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September 9th, 2013

Paper #1—Pacman Analysis

An arcade classic, Pacman transcends video games into the realms of pop culture. While other arcade games have come and gone, Pacman remains ever engrained into the minds of gamers and non-gamers, alike. From the iconic shape of Pacman and the "waka waka waka" noise of eating pellets, Pacman is instantly recognizable. However, what is it about the game Pacman that is so unforgettable? The design of Pacman is a good lesson on how more often than not, less is more.

Like many classic arcade games of its time, the goal for a player playing a game of Pacman is to score as many points as possible. The core goal is reinforced by an ever-present point score board that updates while playing to show you the points you earn while playing the game. This goal is achieved by eating all the pellets available in a stage, which in turn allows you to proceed to the next level. Point bonuses in the form of eating fruit, which are not necessary to clearing a stage, further emphasize the core goal of scoring points. If this is not enough, the bragging rights of having one's initials displayed on the game's high score board is another incentive to achieve the goal of scoring as many points as possible in Pacman, as well. This simple goal is easily understandable to any newcomer to Pacman, aiding in their ability to quickly pick up and enjoy playing.

Keeping to the theme of simplicity, the core mechanic of Pacman is to clear the maze-like stage of pellets in order to move on to the next stage. Clearing a stage of pellets not only earns the player points, thus reflecting the core goal of Pacman to earn as many points as possible, but also opens up the next stage where there are more pellets to clear and points to earn. Clearing a stage is not without any challenges, however, and this presents itself in the form of four ghosts who try to stop Pacman. These four ghosts, Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde, have different personalities and try to stop Pacman in their own way. These four ghosts add an element of risk to Pacman and challenge the player to survive and score points, despite being chased by four ghosts. Thankfully, Pacman's situation is not hopeless, as a power pellet exists in each of the four corners of the stage which allows Pacman to temporarily eat the ghosts and earn more points with every ghost eaten during the duration of the power pellet. Once again, this added mechanic supports the core goal of earning as many points as possible while not being too complex for the average person to learn.

The visual aesthetics of Pacman are very simple and clearly defined. Even though Pacman was created in an early stage of video game history, the decisions made in the look and feel of Pacman are very well thought out. The color choices aid the player in quickly understanding Pacman and recognizing the environment of the game. Pacman is the brightest yellow, a quick and easy color to notice, which is essential so that the player knows where they are in the maze at any time. The ghosts are also bright colors of red, pink, cyan, and orange, making them easy for the player to keep an eye on while guiding Pacman through the game. The stage is composed of dark blue walls on a black background which further aids a player in seeing the enemies first and the maze as an important, but secondary concern. The pellets are a dull yellow, relating to Pacman, which the player will instantly recognize as being good. Even the power pellets mimic Pacman's color and shape, which the player should recognize as being important to Pacman. These simple, but effective color choices are like a good logo, quick to recognize and easy to remember.

While modern video games may be more technologically advanced with photo realistic graphics and complex rules, Pacman is still popular today despite being an older video game. It isn’t hard for anyone to quickly pick up and enjoy playing Pacman because every aspect of the game is so well thought-out. This is accomplished by having a clear goal, simple, yet challenging mechanics, and easily recognizable visuals. Pacman proves that a video game can remain successful and popular throughout time with a simple and clear design.