CATALOGUE OF OBSOLETE ENTERTAINMENTS
by Adam Pennyman

GAME: PAC-MAN
Format: Coin-Op Arcade Machine
Manufacturer: Midway license of Japanese Namco property
Year: 1980
CPU: Z80 3.072000 MHz
Sound: Namco mono (1 channel)
Screen resolution: 288 x 224 pixels

The most universally recognized of the arcade machines, Pac-Man's central icon is the player's avatar, his on-screen representation: the game's eponymous, voracious yellow three-quarter circle. By removing a simple pizza slice, Namco game designer Toru Iwatani breathed life into the simplest geometric form, turning it into a snipping mouth, lovable... but hungry, always hungry, all the time chomping with want just like the player it represents. The Pac-Man must eat its way through the 240 dots and four Power Pill energizer dots that line his blue, bilaterally symmetrical maze, while dodging (or, when under the fleeting influence of a Power Pill, eating) the game's antagonists, the four Pac-Man ghosts.¹

The Pac-Man's insatiable hunger for the dots and Power Pills that fill the corridors of his maze-worlds suggests weighty parallels, such as the ravenous hunger for More Life that Darwin saw in all species, any one of which would overpopulate and overrun the earth if not for the predatory ghosts of natural selection. Also, we are reminded of Marx's "need of a constantly expanding market" that "chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe" (Communist Manifesto) with the "vocation to approach, by quantitative increase, as near as possible to absolute wealth" (Capital), casting the Pac-Man in the

¹Pinky, Blinky, Inky and Clyde are undeniably cute, cuter than the Pac-Man himself: the first time the author played the game as a fat ten-year-old boy with microwave pizza grease on his fingers at Ed's Convenience Mart in Woodhill Grove, Illinois, his virgin Pac-Man lasted all of ten seconds as he instinctively moved to connect with them, somehow trying to assimilate their cuteness and their all-seeing eyes into his blind yellow proxy.
role of corporate antihero in a utopian fantasy where the agents protesting his unfettered domination of the maze-world actually defeat him in the end. Obvious metaphors, lurking just beneath the surface of the game.

Suspiciously obvious. These kinds of interpretations belie the poverty of imagination that has become all too typical of practitioners of the interpretive arts. If Pac-Man and the games that followed in its wake mean anything to us, if they are central switching stations through which thousands of our most important memories are routed, it is our duty to dig deeper.

To us, the Pac-Man's lives appear short, cheap, and relatively inconsequential once we discover the overwhelming importance of sex and money. But if we perform a thought experiment and try to occupy a Pac-Man's subjectivity, we will realize that these three short spans are not so short to him. We must allow that each dot eaten takes on a meaning for the Pac-Man that we can barely fathom.

I suggest that if we, through force of imagination, were to dilate time to experience it as the Pac-Man does, and increase the resolution to allow us to read as much into each pixel as the Pac-Man must, we would not see the identical dots as identical at all. When the microscopic differences in each pixel are made large, each dot will possess a snowflake's uniqueness, and the acquisition of each—not, the experience of each—will bring the Pac-Man a very specific and distinct joy or sorrow. The dots all rack up points equally, of course; in retrospect, however, some are revealed as wrong choices, links in a chain of wrong choices that trace out a wrong path leading to a withering demise beneath the adorable and utterly unforgiving eyes of Blinky, Inky, Pinky or Clyde. As anyone who ever played the game seriously must know, the order in which the dots are experienced is of great importance. For each labyrinth, there are rigid and precise patterns through the maze—i.e., specific sequences of dot acquisition—that, if followed with a samurai's unwavering, arrow-into-hell certainty, allow the knowing Pac-Man to ascend from level to level with Zen ease and deliberateness.

An often-overlooked, seemingly minor feature of the game has implications which, once unraveled, are more radical than anything
heretofore discussed. In the middle of each maze, on the left and right sides of the labyrinth, there are two identical tunnels that lead off the borders of the screen. These tunnels are connected, with the left tunnel leading to the right, and the right to the left. In itself, this disappearing off one side of the screen to reappear on the opposite side broke no new ground. In Atari's Asteroids, for instance, a player's ship can do as much.

When an Asteroids ship leaves the screen, however, it reappears on the other side instantaneously; thus, the three-dimensional space described by Asteroids' two-dimensional screen is a continuous, perfect sphere. In Pac-Man, this is not the case at all. When a Pac-Man disappears into one of the off-screen mid-maze tunnels, there is a lag of about a half second before he reemerges on the other side. Assuming his speed remains constant, we can extrapolate some other-dimensional space of approximately six dots' length that the Pac-Man must traverse each time he goes through the off-screen tunnel. Were it not for the pursuing ghosts, he could remain in this off-screen space indefinitely.

In its evocation of an unseen world beyond the rectangle of the seen screen, Pac-Man forces us to reckon with a space that is real, yet never experienced directly, empirically. An area where no points can be earned, yet one crucial to the successful completion of the higher-level screens. The truly tapped-in player never forgets the off-screen tunnels, like a religious man with one mental foot planted firmly in the hereafter.

Pac-Man is the world's first metaphysical video game. Like a black hole's event horizon, the impassable barrier of its CRT screen hides a richness we can speculate about but never experience directly. What happens in its unseen regions? Perhaps the laws that reign there are not the brutal laws of the maze. Perhaps the tunnels move through an endless Valhalla of energizer dots with no ghosts in sight, tantalizingly close, if only we could break free.

There is a world beneath the glass that we can never know.