



A game about gender, work, and food insecurity
by Annina Rüst



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PAC-MOM: A Game about Gender, Work, and Food Insecurity

Annina Rüst
aruest@fau.edu
Florida Atlantic University,
Jupiter, Florida,
United States of America

PAC-MOM is a parody of the popular arcade game *PAC-MAN* (1980) by Toru Iwatani. Game scholars classify *PAC-MAN* as an eating game. *PAC-MOM* is a game about gender and food insecurity. *PAC-MOM* is based on data on hunger as a gender issue. This includes the gender pay gap. It takes place in a situation where accessing food requires *PAC-MOM* to work a disproportionate amount more than *PAC-MAN* for the same number of pellets. In addition to having to work more, *PAC-MOM* must avoid powerful ghost-enemies including patriarchy, misogyny, racism, ableism, and many more. *PAC-MOM* is programmed for the web in JavaScript/HTML5 and can be played online in most browsers as a single-player game. The game consists of a training level, a character customization screen, and a main level. The training level conveys background information. The information gained in the training level is applied in the character customization screen and the main level.

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A Playable Data Narrative

PAC-MOM (Rüst, 2021) is a parody of the popular 1980s arcade game *PAC-MAN* by Toru Iwatani (Bandai Namco Entertainment Inc., 1980). *PAC-MAN* is canonized and classified by game scholars as an “eating game” (Mäyrä, 2008). I created *PAC-MOM* as a parody of *PAC-MAN* (Fig 1). *PAC-MOM* is a game about gender and food insecurity. *PAC-MOM* takes place in a situation where accessing food requires *PAC-MOM* to work more than *PAC-MAN* for the same number of food dots. In addition to having to work more, *PAC-MOM* must avoid a set of powerful ghost-enemies including patriarchy, misogyny, racism, ableism, and many more. *PAC-MOM* consists of a training level a character customization screen, and a main level. The training level conveys background information. The information gained in the training level is applied in the character customization screen and in the main level.

The training level consists of several screens that introduce themes and statistics that the player will revisit in the main level. The game is called *PAC-MOM* and not *PAC-WOMAN* because this is a game about food insecurity and gender and moms are more likely than fathers to be food insecure – specifically single moms. Single moms in the United States are more likely to live below the poverty line and more likely to be food insecure (Freely). In the first screen of the training level, the player sees narrative text and instructions to advance *PAC-MOM* from left to right to eat food dots. The dots begin to disappear as the player moves *PAC-MOM* and more statistics about single moms and food insecurity appear in the narrative text.

The second data set that I am introducing in the training level is the gender pay gap. Although the gender pay gap exists worldwide, I chose data from the United States because it clearly illustrates that the gender pay gap is an intersectional issue: African American, Native American, and Latina women make considerably less than Asian and white women (Association of American University Women, 2021). However, all still make less than white, non-Hispanic men. Because of the gender wage gap, women are required to work more hours to cover basic needs. The player therefore has to press/touch the arrow key far more often depending on the size of the gender gap that is shown in the narrative text. In the game, the player is required to press more intensely to advance *PAC-MOM* as the gender pay gap becomes larger.

The last two screens in the training level introduce the perils that *PAC-MOM* faces: The narration text explains that “food insecure household are on average more vulnerable to poor nutrition and health challenges”. It shows two ghosts. One is labelled “Health Care Discrimination” and the other “Body Shaming”. The screen serves to illustrate that the perils that food insecure people face are often compounding: Poor nutrition and health challenges are outcomes of being food insecure. However, poor people can often not access healthcare to address health challenges in the same way that rich people can. People with poor nutrition and

weight-based health challenges are then often body shamed. Food insecure women therefore face perils such as sexism (the pay gap), racism (racial disparities in the pay gap), healthcare discrimination, and body shaming. In the game, these perils are part of a larger compounding set of dangers that *PAC-MOM* faces in the main level.

The character customization screen of the main contains a slider where the player can adjust how much more their *PAC-MOM* must work as compared to *PAC-MAN*. This part is based on the data 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 perils, all perils will appear. A ghost labelled “Patriarchy” is always the first ghost to appear.

There are very few players who win the game and I will not spoil this “ending”. Most players will inevitably lose all three lives. When a player has lost, the screen prompt reads: “Sorry *PAC-MOM*, you worked so hard but you lost anyway! Maybe you should have been more confident?”. The player can then click on a button labelled “More Useless Advice” to receive more patronizing self-help advice or go back to the start screen.

PAC-MOM is a playable data narrative. The foundation of the game mechanic and level design is data, but I am extrapolating the data into the game space of *PAC-MAN*, telling the story of *PAC-MOM*, a more complex character. Ostensibly, her world is the same as *PAC-MAN*’s but navigating it requires her to work more to avoid peril and be able to eat.

Rethinking the “Classic” Video Game

PAC-MOM is a practical rethinking of a “classic” game to challenge and rethink a canon of games that are uncritically revered by game enthusiasts and often recreated with minor modification by individuals and organizations (Google, 2010). In her book *Coin-operated Americans* Carly A. Kocurek describes how video game arcades became a space claimed by boys and young men in the US in the 1980s (Kocurek, 2015). A game common to 1980s video gaming spaces was *PAC-MAN*. Every discipline has its canon of “important” works. The longer a canon exists, the more immutable it becomes. Instead of a calcified collection of works, I am proposing a continuous refiguring of works in a canon to encourage continued questioning of a discipline’s history. Instead of worshipping on the altar of the “classics”, we should be creating alternative views of works seen as “historic”. My impetus for this work is to create a subjective view on *PAC-MAN* but also to appropriate *PAC-MAN*, a man-centric narrative, and give it a new life as a feminist data narrative.

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