

Pac-Mom: Video Game as Practical Feminist Technology Scholarship

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Abstract

This is a paper about the game *Pac-Mom*, a game about gender, work, and food insecurity. It is a playable parody of the classic video game *Pac-Man* from 1980. By reprogramming a "classic" game from an activist feminist perspective, I question game culture and game history and offer a playful yet pointed perspective on gender inequality. This short paper reflects on the game itself but also on *Pac-Mom* as practical scholarship in feminist technology studies in the form of a playable video game parody.

Keywords

Digital Game, Game Development, Activist Game, Feminism, Gender, Food.

Introduction

Pac-Mom: A game about gender, work, and food insecurity [1] (Figure 1) is a parody of the classic video game *Pac-Man*. [2] The purpose of *Pac-Mom* is to re-think the "classic" video game from a gender and gendered labor perspective. *Pac-Mom* as a character resembles *Pac-Man*. However, in *Pac-Mom*'s world, much like the real world, accessing food requires *Pac-Mom* to work more than *Pac-Man* for the same number of food dots. The "working more" game mechanic is exemplified by how difficult it is for a player to move the *Pac-Mom* character forward (how many key presses it takes) (see Figure 2). In addition to having to work more, *Pac-Mom* must avoid a set of powerful ghost-enemies including patriarchy, abortion restrictions, misogyny, racism, ableism, and many more.



Figure 1. The title screen of the game *Pac-Mom* ©Author.

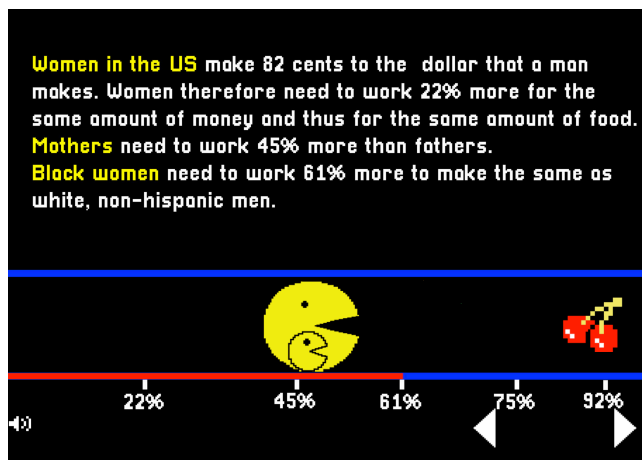


Figure 2. Part of the training level of the game *Pac-Mom* ©Author.

Pac-Mom as a game consists of a training level, a character customization screen, and a main level. The training level can be described as a walking simulator that helps players work through background information. The information gained in the training level is applied in the character customization screen and in the main level. However, the main level can be played independently. Players do not need to have played the training level.

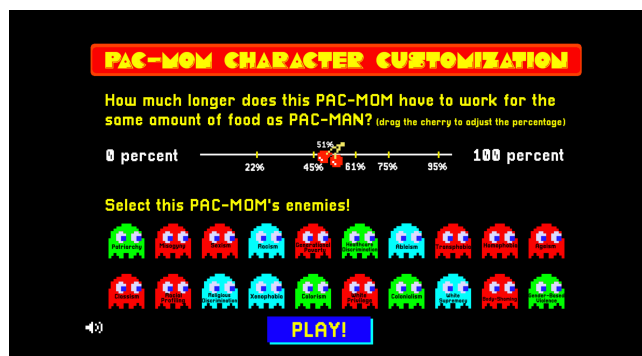


Figure 3. The character customization screen ©Author.

The character customization screen of the main level (Figure 3) contains a slider where players can adjust how much more their *Pac-Mom* must work as compared to *Pac-Man*. This part is based on data on hunger as a gender issue [3] previously introduced in the training level. Then, the player can select specific perils (ghosts) that *Pac-Mom* will

confront in the main game. If the player does not select any specific perils, all perils will eventually appear. A ghost labeled “Patriarchy” is always the first ghost to appear in the main level (Figure 4). The purpose of the character customization screen is to allow players to customize their Pac-Mom either according to their lived reality or according to a scenario that they would like to play using Pac-Mom.

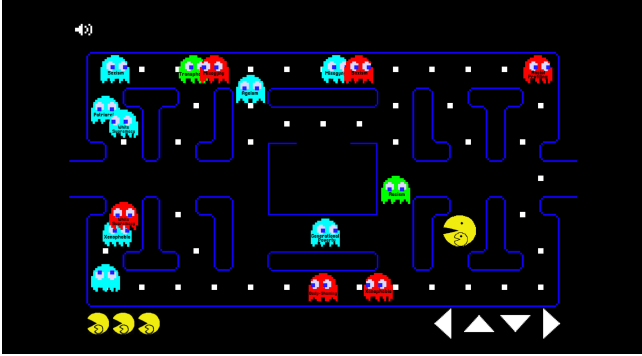


Figure 4. The main level of the game *Pac-Mom* ©Author.

While *Pac-Man* has no true ending, *Pac-Mom* has both a winning and a “Game Over” screen. When Pac-Mom almost inevitably loses the game, she is immediately presented with a plethora of “useless advice” taken from women’s workplace self-help literature. This includes “maybe you should have been more confident?”, “maybe you should have leaned-in more?”, and “maybe you should have changed the way you speak? Ostensibly, Pac-Mom’s world is the same as Pac-Man’s but navigating it requires her to work more to avoid peril and sustain herself. Depending on the player’s lived reality outside of the game, they will have a different relationship to the fears/perils portrayed in the game and their level of insight will therefore differ. This is why the game includes a character customization screen. *Pac-Mom* is a game about structural inequalities and thus there is no truly happy ending even if the player manages to succeed.

Pac-Mom is what Mary Flanagan calls an “activist game”. According to Flanagan, activist games are “not purely conceptual exercises, but rather, games that engage in a social issue through, most commonly, themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals, and characters; [...] [4]. In this paper, I make the case that critical game design can diversify academic discourse on games as a complement to more theoretical perspectives on games.

Pac-Man, a “Classic”

At its inception, *Pac-Man* represented a new kind of game in terms of gameplay and visual identity. As a result, academic analyses of the game often focus on these novel characteristics. For example, *Pac-Man* was the first game where a character “eats” other items in the game. This represented a shift in spatial modeling at the time. [5] *Pac-Man* also often appears in academic literature as a shorthand for a game that the audience will know due to its ubiquity in popular culture.

This further solidifies *Pac-Man*’s position in the canon of “classic” 1980s games.

When *Pac-Man* was first released, it was marketed to a female audience and was seen as “neutral, family oriented” because “Pac-Man did not represent a vehicle or weapon” as was common for games at the time but rather “it had a recognizable main character that made identification and emotional attachment more directly possible than some more abstract implementation of its gameplay structures would have”. [6] Spin-off sequels to *Pac-Man* had female characters such as *Mrs. Pac-Man*. However, these were not significantly different from the original *Pac-Man*. The gameplay in these games is very similar and does not represent any feminist reflection despite featuring a character with a feminine appearance.

Feminist Technology Studies

Carly Kokurek’s Book *Coin Operated Americans* explores arcades, the spaces where *Pac-Man* was played in the 1980s. These spaces were coded masculine and this has reverberations in today’s gaming culture. Kokurek writes “The gendering of gaming started long before it became a public concern in the 1990s, but there was nothing natural about this process”. [7] She then goes on to describe how a combination of factors specific to the coin-op era but also to tech culture at the time contributed to coding games and gamers as masculine. Kokurek’s perspective is a holistic study of games and gaming culture at the time as she is looking at game history as part of a larger cultural development.

Science and Technology Studies scholars Cynthia Cockburn and Rusza Fürst-Dilić offer similar perspectives on the gendering of consumer technologies outside of video games. In their book *Bringing Technology Home: Gender and Technology in a Changing Europe*, they argue that technology, gender, and society are processes that are up for constant renegotiation. Technology and gender are therefore not static. This implies that anyone can intervene because technology is “shapeable” rather than neutral or inevitable. Cockburn and Fürst-Dilić say “There are clear pointers here for a feminist strategy on technology.” [8]. In “Sorting out the Question of Feminist Technology”, Deborah G. Johnson writes: “A plausible account of feminist technology could, then, refer to new artifacts and changes to the built environments that create the possibility for more equitable gender relation, including artifacts that favor women”. [9] As an artist, I take this as a call to make technology through a feminist lens as a practical implementation of feminist scholarship in technology and video game artifacts.

Pac-Mom embodies various layers of feminist critique: In the game, I am using game mechanics to visualize data on gender and food insecurity as an intersectional issue. The game presents motherhood as a major economic peril for women that is amplified by “ghosts” like misogyny, racism, abortion restrictions, and many more. If technology is in fact “shapeable” then 8-bit games are overdue for critical practical examination. *Pac-Mom* takes a critical view on 8-bit games as a practical reinterpretation of a “classic” game, a

way to challenge and rethink the canon of games that are often uncritically admired by enthusiasts, frequently reproduced with only slight modifications by individuals and organizations.

Through *Pac-Mom*, I am looking at a classic game not just as an outside observer who collects data, analyzes, and interprets, I am actively engaging with game culture and history through the making of code. By re-programming a game (as a woman programmer) from the point of view of a demographic (moms) for whom this game was not specifically created, I am questioning on what basis and for whom a “classic” game is established and how economic conditions and social processes are different for moms. I am also providing players with a form of digital engagement in the perils of navigating gender inequities, allowing them to shift perspectives and re-frame their experiences with the game.

Last, but not least, *Pac-Mom* provides entertainment. Traditional scholarship in feminist technology studies or game studies is often directed at a specialized audience and is not playable. Should a feminist game be fun despite the serious topic? Yes. In fact, Mary Flanagan writes about activist games: “The term ‘activist game’, however is meant to specify the game theme and sometimes-desired outcomes for playing the game, and only one of the desired outcomes would be entertainment”. [4] Games like *Pac-Mom* can reach a group of people that Science and Technology Studies literature may not reach and thus offer a more inclusive way to engage with feminist scholarship in technology. Furthermore, projects like these can demonstrate what a feminist strategy on creating technology may look like in practice.

Conclusion

In this paper, I described *Pac-Mom* as an example bridging theoretical discourse with practical game development. Artists and game developers are in a unique position to produce

practical scholarship that points out the nuances in political implications of seemingly “neutral” or purely technical applications such as classic video games. This form of practical scholarship can offer a critical view on the past as well as concrete, playable examples demonstrating how technologies like video games can and could be different to address a variety of experiences and lived realities.

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