

Why I Love Ms. Pac-Man

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I don't know about you, but I am exhausted from the deluge of discussions this week about hand sanitizer and health care policy, travel bans and super delegates. No doubt that coronavirus and the US Democratic primaries are serious topics worthy of our attention and thoughtful consideration. But sometimes we need a break, and that is where Ms. Pac-Man comes in.



[Photo Credit](#)

I fell in love with Ms. Pac-Man the summer I worked as a waitress after graduating from college. In that lull between breakfast and lunch, dropping a few quarters into this new arcade game that sat in the vestibule of the restaurant during my 20-minute break became routine. So out of character for me, I didn't really understand why I delighted in playing this silly maze game so much. At the end of the summer, I headed off to graduate school in psychology and learned a few things about my love affair with Ms. Pac-Man.

1. Play. We live in an ever-accelerating work culture today. Getting “downtime” has become more difficult in our hyper connected world. Checking email before we are out of bed. Texting under the table at meetings. Turning off airplane mode on our smart phones nanoseconds after touchdown. In contrast, as much as the old-fashioned arcade games made use of early computer technologies, they were designed as entertainment that would help us disconnect from the stresses of everyday pressures, news, and decisions. [It is all about play!](#) Our conscious experience is that we play for fun rather than for any immediate practical purpose. But the truth is that [play is good for us](#), serving to [promote learning](#), [relieve stress](#), and [promote mental health and wellbeing](#).

2. Distraction. A customer is unhappy with me because I forgot to deliver his morning coffee. I feel bad about not doing a great job. I hear that another waitress had a car accident. I worry about my coworker. One of the benefits of play is that it is distracting. Taking some stolen moments to get Ms. Pac-Man through a few mazes can work wonders. By the time Ms. Pac-Man ultimately succumbs to the monsters, I will have gained some distance, relief, and perspective, making my distress easier to manage. In fact, we can see the [benefits of such temporary distraction in terms of reducing activity of the amygdala](#), a structure of the brain that can contribute to depression, mood and anxiety. The key here is that [distraction works as a temporary coping strategy](#) - not to be confused with finding a longer term solution to our concerns.

3. Mastery. Music starts. Joy stick left, down, right, up, pause. At just the right moment I gobble the energizer pellet which gives me temporary super powers to eat all the monsters. And if I time it just right I might get the cherries, too. How often does that happen in real life? Especially when life is stressful, having the experience of being able to operate on something with a sense of control and [mastery has positive mental health benefits](#). Of course, getting to the next level maze of Ms. Pac-Man is a fairly narrow skillset, but in its own way, it is a reminder that the world is not completely upside down.

4. Laughter. The iconic sound effects of Ms. Pac-Man tell you when you are getting close to the monsters, when you score bonus points by eating the wild fruit, when you have superpowers to gobble the monsters, and when you whither from bumping into the monsters at the wrong time. The thrill of escaping the chase by exiting the right side of the screen via one of the warp tunnels and reappearing on the left side of the screen always fills me with mirth. The thrill of successfully gobbling all the pellets and moving on to the next level of the game is so satisfying I sometimes laugh out loud. [Laughter really is the proverbial best medicine. Laughter engages the reward system in the brain, including the nucleus accumbens. Laughter even has the potential to elevate our pain threshold.](#)

5. Comfort. At a time when coronavirus and the political landscape lead to worry, discomfort and anxiety, familiar games bring us comfort. I have no idea how to play Nintendo Switch. I can't even figure out who is controlling which character on the screen. No comfort there for me. For someone else the familiar practice of completing the morning crossword or sudoku puzzle would serve the purpose. The key psychological understanding is that familiarity breeds comfort, which is associated with enjoyment. [And enjoyment is associated with a more positive mental health outlook.](#)

Over the years, I played Ms. Pac-Man any chance I got. I booked the "Cape Henlopen" Ferry, a refurbished WWII landing craft that participated in D-Day, whenever we traveled to Maine to see my oldest sons for summer camp visiting weekend. The Cape Henlopen was a little slower than some of the newer ferries, but it had a game room with Ms. Pac-Man, and I always had quarters ready. So you can only imagine how over the moon I am with the most extravagant birthday gift of my very own Ms. Pac-Man Arcade game! I know I need to be responsible and take appropriate precautions related to coronavirus and think carefully about my vote for President. I am committed to doing so, but I am so happy to have Ms. Pac-Man to help me get some downtime and clear my head. Open invitation to anyone who wants to come over to play.