

# BEWARE

possibility. Robert Lewis Stevenson's dictum that "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive" has lost meaning in an arena without any notion of "sportsmanship." How do you play fair against a machine? The challenge is playing to the point of boredom (i.e., "to win"), outwitting the computer program by hook, crook or strategy book.

The manufacturers know this. Most are reluctant to disclose the simple rules of their games, forcing each player to figure things out by trial and error. Nineteen-year-old Hirschfeld's manual does well by providing simple rules rather than arcane strategies, and his initial volume for 30 games has not one, but two, sequels in the works for the more recent machines and updated programs. The better you understand what you are watching on the screen, the more power you have towards achieving the sought-after boredom border. (See Level Seven).

The informed player won't mistakenly shoot his little pink humanoids in DEFENDER, taking them for yet another enemy. The smart player will trust his own experience over the touted rules of strategists.

## LEVEL FOUR

Typical Attacks and Uncopyrighted Rebuffs

**Attack #1:** "These games are corrupting our youth," says a Long Island housewife who is working toward their banishment in her area, a move already taken in parts of Texas, Rhode Island, Illinois, Massachusetts, other states and even entire countries. "They are not wholesome. They mesmerize our children, they addict them and force them to mindlessly pour one quarter after another into the slots. We see 15-year-olds playing on school nights and during school hours. We want the games out of our town."

**Rebuff:** Mitchell Robin, a child psychologist and instructor of data processing, wrote the *New York Times* with this statement: "I have seen absolutely no scientific evidence to date that video games are 'mesmerizing our children.' There has simply been no such research. Campaigns against video games are created out of a fear of the unknown, in this case, computers. Adults are afraid of the power of computers, because we didn't grow up with them. What better way to be introduced to them than through friendly software such as computer games?"

**Attack #2:** "People are separated from society already with each new technological advance. The car, the telephone, television ... all keep us at a distance. You don't have a comrade in arms. Even when you play the games with someone else, you're just waiting your turn. The machine stands between you more than ever."

**Rebuff:** "Unlike many other activities, electronic gaming brings families closer together," writes Frank Laney, Jr., editor of *Electronic*

*Games Magazine*. "How many other things can mother and son, father and daughter, enjoy on an equal basis? Most participation sports give such a tremendous advantage to bigger and stronger players that the idea of, for instance, a family game of tennis or golf becomes an exercise in boredom and frustration." And Mitchell Robin again: "Children who aren't athletically inclined can use video games as a means to success that is accepted by their peers. That type of acceptance through a particular skill is very important to the psychological health of adolescents."

**Attack #3:** "The games are actually sort of stress-related," says Larry Gertz, owner of Chess and Games, one of the largest game retailers on the West Coast. "I find myself wasted when I'm competing with Entex Football Four. I'm exhausted physically and mentally. I can feel the muscles in my body all tense." Contributing editor of *Games* magazine, Roger Dionne, writes, "I was amazed at the hostility the machine has aroused in me. I walked away trembling." The DEFENDER callous and PAC-MAN blister have already been cited as other physical handicaps of the games.

**Rebuff:** Steve Nelson, doctoral candidate at New York University, deduces from his research that "a video game can teach you how to process information on several channels at once. The Army and Air Force are experimenting with them. The rapid increase in learning ability they can provide is amazing. Therapists have been using them in rehabilitation of the handicapped." Linda Duesterhaus, mother of a 3-year-old video arcade habitué named Zack, comments, "People don't have to use their wits anymore. Maybe some street people survive that way, but mostly society's too safe. The positive aspect of video games is that one must be alert in many sensory modes at once."

**Attack #4:** "I don't see why people put their money in them. They're frustrating, make irritating sounds, and all you get if you win is more of the same and all of it is torture. And the people who hang out there are just a mess," comments Katherine, a young library assistant who likes the theatre.

**Rebuff:** This is pure prejudice, based upon bordello assumptions from the pinball past. The person just hasn't tried a game suited to his or her personality. Perhaps Katherine should try DONKEY KONG for its narrative element. The best answer here, however, is just a "you won't know until you try it" laugh. The pool hall mystique does get a foothold in some arcades, handed down from the uninformed fears of River City. Not worth huffing at.

**Attack #5:** Audio-visual coordinator and part-time TV talk show host Scott Parsons says, "The real question is whether video games are more addictive than other addictive things, and I think they are. The manufacturers are just beginning to realize how to capitalize upon this aspect of the games."

**Rebuff:** None. Change the subject. He is right.

## LEVEL FIVE

### "The Video Arcade of Beastly Love"

"My baby's spending all her time  
Dodging monsters, bugs, and climb-  
ing up the ladders on her electronic toy.  
She dreams of centipedes and fleas,  
But she used to dream of me.  
Those Space Invaders have invaded all my joy.

(Chorus)

Slip a token in the slot  
See the creatures getting shot  
Hear the blips and boops and beeps and monster feasts  
You're gonna play until you crash.  
Machines are swallowing your cash  
In the video arcade where my baby plays around with other beasts.

"It's her and those machines.  
She sits and drools at all the screens,  
Rubbing buttons that spurt out the brightest lights.  
Gorf tells her what to try,  
and the Tempest lets her fly.  
She thinks it's better than the way we spent our nights.

She figures out attack plans  
For her darling yellow Pac-Man  
But that legless, hungry monster's just a blur.  
Still she'd rather run him 'round  
Since he never puts on pounds,  
And he hasn't any arms to bother her.

The answer is, I guess,  
To learn to play like all the rest  
Become a stud beside her on adjoining stool.  
Still our love won't last too long  
If she discovers Donkey Kong.  
I know that hairy monkey's gonna be her fool."

## LEVEL FIVE

The sexual component of video games isn't due to suggestive images on the screen. There are very few — if any — of these and they're best left to the archaic pinball era. Instead, sexuality becomes both sublimated and transformed into metaphor during the experience of videogaming.

The DEFENDER player, for example, needs a physical positioning over the machine that allows no room for distraction. He may have to use an elbow to fly into hyperspace, since both his hands and all his mental power must be intricately aligned with the buttons and joystick. As he defends his humanoids and planet against the invaders, the emotional experience grows into one of serious righteousness and a do-right edge of will. The humanoids, of course, are androgynous.

Winning any of the video games at best entitles you to put your initials at the top of the board. Machismo conquest and egotism can trail one whose initials frequently are seen on various machines and in various arcades. "Stud" has become one common designation for a games adept, while "wimp" is the sort of congenial taunt allocated one who fails.

Sex-linking the games made a breakthrough with PAC-MAN, the first video game to attract as many women as men. One regular male player insists it is the perfect pick-up ploy, offering a round of PAC-MAN as an opening line. Because the yellow Japanese gobbling ball survived the sex test better than any before it, the new game MS. PAC-MAN has now been introduced, in which a female gobbler, wearing a ribbon and dancing in circles

when captured, moves in pink and yellow mazes and through a dual set of Freudian tunnels. Special interboards depict the new Pac-Woman falling in love with the Original, a first (but probably not the last) in the infant world of video game evolution.

## LEVEL SIX

### Philosophical Finish

A bored kid sits on his stool, watching the yellow PAC-MAN run by itself toward the bottom left wall. Look, Ma, no hands, he seems to want to say, but to whom? No one is watching, no one cares, and the boy hesitates briefly before continuing his pattern play to rack up impressive points. Having spent his lunch money to be here, he has achieved the ultimate goal of video games: success by saturation.

The theory of entertainment is that the formula shouldn't change. Entertainment is a commodity which trades best when quality control is high, standard, and utterly predictable. Art, on the other hand, makes us nervous, challenges our assumptions, involves change, and lives on risk. McDonald's hamburgers, with across-the-country uniformity in its product, make a good case for entertainment food.

The movies rely upon a great deal of repetition — sometimes called sequels — to bolster box office. That's entertainment. Movies, however, are trying hard now to win back the dollars that video games have stolen away from them. Five billion dollars were grossed by the video games industry in 1981; only \$2.8 billion came to the movie box office. Hollywood is wasting no time getting the attractive video image onto the big screen. *Escape from New York* and *Wolfen* were just two of last year's movies to fea-

ture video-generated techniques, and Walt Disney Studios have released *Tron*, a feature-length computer animated film about life within the videogames reality. (One might be tempted to claim that *Star Wars* inspired the videogames boom — and there is some connection — but the first computer game was called SPACE WAR, created in 1962 by Steve Russell.) More than this, film exhibitors are bringing games into the lobbies of the theaters, hoping to augment the concessions income which already accounts for the largest percentage of a theater owner's income. Movies are just an excuse. That's entertainment, too.

Are video games art? Of course not. For a quarter you get a scenario that is infallible and predictable, like a good 48¢ hamburger. But with that limitation, you also get a chance to interact in ways *Raiders of the Lost Ark* never could provide, and the aesthetic experience is quite likely of a higher order on the machines than at the movie. The game lets you relate, revise, devise, experience all the synthetic emotions of hate, fear, anxiety, and (with MS. PAC-MAN) even romance. You come away sweating, and you — not Indiana Jones — have done something about the survival of the plastic planet. Aldous Huxley's prediction of participation "feelies" in *Brave New World* may only be as far away as 3-D and holographic video games.

Not since classical music has any entertainment form allowed as much fascination within a rigidly fixed form. The rigid guidelines of a Bach fugue — consistent within a strict structure — have a symmetry and recursive design already praised highly by computerists. It takes many many listenings before one tires of the intricate music that's hard to unwind. Video games are as constricted as a sonnet, yet — like Wordsworth's praise of that confinement — have the beauty of playing within pure form. The games may provide the revenge of the TV generations. We're capable of talking back at last, we're finally getting our crack.

Monotony, uniformity, and hypnosis have their place in coping with a rough world where sportsmanship is largely a game for hypocrites. A quarter may give comfort. If Marcuse or McLuhan were alive today, much hypothesizing about the future of a planet populated by video gamers could be expected.

Are games really that important? Hesse thought so when he wrote *The Glass Bead Game*, predicting a world where gaming controlled all politics, religion, and language. Certainly the Zen archer would have DEFENDER blisters on his hands. Even if artificially induced, the "hypnosis" of video games creates an intense emotional concern, something referred to in the Sixties as "involvement." Maybe it will spread to other human realms once the feeling is reawakened. The more things change, the more they stay the same. The universe recycles and is saved once again. Insert coin.