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Paper #2—Pacman Analysis using the MMDA Framework

While many games were made during the height of the 1980’s arcade era, few of those arcade games are still played today. Of those few arcade games that still get played on a regular basis, even fewer of them remain to this day a pop culture phenomenon. Pacman is an iconic game that people still recognize, regardless of whether or not they play the often. What is it about the game of Pacman that makes it so unforgettable? Using the MDDA Framework for analyzing the human experience of playing Pacman shows that the game’s simple, yet effective design allows for a fun experience for anyone.

Observing the Multi-Media aspect of the MMDA Framework reveals that Pacman was designed with a lot of care in order for the game to be understandable. The rules of Pacman are simple; score as many points as possible by eating all the pellets on the stage. This concept is easy to grasp and made very clear from the beginning of a stage, as Pacman automatically moves and eats the pellets in the direction he starts the stage in which updates the scoreboard. Right away the player sees their score increase by moving across pellets, thus teaching the player this mechanic right away. In additional to the pellets, fruit appear in the game, offering the player a chance to earn more points at the cost of going out of their way to get the fruit. Finally, by clearing the stage of pellets, the player is rewarded with a new stage, with more pellets and fruit to eat in order to increase their score.

Pacman also has amazing visuals and sounds that are distinctive and helpful to the player as they play the game. Pacman is a bright yellow circle, making Pacman easy to see when navigating through a stage. The ghosts are secondarily bright colors, helping them to be noticeable, yet different from Pacman. Even the power pellets are well designed, mimicking the shape and color of Pacman, aiding the character in knowing that they are important. The audio compliments the visuals well, keeping to being simple yet informative. As Pacman eats a pellet he makes a “waka waka waka” noise that lets the player know they passing over a section of the maze that they have not cleared of pellets yet. Every stage also has sirens playing in the background, which play quicker and quicker as more pellets are eaten. These sirens play throughout Pacman being alive in a stage and are only interrupted by different music if Pacman eats a power pellet. These audio clues help the player know how they are progressing through a stage in addition to the simple visuals, combining to help the game become even easier to understand for the player.

What really makes the experience of Pacman fun is the experience of trying to complete the maze-like stage against the four ghosts trying to stop Pacman. The micro-dynamics of Pacman involve how aggressive the ghosts are in trying to chase down Pacman. The longer it takes Pacman to complete a stage, the more aggressive the ghosts get in trying to stop Pacman. This pairs well with the faster siren noise as the player completes a level, effectively ratcheting up the tension. This tension is offset by eating a power pellet, which temporarily makes the ghosts vulnerable to being eaten by Pacman, causes the ghosts to run away, and changes the music of the game. This allows the player some control over the tension of the game, while still being difficult. As the player completes levels of Pacman, there is an increase of speed for Pacman as well as the ghosts, furthering the difficulty for the player. This dynamic is clear and easy to understand, while still being a fun experience for anyone playing Pacman.

Pacman is so compelling to play due to the thoughtful way in which the aesthetics of Pacman were originally designed. Pacman’s stages are maze-like, covered in pellets that the player must eat, and four ghosts roam the maze trying to stop Pacman from scoring points. This scenario perfectly appeals to our need for challenge. The joy of out-smarting the obstacle of the four ghosts to accomplish the core goal is simple and satisfying. This joy is further challenged when playing Pacman against a friend. While not in direct competition in the game, taking turns and trying to beat another player’s score appeals to the need to express dominance over one another. Other minor compelling aspects of Pacman involve the excitement of unlocking a fun little animation for every three levels completed, the drama of trying to eat the ghosts just in time before the power pellet runs out, and the tension that builds as the sirens play faster and faster as more pellets are eaten in a stage. All these simple aesthetics add up to make the experience of Pacman exciting.

Compared to modern video games, Pacman has crude graphics, sounds, and uncomplicated mechanics that have not changed throughout the years. However, this simplicity makes Pacman easy for anyone to recognize, quickly learn how to play, and enjoy playing a game of Pacman. Pacman easily proves that a game doesn’t need to have the latest photo realistic graphics, concert hall quality music, or overly complex rules to be a hit video game. Instead, Pacman proves that any video game can be successful, no matter how many years have passed, with a simple and clear design.