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## Popular Culture: Play It Again, Pac-Man

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Play It Again, Pac-Man

*Charles Bernstein*

Your quarter rolls into the slot and you are tossed, suddenly and as if without warning, into a world of controllable danger. Your “man” is under attack and you must simulate his defense, lest humanity perish and another quarter is required to renew the quest.

Drop in, turn on, tune out.

The theories of video games abound: poststructuralist, neomarxian, psychoanalytic, and puritanical interpretations are on hand to guide us on our journey through the conceptual mazes spawned by the phenomenon. Acting out male aggression. A return, for adolescent boys, to the site of mom's body. Technological utopia. As American as auto-eroticism. The best introduction to computer programming. No more than an occasion for loitering in seedy arcades. A new mind-obliterating technodrug. Marvelous exercise of hand-eye coordination. Corrupter of youth. Capital entertainment for the whole family. Not since the advent of TV has an entertainment medium been subjected to such wildly ambivalent reactions nor such skyrocketing sales.

If the Depression dream was a chicken in every pot, today's middle class adolescent's dream is a video game in every TV.

More and faster: better graphics and faster action, so fast you transcend the barriers of gravity, so vivid it's realer than real.

A surprising amount of the literature on video games has concerned the social context of the games: arcade culture, troubled youth, vocational training for tomorrow's *Top Gun*. So much so that these scenarios seem to have become a part of video game culture: Nerdy kid who can't get out a full sentence and whose social skills resemble Godzilla's is the Star of the arcade; as taciturn as a Gary Cooper's Sheriff, he gets the job done without designer sweaters or the girl.

In the Saturday Night Fever of Computer Wizardry, achievement with your joystick is the only thing that counts; success is solitary, objectively measured, undeniable.

Or, say, a 1980s Horatio Alger. A failure at school, marginal drug experimenter, hanging out on the wrong side of the tracks with a no-future bunch of kids, develops \$30 a day video game habit, can't unplug from the machine without the lights going out in his head. Haunts the arcade till all hours, till the cops come in their beeping cruisers, bounding

into the mall like the beeping spaceships on the video screen, and start to check IDs, seems some parents complained they don't know where Johnny is and it's pushing two. Cut to: young man in chalk-striped suit vice-prez for software devel. of Data Futurians, Inc. of Electronic Valley, California; pulling down fifty thou in his third year after dropping out of college. (Though the downside sequel has him, at 30, working till two every morning, divorced, personal life not accessible at this time, waiting for new data to be loaded, trouble reading disk drive.)

Like the story boards of the games, the narratives that surround video games seem to promise a very American ending: Redemption through the technology of perseverance and the perseverance of technology. Salvation from social degeneracy (alien menace) comes in the form of squeaky clean high tech (no moving parts, no grease). Turns out, no big surprise, that the Alien that keeps coming at you in these games is none other than Ourselves, split off and on the war path.

The combination of low culture and high technology is one of the most fascinating social features of the video game phenomenon. Computers were invented as super drones to do tasks no human in her or his right mind (much less left brain) would have the patience, or the perseverance, to manage. Enter multitask electronic calculators which would work out obsessively repetitive calculations involving billions of individual operations, calculations that if you had to do by hand would take you centuries to finish, assuming you never stopped for a Coke or a quick game of Pac-Man. Now our robot drones, the ones designed to take all the boring jobs, become the instrument for libidinal extravaganzas devoid of any socially productive component. Video games are computers neutered of purpose, liberated from functionality. The idea...



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Popular Culture: Play It Again, Pac-Man, escapism, due to the quantum nature of the phenomenon, is quite likely.

Profile: Jamie Gilson, = 24.06.-771).

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