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Dots, fruit, speed and pills: the Happy Consciousness of *Pac-Man*

Alex Wade

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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 Marcuse

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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 and Gung-Ho 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 Methylenedioxymethamphetamine.

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