essential to stay alive at all costs in order to progress as far as possible and thus attain a personal best score. For both types of players the need for speed is apparent: be quick or be dead.

Much of this need arises from the compulsion to consume, after all both in *Pac-Man* and in everyday life it is necessary to eat to stay alive. Yet there are additional dynamics at work in *Pac-Man* which suggests that in common with its fairy-tale constituents, there is a shadowy complexion behind the primary colors and cute icons, demonstrating that survival is the absolute zenith of existence in Pac-Land. This is illustrated in an article by Bauman who observes that videogames (along with films and television) are beyond the ken of any of the social or genetic engineers who took part in the holocaust

Surely, compared with the refined artistry of cinema, television, Nintendo or Play Station, the everyday life in the barracks of the concentration camps or the communist bloc must seem like some abortive creations produced by provincial amateurs and manufacturers of cheap kitsch

(Bauman 2009)

It is interesting to note how Bauman reverses the widely held view that entertainment products like films and videogames offer a downgraded view of everyday life, but instead argue that the shiny graphics of high dynamic range and normal mapping, are somehow superior to the proffered reality. This has an ethical as well as an aesthetic effect upon the player, as

western Generation-X and Y gamers, have known almost from the day they were born that monstrous things are the creation of monsters and sordid things are created by scoundrels, and that monsters and scoundrels therefore have to be exterminated before they get a chance to exterminate us, and that, since those who are being exterminated are the spawn of the devil it must follow that those who subdue them are nothing but angels

(Bauman 2009)

The player, born into a world sterilized (and atrophied in the museums of Chernobyl and Auschwitz) of the actions and accidents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is thus garnered with the idea that the games they play reinforce their favourite position on the moral high ground. Bauman isolates a crucial thematic in videogames whereby through permitting a pasteurised, anodyne experience of recent history, they also distance us from the time and space in the present.

Following *Pac-Man*, Bauman shows that modern entertainment, and specifically videogames, provide a forum for scores of children, teenagers and adults to justify their place in the world. Like the Nazis of *Wolfenstein* (2009), contemporary videogames offer an easy target twice over: being fully susceptible to an easy head-shot they are simultaneously prey to a laconic moral shot from the lip: nothing can justify this evil, ergo they must be eliminated. Repeated play, high-score attempts, tactical innovation, the snuffing out of the Third Reich threat merely compounds the impression that the only point of life in this digital space is ‘survival’ thus inculcating ‘survival syndrome’ as gamers ‘sit at their computers with their faces ablush, trying to defeat the electronic monsters at their own wicked game, to respond to their trickery with their own, even more refined, tricks’ (Bauman 2009).

As Poole (2009) neatly articulates the need to stay alive at all costs is replicated not only in the genealogy of the ‘survival horror’ genre with games such as *Resident Evil 4* (2005) and *Dead Space* (2008), eliding the aim to live and thrive, instead focussing on surviving hyperreal schlock and gore, but in a host of other games from *Tomb Raider* (1995) to *Assassin’s Creed* (2007). This also applies to *Pac-Man*, which shares many key game components with survival horror. Limited resources (lives), ill-suited armaments (a mouth that can’t eat spectres) and hostile environments (Borgesian labyrinths) culminate in murderous odds (four ghosts versus one Pac-Man). In the survival horror genre, these odds are countered by weapons of prophylaxis, that is, a kind of pre-emptive protection against the threat proffered by the enemies in the game. Acting more as a shield against the *Biohazard* (1996)(4) than a first-strike capability weapon, these weapons often take the guise of the weird and the wonderful, from the plasma cutter of *Dead Space* to the mannequin of *Dead Rising* (2006), but is there any more eclectic or seminal videogame weapon of pre-emption than *Pac-Man*’s power pills which the player can use as ‘a legitimate defensive tool – good for tight corners as well as for accumulating points’? (Amis 1982: 57)

Extrapolating meaning from the ludic construction of the videogame, Bauman suggests that the post-holocaust latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has taken the idea of prophylaxis and applied it to geopolitics, with a concurrent rise in ‘preventative’ wars. As the experience of contemporary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate, the military application of Philip K. Dick’s notion of ‘pre-crime’ where survival is time-dependent on pre-emptive capability is just as evident in military strategy as in the survival horror genre. This

carries somewhat distasteful results, with politicians 'willing to unleash genocidal passions in the name of preventing presumed genocide' (Bauman 2009), therefore sharing the same political-ethical motivation with players of *Mass Effect* (2007) who are given the binary choice of either killing the Rachni race or allowing them to live in peace. The seeming lack of difference between the outcome of genocidal tendencies (Commander Shepard is vilified by a superior whether he allows the Rachni race to live or die, politicians are criticised if they engage or withdraw from military action) lends itself to the title of Bauman's article: 'Inhumanity is Part of Human Nature'. What has happened, especially with the advent of sophisticated software seen in the *Mass Effect* trilogy, is the generation of a crucible for the execution of inhuman moral judgements, which simulate, but also distance the individual from any of the related consequences. Therefore, we are all survivors of Nazi experimentation in *Castle Wolfenstein*, or a nuclear attack in *Call of Duty 4* (2007) and can pass judgements on what should be 'done with' North and South Ossetia, Transnistria or Eritrea. Melancholically – and not a little tritely - it is the same need to survive, the 'survivor syndrome' (Bauman 2009) which pushes us towards 'achievements' and 'trophies'; the rewards which give a little thrill to the player as the required number of heads 'asplode' in *Shadow Complex* (2009).

## **PAC-MAN: EMBLEM OF THE SOVEREIGN CONSUMER?**

The question that is raised by the abstract uniformity of the digital spaces and times which are generated by videogames, is, like the idea of *Pac-Man* deceptively simple: where do the players go when they want to escape these homogenous spaces which rein in morality under a deluge of ethical considerations? Where are their venues of rest and recuperation? The answer is concordant with the Borgesian labyrinth: to more, identical homogenous spaces. This is especially prevalent in the music of *Pac-Man: CE* which purposefully provides an evocative soundtrack, fully emblematic of leisure pursuits of the late 80s and early 90s then evangelised in the quip by British comedian Marcus Brigstocke that 'If *Pac-Man* had affected us as kids, we'd all be running around in a darkened room munching pills and listening to repetitive music' (Brigstocke 2009). For Generation-Xers, the message is self-evident in that *Pac-Man* introduced a welter of people of both sexes to videogames and, as their demographic aged, the culture reflexively acted back upon itself and became a method of coping with the growing pains of moving from childhood, to adolescence and into adulthood.

Much of this was held into relief against the backdrop of boomtown Britain and yuppie Manhattan where derelict docklands exploded in the big bang to become spectacles of consumption. Under the sign of Gordon Gekko's 'greed is good' mantra, electronica, music and audiovisual spectaculars were hard-wired into the technological habitus from Jean-Michel Jarre's(5) London Docklands concerts to raves in grain silos in the Staffordshire countryside. It was widely held that to properly experience these sensory extravaganzas, it was necessary to partake in pharmaceutical enhancement. Initially this took the form of relatively common street-drugs such as LSD and amphetamines, but raves, an acronym derived from 'Radical Audio Visual Experience' required their own design of drug. In the mid 1980s, ecstasy, a recreational version of MDMA(6) was developed and sold to revellers across Europe and the US. These were often produced in a tablet form and were therefore widely known as 'pills'. Following on from childhoods spent in darkened, subterranean *arcaves* playing darkened, homogenous labyrinths and ingesting narcotics to chase ghosts it is only small leap to replicating the self-same in adulthood. This is musically enshrined in Power Pill's 1992 single release 'Pac-Man', where the eponymous track remixes ditties from the 1980 original, encourages the

gamer/listener to 'Insert Coin' before other samples urge the imbibing of 'power pills' by 'eating them up, yum yum'. The meshing of audiovisual and tactile stimulation – often paradoxically attained through simultaneous deprivation and enhancement of the senses – as central to the *Pac-Man* experience, is also crucial to the experience of the first generation to be born with digital technologies as part of their everyday lives. The very fact that the escapism from homogenous spaces and times is merely more of the same - albeit in a different place - is symptomatic of the technocratic ordering of everyday lived experience.

During the 1980s when videogames were purely videogames and not simulations of other media, their iconography was visceral, crude and relied on sharp contrasts and images to portray their message: they were the quintessential radical audiovisual experience. Narrative plays little part in the abstraction of *Pac-Man* or *Space Invaders* (1978) yet their ability to transcend much of the videogame canon, from the genesis of the golden age of videogames in 1978 through to *Space Invaders Extreme* (2008) thirty years later means that they have the most enduring tales to tell. As *Pac-Man* himself exists in a double helix, sandwiched between east and west, between the industrial devolution and the information revolution, it is relatively straightforward to see how he can become a metaphor for life in advanced capitalist societies, riven and driven by the need for more

He is the pure consumer. With his obsessively gaping maw, he clearly only wants one thing: to feel whole, at peace with himself. He perhaps surmises that if he eats enough, in other words buys enough industrially produced goods – he will attain . . . perfect roundness. But it can never happen.

(Poole 2000: 189)

A certain sadness reigns in this depiction of *Pac-Man*. Already labeled as a survivor of political economy, he is doomed to a life of repetition, incessantly chomping at the same number of dots in the same one-screen maze.

Homogeneity in consumption and duplication of a model is a key consideration of a digital and technocratic society. From the *Windows* of (nearly) every PC and the wi-fi seating arrangement at Starbucks, through to the hidden exits in the corporate jumble sale of TK Maxx the 'new means of consumption seeks to replicate the same setting from one geographic location to another' (Ritzer 1999: 182). With *Pac-Man* the pre-eminent consumer he is – along with George A. Romero's zombies in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) - an emblem of materialism, unable to escape from the shopping mall, where time is blurred, daylight omitted and space looped back on itself so that each exit becomes an entrance to another level, thus ensconcing him in the hell of the same. The only alteration to *Pac-Man*'s relationship to the means of consumption occurs when he moves outside of the sheltered system and into the black market to ingest narcotics, in order that he consume *yet more*. On the surface, this appears darkly humorous, but the message is striking, for although as consumers we are aware of our complicity in this consumption spectacular 'the masses simulate the media which in turn hypersimulate the masses' (Lash & Urry 1987: 289) and, in a water-cooler carnival, thrive on its fascination, it ultimately leads us to a mobius strip of positive feedback, which as anyone who has relaxed in a coffee shop after partaking in a frantic shopping spree can attest, is 'closer to nirvana than hell' (Ritzer 1999: 183).

Summarily, the experience belongs to the fairground or theme park, but historically it identifies with the theatre of the absurd where consumption is limited to cost, not value and everything from the banal to the obscene is available for viewing and purchase. Consumption is unmitigated; spending power is unleashed as traditional notions of nation-state borders are dissolved in the rush towards 'freedom': interest-free, tariff-free, free trade zones aligned in borderless market-states, themselves part of a global supra-state which impel the spatial boundaries in and around production and consumption to implode. The Internet provides the analogous infinite space 'which can be as big as the imaginations of those who create and view its various components' (Ritzer, 2001: 148). There seems little irony in the inspiration for this frictionless, Deleuzian smooth space which is coterminous with

a video game in which players are treated to incomparable spectacle *if* they can suspend their sense of reality and distance themselves from their physical surroundings and immerse themselves completely in the game world . . . [Adrift], one has lost touch with reality (at least day-to-day reality) and is in a state that makes one vulnerable to buying things one does not need and cannot afford.

(Ritzer 1999: 162)

The state of the individual consumer within this totalitarian digital ideology is 'dreamlike', which, when coupled with rampant homogenization of the mazes of Ikea and Westfield, or the subterranean arcaves which are home to *Pac-Man*'s iconic labyrinth, 'defines Romero's zombies as the perfect allegory for capitalism' (Loudermilk 2003: 88) as they are 'vacuous, mimetic replications of the human beings they once were. Despite . . . signs of difference they all act in exactly the same way' (Shaviro, cited Loudermilk 2003: 88): that is as automaton, where they blindly, blithely move from one hole-in-the-wall to the next uncontrollably munching goods, irrepressibly crunching credit. Such a digital mode of consumption which makes us Pac-Men and zombies in the shopping mall reaches its ultimate apotheosis in *Dead Rising* where the gamer races against time to defeat the zombie menace, while possessing *carte blanche* to use any of the consumables in the Willamette shopping mall. The game concludes at the beginning of another business day with the realization that there is no escape from the shopping centre. Condemned to 'survival mode', the avatar slowly, inevitably dies, rotting away in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's bastion of consumption.

## **THE ONE-DIMENSIONAL SOCIETY OF PAC-LAND**

If as Bauman reminds us, 'the life of a consumer, the consuming life is . . . first and foremost about being on the move' (Bauman 2007: 98), of being a Pac-Man endlessly circulating in a cycle of signs, then where does that place the society of which we are (in)active part? A technocratic society, through the utilization of digital technologies and media encourages the projection of the self to a multitude of people, scenarios and goods and services at the tap of a microswitch and is also a portal to a highly controlling and self-replicating existence in the everyday: stripped of normalcy, it becomes abnormal, until extended absorption makes it normal, then lackluster, and ultimately monotonous. Thus there is no difference between the drudgery of the 9-5 and updating a profile on a 'social utility' website six times in every waking hour. The convergence between work and leisure where digital technologies are used for labor and love, toil and pleasure, may have some bearing on this sense of estrangement, as well as the dynamics and leitmotifs

engaged with in this paper's analysis of *Pac-Man* including mobility in the form of speed and need in the form of consumption.

These are concepts central to the critique of contemporary societies offered by Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man* who, in common with Ritzer and Bauman, sees many needs as transient and fleeting, as manufactured artificial desires which are eminently changeable and subject to instant gratification. In the eternal quest for satiation, there is only dissatisfaction,

The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to the category of false needs.

(Marcuse 2002: 7)

This leaves the analysis of *Pac-Man* in something of a non-place. The need has already been established: that *Pac-Man* is born with survivor syndrome and lives in survival mode, and yet during this existence he is impelled to consume in much the same manner as UK and US citizens were instructed on their 'moral obligation' to consume during the recent economic downturn: an urge to splurge and increase the excess, all in the name of survival of the capitalist-democratic system of administration. Marcuse, originally writing in 1964, identifies that there is little sociological differentiation between the need to survive and the need to consume as they are inherent in 'social content and function which are determined by external powers over which the individual has no control'. As we are subject to these powers, so we are caught in a Pacmania of consumption and reduced to 'products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression' (Marcuse 2002: 7). In this form, where consumerism is used as a method of social control, the overbearing choice of the market, 'the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry' has the opposite effect upon the individual, for while advanced societies offer a comfortable, anodyne, pacified way of life, what emerges is a 'pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations and objectives . . . are either repelled or reduced [or] redefined by the rationality of the given system' (Marcuse 2002: 14).

*Pac-Man* is coterminous with one dimensional man who has lost 'or is losing individuality, freedom and the ability to dissent and control one's own destiny' (Kellner 2002: xxvii). Adhering to this ascription, *Pac-Man* is a flat icon on an already two-dimensional plane, cannot see, has no control over his own actions, exists in a nearly-endless consumer hell with no hope of escape and is played on a machine which is found in arcades which look much the same from one configuration to the next. In this failed labyrinth, where *Pac-Man* inevitably withers away on level 256, both player and avatar are availed to a society whose needs 'are not its own, they are administered, superimposed' intimating 'increasingly total domination' (Kellner 2002: xxvii – xxviii). There are however, certain contingencies which suggest that if *Pac-Land* is representative of society, it is still made-up of 'a system of countervailing powers' (Marcuse 2002: 54) which render us all *Pac-Men* in the maze, oblivious and content, myopic to the potential and actual totalitarian constitution of society.

These countervailing powers are not pernicious, tangible objects, but derived from an individual world-view which stems from 'The Happy Consciousness', belief in a system which quite literally delivers the goods within a technocratic structure transferred into a way of living, that is, a rationalized, instrumentally measured lifestyle. This technical ordering, finding its nadir – and zenith – in Soviet and German extermination camps, permeates all levels of The Happy Consciousness, so that it moves from the conceived, technical realm through the technological habitus into all areas of everyday life so even 'sex is integrated into work and public relations' but 'no matter how controlled the mobilization of instinctual energy may be . . . it is also gratifying to the managed individuals just as racing the outboard motor pushing the lawn mower' (Marcuse 2002: 78) and playing the videogame are fun. The Happy Consciousness is concerned with infusing the technocratic into all areas of everyday life – and that involves a technical mastery over technological objects, and, in an epoch defined by the ability to assimilate and disseminate exabytes of information, the ability to master the twitch processes of digital entertainment - videogames - is as worthwhile as any.

Writing in 1964, just two years after the invention of *Spacewar!* (1962), Marcuse's ascription that 'The Happy Consciousness has no limits' as 'it arranges games with death and disfiguration in which fun, team work and strategic importance mix in rewarding social harmony' (Marcuse 2002: 83-84) is spookily prescient, similar in form and content to any number of the survival horror genre played on Xbox Live or PlayStation Network. The specific game from the RAND Corporation Marcuse describes is akin to *Missile Command*, *DEFCON* (2006) or *Raid Over Moscow* (1985) 'the rockets are rattling, the H-bomb is waiting and the space flights are flying'. The subsequent abstraction, so common in early videogames, allows the players of the game to project themselves into a given scenario and distance themselves from the consequences 'the world becomes a map, missiles merely symbols' (Marcuse 2002: 84). Even the venue where these games takes place are familiar to the arcade dwellers of the 1980s 'the game has been played since 1961 at RAND "down in the labyrinth basement' (Marcuse 2002: 85). The very notion of war as game is to act as a prophylaxis in order that the population can make preparations for survival, not to mention to test the efficacy of a pre-emptive strike.

The games of the Happy Consciousness with its dubious ethical considerations at once give rise to the 'Warfare State' and also to the 'Welfare State' (Marcuse 2002: 21). Both have the same aims: prevention and containment, prophylaxis as survival. The rise of living standards, instrumentally quantified by infant mortality; longevity; GDP per capita; maintains and improves administered living standards, thus generating pacification and inertia, while repressing intellectual and physical freedom through the same technological and technical instruments of surveillance, command, control and communication, turning the spaces of the everyday into a wholly conceived and managed space. The pills offered by the welfare state to assist in recovery from illness and infection, proliferated alongside health systems in order to make the patient well and fully able to consume once again. In the 1980s pills were taken as a form of consumption: as escapism and entertainment. Now, in a neat irony, pills are provided from the welfare state to maintain a psychologically stable and fruitful Happy Consciousness which has been brought into question by the limitless expansion of the warfare state, itself operating as a means of protection and containment against real and imagined threats.

## CONCLUSION

The longevity of *Pac-Man* and its continuing popularity and recognition is due to Iwatani's conscious effort to make a game which appeals to everyone. From the apparently sanguine starting point of *Pac-Man*'s status as videogame icon, it becomes apparent that basing a game on eating and consumption within the conceived space of *Pac-Man*'s labyrinth and its game dynamics are a touchstone of wider social change. This is especially evident in how eating is central to the well-being of every living being on the planet, which then demonstrates two associated strands of survival and false desires, both stemming from the game dynamics of speed and need.

This revealing of false needs instructs us as to the constitution of a society where there is a certain satisfaction to be derived from placing the player within a space that is deemed to be quintessentially good. Extolling the moral right to exterminate other evil and less deserving members of society, it is only indicative of 'The Happy Consciousness' which itself belongs to the pantheon of *Pac-Man*, with its adherence to all-consuming expectations which are sterilized by ignorance standing in for entertainment, creating labyrinths which the individual finds it difficult, if not impossible to escape from.

That the health and care and the destruction and extermination of the individual are different sides of the same coin should not be a surprise to anyone who has played *Pac-Man* and examined its game dynamics. On the one hand it is a comparatively peaceful game, played against a backdrop of harmless – if rootless – consumption which is also representative of the need to survive at all costs. However, this survival syndrome gives lie to the machinations of a technocratic political system that is warped in the quest for its own survival, co-ordinating and regulating space and time so that survival is replaced by the surface sheen of glamorous graphics and faux-moralistic consumption. *Pac-Man*'s power-pills of prophylaxis are indicative of a society in the strange throes of war and peace, pacification and control, yet the ignorance of ecstasy provided by 'eating them up yum, yum' is preferential to the knowledge of a labyrinth existence in a one-dimensional digital society, from which there is no escape, except through death on level 256.

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## **Gameography**

*Asteroids* (1979) Dev/Pub: Atari

*Biohazard* (1996) Dev/Pub: Capcom

*Braid* (2008) Dev: Number None Inc, Pub: Microsoft Game Studios

*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) Dev: Infinity Ward, Pub: Activision

*Dead Space* (2008) Dev: Visceral Games, Pub: EA

*Dead Rising* (2006) Dev/Pub: Capcom

*DEFCON* (2006) Dev: Introversion Software, Pub:  
Steam/Introversion/Ambrosia/Pinnacle

*Galaxian* (1979) Dev: Namco, Pub: Namco/Midway

*Loco* (1984) Dev: Tony Crowther, Pub: Alligata Software

*Mass Effect* (2007) Dev: Bioware Pub: Microsoft Game Studios

*Missile Command* (1980) Dev/Pub: Atari

*Pac-Man* (1980) Dev/Pub Namco

*Pac-Man: Championship Edition* (2007) Dev/Pub Namco

*Radar Rat Race* (1981) Dev/Pub: Commodore

*Raid Over Moscow* (1985) Dev: Access Software, Pub: US Gold

*Rally-X* (1980) Dev: Namco, Pub: Midway

*Resident Evil 4* (2005) Dev/Pub: Capcom

*Ridge Racer* (1993) Dev/Pub: Namco

*Shadow Complex* (2009) Dev: Chair, Pub: Microsoft Game Studios

*Space Invaders* (1978) Dev/Pub: Taito

*Space Invaders Extreme* (2008) Dev/Pub Taito

*Spacewar!* (1962) Dev: Steve Russell, Pub: N/A

*Tetris* (1985) Dev: Alexey Pajitnov, Pub: Various

*Tomb Raider* (1995) Dev: Core Design, Pub: Eidos

*Trollie Wallie* (1984) Dev: Andrew Challis, Pub: Interceptor Micros

*Wolfenstein* (2009) Dev: Raven Software; id Software; Pi Studios; Endrants Studios,  
Pub: Activision

## Notes

(1) Augmented reality is the transposition of computer-generated graphics onto perceived space through the use of an audiovisual headset and global positioning systems, linked into a local area network. First used at the University of Singapore in 2004 it has potential use for medical and military applications, as well as entertainment. See Knight (2004) for further discussion.

(2) The uneasiness related to the rise of the Japanese economy is mirrored in American popular culture of the time, with films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Gung-Ho* (1986) portraying a contemporary American society increasingly influenced and affected by Japanese values and culture.

(3) This is especially poignant in the current economic climate as US car firms look towards merging in the face of growing competition from VW Group in Europe and especially Toyota in Japan. At the time of writing none of the 'big three' car manufacturers of Ford, GM and Chrysler had discounted the possibility of merging with one another to protect themselves against a lack of liquidity, thus threatening solvency and ultimately bringing the US car industry to its knees. In this case the mergers can be seen as a variant on the 'Pac-Man defence', whereby a hostile takeover is subverted by a counter-bid (see Wasserstein, 1998), and the threatened companies swallow the 'power pill' of each others' economic capability and counteract the aggressor.

(4) *Biohazard* is the Japanese moniker given to what is known as *Resident Evil* in the west.

(5) It is fascinating to chart the unlicensed inclusion of Jean-Michel Jarre's recordings in videogames including 'Popcorn' and 'Equinoxe' Part 5 on labyrinth supermarket-fest *Trollie Wallie* (1984) and the latter on pseudo-train simulator *Loco* (1984).

(6) MDMA is the acronym for the chemical compound Methylendioxyamphetamine.

