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### References

Beating the Game Game. (1982). *Time*, 119(3), 66.

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### Beating the Game Game

Of the hundreds of video games introduced each year, most flop utterly, as if their screens and chips gave out algebra rays or tax-audit emanations. A few do moderately well And once every year or so a new game jumps into the public's lap and licks its face, and proves so endearing that money in unbelievable abundance falls on the heads of its fortunate makers. It is very hard to predict which game will be a lap jumper. Robert Mullane, president of Bally admits that he was not impressed with his first view of Pac Man, the company's most successful game. "Who plays a maze game?" he remembers thinking.

To assist in divination, game companies bring in packs of sockless teen-agers to play prototypes, and hire as consultants professors of almost anything—engineering, psychology computer science, possibly even medieval French literature. At Bally, three teams of about 25 engineers, artists, computer programmers and game developers work on translating ideas into intricate microchip circuitry. One project started three years ago in Bally's Midway division as a black-and-white game called Catch 40. A little man ran back and forth trying to catch falling objects on his head. As the game progressed, the objects fell faster and faster. Early tests showed that the game grew too difficult too quickly—the objects fell so fast no one could catch them. "You were arbitrarily deprived of playing," said Martin Keane, Bally's director of technology. "In the ideal situation, the player feels it's his own fault that he lost." So Catch 40 lay on the shelf for two years.

"We went dry for ideas," says John Pasierb, Midway's chief electrical engineer. They needed to give the little man, who had evolved into a clown on a unicycle, another weapon to help him deal with the falling balloons. Hank Ross one of Midway's founders, got the idea of letting the clown

retrieve missed balls by kicking them back into the air. It was decided that on the easy first "rack," or skill level (some games have as many as 20 racks), the clown would get rid of balloons by popping them with a spike on his hat. But on the second level, the balloons would pile up on his head, so that successive balloons would have a shorter distance to fall from the top of the screen, and the clown would have to pedal faster to get to them. To identify racks as the game progressed, additional falling objects were introduced—flowers, hats and beach balls. While the pedaling clown was catching or kicking these, it was decided there should be occasional hazards too: some of the thrown objects could be anvils that he would have to avoid. Scratch that, said someone; you cannot throw anvils. So eventually, bombs were substituted. (In the violent idiom of video games, this makes perfect sense.)

Hank Ross had another idea that everyone hoped would give the game a last, irresistible quirk of personality. This is known in the business as "the tweak. He proposed having Bally's enormously popular Pac Man, a dot-gobbling yellow disc, help the player by eating balloons on the clown's head. And so it came to pass, and a sneak preview was held at a local arcade. The results, after all of this R. & D., were disastrous. The game, renamed Kick, took too long to play, and thus took in too few quarters. To remedy this, the rate of fall of the balloons was slightly speeded up.

Some time early this year, after further tinkering with the game, Kick will be shipped to distributors and then will appear in the arcades. Bally's development people think it is fun, but right now, no one has any idea whether it will be a lap jumper or a puddle maker. "This is the most democratic business in the world," says Mount Prospect, Ill., Arcade Owner Bill Herman. "You got a ballot box, and people vote with their quarters."

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