

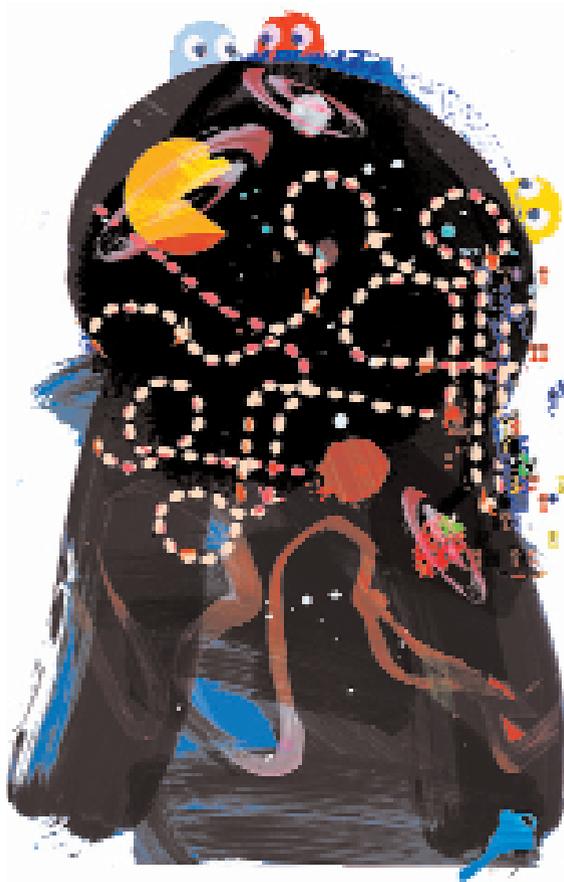
THE PERFECT GAME

Five years with the master of Pac-Man

By Joshua Bearman

The first time I see Billy Mitchell he is holding court among the games, greeting admirers, signing autographs, and distributing a stack of bumper stickers that celebrate his greatest achievement: WORLD'S FIRST PERFECT PAC-MAN. This is the summer of 2003, and we are at the Sixth Annual Classic Gaming Expo, held in the slightly run-down conference facilities of the Plaza Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Billy is impossible to miss. Tall and imposing, he usually wears tight pants, a dark shirt, and a necktie adorned with the stars and stripes. His strangely well-sculpted mullet cascades over his shoulders, and at Billy's height that hair is visible from a great distance. I approach him during a lull in the adulation. Billy got hooked in 1982, he says, leaping without preface into the Legend of Billy Mitchell. "I remember realizing that I could be the absolute best at something. When people ask how they can follow in my footsteps, I say, 'Forget it. Don't bother. It will just cause you grief.'" He tells me how he first gained national recognition when *Life* magazine profiled him in 1983, right around the time that "Pac-Man Fever"

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improbably rose to number nine on the *Billboard* Hot 100. Video games have evolved considerably since then, but Billy has carefully maintained his image as the central figure of the still-thriving competitive classic-video-game realm. He is Billy Mitchell, arcade conqueror: the one player who gets interview requests every week, the man who once played *Centipede* for two days straight. "I have a reputation to maintain," he says. "That's why I

always make time for fans, especially children." For Billy, the spirit of his self-created celebrity resides in his hair, the maintenance of which requires two consecutive showers, a blow-dryer, and a leave-in conditioner. "I won't cut the hair until I stop playing video games," Billy says. It is the vivid styling of a man very secure in his public persona, however esoteric it may be.

The expo is a marketplace where fans of long-forgotten arcade games like *Burgertime* and *Congo Bongo* and *Mr. Do's Castle* can buy and sell ancient home arcade systems, collectible cartridges, and mint-condition instruction manuals. It is also one of several stops on the circuit of classic-video-game competition, and therefore an important moment of social interaction for a crowd that, by all available visual evidence, spends a considerable amount of time alone. Most classic gamers came of age in the early Eighties and, like Billy, are now entering their forties. The best of them still practice up to several hours a day to maintain top form, and when they come to break records an audience gathers, just like back in the glory days of the arcade.

Billy is not breaking any records today, but Billy's fame is such that

he does not need to compete to draw a crowd. He has set so many gaming records that he also holds the meta-record for holding the most records simultaneously. His most noted feat, however, remains the landmark “perfect” Pac-Man, which Billy completed on July 3, 1999 at 4:45 P.M. at the Funspot Family Fun Center in Weirs Beach, New Hampshire. In one six-hour game, he collected all available points—every dot, every energizer, every ghost (while energized), every bonus prize, for all 256 levels—on his first man. This fulfilled the game’s maximum scoring potential of 3,333,360 points. Another player named Rick Fothergill had almost beaten Billy to the mark, but he fell short by nine dots, or 90 points. Fothergill is Canadian, and his challenge made Billy redouble his efforts, because Billy thinks of his Pac-Man prowess as a patriotic symbol, a matter of national pride not unlike like the space race. Billy was so determined to beat Canada that he forgot to eat for several days. He had set out on his quest July 1—Canada Day—and eventually executed 30,000 precisely calculated turns for a perfect run just in time to celebrate America’s own Day of Independence on July 4. “It’s like Neil Armstrong walking on the moon,” he told reporters afterward. “No matter how many people accomplish the feat, it will always be Armstrong who will be remembered for doing it first. And, best of all, it was an American.” To emphasize the point, Billy began using a new set of high-score initials: U S A.

Later, Billy was feted in Japan by Namco, the creator of Pac-Man. Masaya Nakamura, Namco’s founder, invited Billy onstage at a televised celebration and named him “Video Game Player of the Century.” Billy tells me how his perfect Pac-Man game sparked renewed interest in classic-game competition; how a fresh crop of players are clawing at his many world records. “Now,” he says, “everyone’s at my heels.”

As we talk, a short, bearded man in a striped referee shirt appears at Billy’s side. This is Walter Day, founder and proprietor of Twin

Galaxies, a Web-based organization that, with its 45,000 registered users and database of 100,000 video-game records, has become the de-facto regulatory body for classic video-game competition. He notices my notepad. “He’ll never tell you all his secrets,” Walter warns me. “Billy’s got things up his sleeve even I don’t know about.”

Billy and Walter have known each other since 1982, when Walter began officiating at video-game events, always wearing his referee shirt, always carrying a clipboard, and sometimes wearing a whistle. Walter can remember when Billy hit all the high scores: “Donkey Kong and Donkey Kong Jr. Not just Pac-Man but Ms. Pac-Man too.”

“Don’t forget Centipede,” Billy adds.

“Right,” Walter confirms.

Walter has spent the past quarter-century maintaining detailed records of these and other gaming accomplishments, not just for Billy but for the entire classic-gaming community, and for the past decade has compiled his findings into a 984-page reference book, the *Twin Galaxies’ Official Video Game & Pinball Book of World Records*, which, as the book’s promotional literature notes, also contains “biographical features that introduce the reader to 265 of the top arcade gamers in the world.” Securing an entry is not simply a matter of posting your initials and sending an email. Players must either perform in public or send a complete set of video tapes to Twin Galaxies’ referees, who carefully verify and record their achievements.

After Billy wanders off to attend to the fans, Walter tells me about how he operates Twin Galaxies out of his home in Fairfield, Iowa. In addition to serving as the seat of authorized video-game scorekeeping, Fairfield is also the worldwide headquarters of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s transcendental meditation movement. Walter has been a believer almost since the Maharishi first bewitched the Beatles with his popular distillation of Eastern philosophy and physical purification rituals, and he followed the Maharishi to Iowa in the late Seventies,

joining the meditating community each day at dawn and dusk in domes on the outskirts of town. It is this mystical tradition Walter has in mind when he tells me that committed video-game play constitutes its own form of meditative contemplation. Walter is gaunt and slightly built and often has a wild look in his eyes, although not always, as I will later learn, since Walter can and will enter a deep state of meditation almost instantaneously, even surrounded by the din of the arcade. “I believe the players are connecting to something deeply profound,” Walter tells me. “But to see that yourself, you need to see real champions at the controls.”

Later, I find Billy back in front of Pac-Man. “My perfect game was all discipline,” Billy says. “I knew how it would come out before I started.” When I ask why he embarked on this mission, he says it was a metaphor for his own life. “Pac-Man set the tone for my business, my family, my relationships, everything,” he says. “Since I perfected Pac-Man, I’ve become obsessed with perfecting everything else.”

The next time I see Billy is several months later, in Florida. Walter had given me the number for Billy’s cell phone, and I had left dozens of messages over several months before I finally got my own voicemail one day: “Hello, Josh. This is it. Your long-awaited phone call from Billy Mitchell.” It takes another week to actually get Billy on the phone and arrange a visit. I arrive in Florida at midnight, and Billy suggests I come over right away. “You made it to the inner sanctum,” Billy says when we finally meet at his father’s restaurant, Rickey’s, which is known throughout the state for its hot wings.

Despite the hour, Billy is in uniform, with hair impeccably fluffed and a vertical Old Glory running down to double inverse pleats. He takes me on a tour of Rickey’s, stopping at the hot wings station to explain how he started expanding the family business a decade ago, bottling and selling Rickey’s brand sauce in many flavors. The sauce line

has generated considerable revenue. Billy says he can identify peppers by taste and distinguish his sauce from others blindfolded. Just as he mastered Pac-Man, Billy says, so too did he master hot wings.

We return to the dining room, where Billy fills several bowls of popcorn from a machine in the corner that churns the stuff out free to customers, and then guides us to a vinyl-upholstered booth. Billy orders steak for two and a plate of wings and begins a monologue about his quest. “What people don’t realize about that thing,” he says, pointing to a game near the popcorn machine, “is that Pac-Man is no place for panic. The maze is all about planning.” He describes the ghosts—Shadow, Speedy, Bashful, and Pokey—and explains that each one has his own programmed priorities, four “personalities” in pursuit. Over the years, Billy and his best friend, Chris Ayra, had used stopwatches, video cameras, notepads, and sometimes even transparencies taped to the screen, all in order to understand the basis for their behavior. They thoroughly internalized Pac-Man’s programming rules, its telos and its gestalt, and they came to realize something important, which was that this closed system was perfect—a controllable, predictable universe in a box. “What I learned,” Billy says, “is that everything has a reason.”

The following morning, I accompany Billy on several errands, driving up and down the Florida Turnpike in Billy’s minivan, which is adorned with Billy’s PERFECT PAC-MAN bumper sticker. One stop is at the workshop of Robert Childs, the area’s best coin-op serviceman. When we arrive, Robert happens to have a Pac-Man motherboard out on his bench. “This is what I’m up against,” Billy says. Robert provides a tour of the electronics. The blue power supply sits not far from the Zilog Inc. CPU, an 8-bit Z80 chip that processes (at 3.072 megahertz) the machine-language instructions stored in a neat row of nine 4-kilobyte ROMs. This sparse arrangement of information defines a world of surprising complexity, and Billy has tried to see it whole. When Billy

was in Japan, he asked the programmers detailed questions about the far reaches of Pac-Man, to which they responded, “We should really be asking you the questions. You have been where we never will.”

For Billy, though, there is always the question of going further. Back in his van, we talk about what is known in classic-gaming argot as the “kill screen.” This is the edge of the universe, the place where instructions end. Billy has seen a lot of kill screens. Pac-Man comes to a halt at level 256, as the program runs out of code and the entire right side of the screen is engulfed by senseless symbols. Circus Charlie just freezes. Donkey Kong ends after five seconds on level 22. The first time Billy reached the impassable final level of Dig Dug, he lost all 400 of his free men. Then there is Galaga, which eventually closes in solitude. After everything comes nothing: No enemy armada. No music. No score. Just you and the existential void. Other games end in violence. In Burger-time, Billy says, the kill screen came at level 28, which he describes as the most chaotic moment he has ever experienced. The fried egg and hot dog and pickles chased him around so aggressively that Billy took it as a cruelly encoded joke. That did not prevent him from attempting to breach Burger-time’s event horizon. Everyone said it was impossible, but he had to know: Is there more?

With Pac-Man, there has always been a powerful appeal surrounding the notion of “The Doorway”—a prospective passageway to the other side, a way past level 256. There are hints right at the threshold. As the maze comes undone, the disintegrating edges seem to hint at an unprogrammed but perhaps navigable new space. Equally enticing is that the final prize Pac-Man collects is not a fruit but a key, the last of nine—and why are there keys if there is nothing to unlock? Such questions have generated considerable controversy. On December 5, 1982, President Ronald Reagan sent a letter of congratulations to Jeffrey Yee, age eight, of San Francisco, for achieving a new world record of 6,131,940 points on Pac-



Man. But such a score would be possible only by venturing well past level 256, and players like Billy had become convinced that such a feat is impossible. "I've spent a lot of time looking," he says. "I've taken Pac-Man as far as it can go." Billy is so confident that his score will never be beaten that he has offered a bounty of \$100,000 to anyone who can go further and prove it.

Our next stop is Chris Ayra's house, in one of the endless subdivisions etched right into the Everglades. Chris takes us into the carpeted, converted garage where he and Billy often do their work. They show me a huge stack of papers, which Billy calls "a complete historical document" of their research. I shuffle through twenty years' worth of diagrams, observations, timing formulas, and statistical tables, mixed in with long forgotten algebra homework and notebook covers emblazoned with AC/DC concert dates in bubble letters. The most important documents look like electronics schematics, and they seem to show how a board's outcomes develop from a series of initial conditions, like a Newtonian system.

These schematics are sometimes called "technologies," and each has a different purpose. Chris gives me the rundown. The Dirty Dozen is meant for exhibition, with twelve disaster-flirting moments to impress onlookers. Tunnel Terror is slow but safe. The prized Screamer pattern was at one time the world's fastest, until the Modified Screamer came along. "It took us ten months to come up with that one," Chris says. "So we have to keep these things closely guarded." Billy and Chris let me look at it briefly, then hide it back away.

When Billy finally demonstrates his technologies, I am shocked by how much they differ from the vagaries of ordinary game play. Billy notes my awe as he gracefully navigates the first few screens. He says it has always been this way. Even the Namco personnel in Japan were astonished. "They kept asking me to do things over and over," he says. "They had no idea. The programmers created the game but don't

know how it falls together." The sound is turned down, and without the audio, the game's movements become mesmerizing. Billy's movements reveal obscure geometries, like mandalas or the labyrinth of Chartres. The ghosts unite, unravel, and reunite, collapsing Pac-Man's chaotic dynamics into purposeful, pulsing harmony. Chris also watches, savoring Billy's poetic turns.

"Beautiful," he murmurs. "Just beautiful."

A few months later, Walter invites me to the Midwest Gaming Classic in Milwaukee. It is not a big event, but Billy will be there, playing some Pac-Man and maybe Donkey Kong too. The plan is that I will meet Walter in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, so we can make the six-hour drive to Milwaukee together and use the time to talk more about the gaming life. Coming in through a storm, the landing is rough, and there are tornado sirens sounding when we reach the tarmac. The airport is evacuating by the time I find Walter in the terminal, eyes closed, meditating. "What's that siren?" he asks when I wake him. Outside, the streetlights rock in the wind, and dark, low-hanging clouds slowly rotate counterclockwise.

When it seems safe, we head out to Walter's car, a '93 Mercury Sable. The back seats are strewn with Twin Galaxies T-shirts, organic fig wrappers, and boxes of the *Twin Galaxies' Official Video Game & Pinball Book of World Records*. Walter says he has always wanted to see a tornado up close, "to feel the raw natural energy directly." He says he is sensitive to the energy that resides in all things, from plants to rocks, from tornadoes to video games. In fact, in 1980, when Walter was a traveling salesman, it was the incredible energy of a stranger playing Gorf in Houston's Malibu Grand Prix that impressed him enough to return home and found his own arcade, Twin Galaxies.

Walter has a collection of newspaper articles, television appearances, and self-made promotional materials that document a rich and varied life: Walter Day, Newspaper

Historian; Walter Day, Oil Broker; Walter Day, Ragtime Piano Player; Walter Day, Celebrity Yearbook Seller. The October 9, 1982, edition of the *Ottumwa Courier* features an article about Twin Galaxies with a picture labeled, "Walter Day, Idea Man." That was when Walter convinced the mayor of Ottumwa, where Twin Galaxies was originally located, to pronounce the city "the video-game capital of the world." The following year, Walter set out in a 44-foot 1953 GMC city bus equipped with a generator and nine games in a cross-country search for players to assemble into what he called the U.S. National Video Game Team. Among their stops was Washington, D.C., where the team arrived unannounced at the Embassy of Japan with a printed proclamation that challenged the entire nation to a video-game duel. None of this was particularly lucrative, and Walter left the team after a couple of seasons. Twin Galaxies closed a few years thereafter, as video games moved into the home, but Walter's scoreboard lives on through his book and online database.

In 1982, Walter wrote an editorial in *USA Today* in which he compared his players to research scientists. "Both are trying to unravel the same kinds of mysteries," he wrote, "using the same methods." Now, as corn rushes past the windows, Walter talks about how higher scores mark more complete knowledge. For Walter, Twin Galaxies was more than an arcade; it was a constellation of universes, lined up in neat arcade-lane rows, each with its own language, its own physics, its own Creator. "We turned the lights down," he says wistfully, "to see these windows into other worlds. Because the screens were so lovely, glowing in the dark."

Walter, of course, is not the first person to consider the divine implications of computer programming. Philosophers have long pondered whether programs constitute a separate reality, and programmers in the Eighties began using the philosophical term "ontology"—the study of what exists—as a technical designation for how software defines operat-

ing space. Some physicists have theorized that the universe itself is a program, since all its laws can be reduced to quantum behaviors and binary choices. “All is number,” the Pythagoreans hypothesized.

For now, though, the heirs to Pythagoras are a lonely bunch. “There are only two competitive Burgertime players in the world,” Walter says. “I think there are three on Donkey Kong. About half a dozen on Robotron.” Uncovering those talented few is Walter’s ongoing goal. Since the days of the U.S. National Video Game team, he has viewed himself as a seeker on a “personal spiritual quest to discover examples of unfolding excellence.” Today, in the car, Walter is still seeking. With night falling on Route 80, Walter gets increasingly animated, which I gather he does before every convention or tournament. “I’m always hoping to find more Billys,” he says. “I know they’re out there.”

In Milwaukee the next morning, I wait for Walter to finish meditating and watch Billy prepare himself for another public appearance. They are sharing a room at the Brookfield Sheraton. While Walter dons his referee stripes, Billy’s hair gets delicately fluffed, the correct American flag tie is chosen from several American flag tie variations, and we all head into the hotel’s convention room. Walter has heavily publicized Billy’s appearance in Milwaukee, and Billy doesn’t disappoint. He throws a casual quarter into Donkey Kong and two hours later puts up 930,000 points, breaking his old world record from 1982. Dwayne Richard, a friend who was watching, says Billy wasn’t even really trying. “I think he was holding back.”

Dwayne is known as the best “generalist” player around, and is competition-ready on more than 300 games. He has long hair, a pharaonic beard, and makes his living driving his pickup 100,000 miles every year in order to deliver classic video games to collectors across North America. “I can play pretty much all of these,” Dwayne tells me, pointing to various titles as we walk the ar-

cade floor. “Lady Bug, Blaster, Bubbles, Make Trax, Krazy Klimber, and then there’s always Nibbler.”

I had read about Nibbler in Walter’s book. Nibbler was the sole machine whose counter had enough digits to display 999,999,999 and therefore turn over at 000,000,000, or one billion points. “Playing this thing is joyless,” Dwayne says, “but we all wanted to get the ‘Billion on Nibbler.’” Many tried and failed, including Dwayne. On January 15, 1984, Tim McVey from Oskaloosa came to Walter’s arcade and finally reached a billion after playing forty-four hours—except that instead of turning over to zeros, the counter kept going. Tim gave up at 1,000,042,270 when he realized the true milestone was ten billion points, another order of magnitude away, and sadly well out of reach for him and all humanity. “I’d like my own billion,” Dwayne says. “I tried again recently. Got close. Forty hours. Sent it to Twin Galaxies, on eight videotapes.”

When I later ask Walter about the point of the Billion on Nibbler, he says it was obvious. “Purity, plain and simple. The purity of higher scores.” Walter talks about how all the great challenges seem to have no intrinsic value. Climbing Everest, enumerating pi to a trillion digits, circumnavigating the globe in a hot-air balloon—these things have only personal rewards. True quests, he says, are about losing oneself, which in the end is finding oneself. “Top gamers have yogic concentration,” he says, “combining utter focus with extreme relaxation, like what I’ve studied with the Maharishi.” Walter says the players, like all great athletes, can enter flow states when navigating Pac-Man or marathoning on games like Nibbler. And many players do in fact report moments, deep into the hours, when everything but the game recedes. “It’s happened to me many times,” Dwayne says. “It’s like you have some kind of automatic comprehension.” Russians say this is “the white moment.” Zen action describes it as the ability to “do without doing.” Walter calls it “an expanded insight” that just might lead to a new world record.



On the second day in Milwaukee, everyone's attention suddenly turns to one corner, where a short man in a leather jacket who walked in off the street has been really lighting up the Centipede machine. "Hasn't played in forever," Walter tells a local news reporter. "And he's demonstrating absolutely incredible ability! A very important discovery."

With the news crews rolling, a crowd forms around the unexpected new adept. The player's hand is in constant motion on the trackball, like a pianist in concert. Walter looks on with a grin. Billy watches, arms folded. Dwayne nods appreciatively. It has been a long time since they've seen a new player work Centipede like this. Soon everyone is watching. For a moment it is 1984 again, and time slows down for a glorious arcade performance. "It used to be like this every day,"

Dwayne says. "I could sit here for hours."

In Milwaukee, Walter told me about another adept, based in New York City, who may be the most exciting new player since Billy himself. For a time, this new player was just a rumor, an extrapolation based on the extraordinary scores appearing on the Ms. Pac-Man machine at Broadway City Arcade near Times Square, scores that were either the work of some unknown master or a clever hoax. The mystery was solved when Darren Harris, a long-time serious player with close ties to the Twin Galaxies community, walked in one day and found Abdner Bancroft Ashman, a Jamaican immigrant from Queens, standing at the machine doing incredible things. The rumors were put to rest, and Abdner immediately entered the orbit of Twin Galaxies. In the fall of 2005, he agreed to let me watch him practice at his home in Queens.

Abdner, who is forty-one and works in construction, spends most of his evenings practicing in the basement of his mother's house. The only illumination is a bare bulb overhead and the dim aura emanating from the game's cathode-ray tube. Abdner himself is broad-shouldered

and powerful from his day job but also shy and soft-spoken. Unlike Billy, he has no explanation for how he does what he does. He can play with either hand and recall entire games in his head, and yet he takes no notes, compiles no data, and has never once thought about the game's code. "All I see is the joystick," he says.

For years Abdner had to practice by feeding quarters into games at local pizza parlors or taking the subway to Broadway City. Then one day, when he was driving his van through Queens, he came across a Ms. Pac-Man by the side of the road. Judging from the location and condition of the machine when he discovered it, Abdner half-jokingly thinks it may even be the same unit he played on as a kid at the liquor store, the one the store owner would unplug when he saw Abdner coming. Today, the machine needs servicing, and Darren Harris arrives to install some parts. His head disappears inside the rear panel, and the room is so quiet that we can hear Abdner's mother upstairs, cooking. Abdner tells me his mother never understood why he spent so much time in this basement, nor did the girlfriends he lost. "They didn't understand how committed I was to this game," he says.

Abdner's chosen game, Ms. Pac-Man, is substantially more difficult than Pac-Man. "Pac-Man can be controlled," Abdner explains. "But Ms. Pac-Man is random." As each level starts, the movements of the ghosts are briefly unpredictable, and therefore the player must create a new technology on the fly. Every time, order anew. The scoring is also undefined because the prizes are arbitrary. Could be a cherry, worth 100 points. Or a banana, worth 5,000. Walter once told me that players used to put bunches of real bananas on top of the cabinet, like a fetish, to coax their valuable digital counterparts out of the circuitry. But ultimately, chance presides: ten perfect games—all possible points all the way to Ms. Pac-Man's kill screen, at level 134—will yield ten different scores.

For years, only a half dozen

people in the world could reach Ms. Pac-Man's kill screen—six master players, competing for twenty years in the Twin Galaxies community, all learning from one another's strategies. Chris Ayra's long-standing record of 920,310 was recorded one lucky Tuesday in 1998. Since Billy and Chris operate as a unit, Billy is very proud of that score as well. He helped plan it, and he was there when it happened. After crafting his game alone, in the wilderness outside Twin Galaxies, Abdner emerged as the seventh confirmed master. Walter and Dwayne both compare Abdner with Luke Skywalker or Neo from the Matrix: an exiled hero and fated receiver of wisdom, a man chosen to do great things.

Today, Abdner is practicing for the upcoming competition at Funspot Family Fun Center in Weirs Beach, New Hampshire, the place where Billy set his own Pac-Man record. Abdner says that once Darren finishes his repairs, he will show me a few tricks, but like Billy, he will keep his more advanced methods hidden, especially his thoughts on how to get extra points after the kill screen. As with Pac-Man, the Ms. Pac-Man kill screen is an area of deep controversy. Usually, the game just stops and goes blank. Occasionally, however, between one and eight additional levels will materialize, seemingly at random. Out there, the game breaks down, like the laws of physics in a black hole. There are upside-down mazes, blank boards, invisible ghosts. It was there, Billy told me in Florida, that he saw Pokey turn into Ms. Pac-Man herself, a disturbing collision of antipodes. "If I didn't have pictures you wouldn't believe it," he said. "You're somewhere you're not supposed to be."

Reaching that mysterious region can mean the difference between just another game and a new record: eight more runs through the maze is worth as many as 61,000 additional points. To get all eight is the rarest of blessings, a gift of good fortune bestowed on maybe one in a thousand post-kill-screen games. Ms. Pac-Man's non-Newtonian ambiguity is frustrating for Billy and Chris, be-

cause it confounds perfection and challenges Billy Mitchell's belief in universal causality. Abdner has no such grand theories, but he has set three record scores in rapid succession, each higher than the last.

This is a highly improbable achievement, and so Twin Galaxies is exercising unusually stringent verification procedures. They've had several referees, including Billy, re-view Abdner's tape, and there is talk of sending Abdner's board to an electrical engineer in Colorado to make sure the components are sound and have not been tampered with. "I've been waiting several months," Abdner says, "and if it goes on much longer, I'll just have to do it in public so they can all see with their own eyes."

After an hour of fiddling in the basement, Darren at last closes the back. Abdner fires up the game. When the opening jingle sounds he smiles. "That's what I love to hear."

The Funspot Classic occurs in early June, on the splendid verge of summer, and for four days each year Weirs Beach, New Hampshire, is descended upon simultaneously by tanned waterskiing vacationers and pale forty-year-old video-game champions. The two groups will never meet, however, because the Funspot attendees spend every minute they can in the arcade's cavernous classic room, which houses the largest public collection of Golden Age machines in the United States. This year there is the usual grumbling, because serious competitors like to swap in their own joysticks—Ms. Pac-Man's original Wico Red Ball Leafswitch, for example, is far superior to today's knock-off, second-rate microswitch—but Funspot never allows it.

Still, everyone plays. The \$40 fee gets you a bucket of tokens and automatic entry into the official competition. Many players also pursue their own record-setting projects on the side. Dwayne is here, taking a shot at Carnival. Greg Erway is prepping for a marathon on Tapper. By the entrance, I see Doris Self, who set a Q-bert world record at

age sixty, sitting at a cocktail Q-bert, telling an ABC News camera how she wants to reclaim the title for her eightieth birthday. And Steve Wiebe is already having a good run on Donkey Kong, whose record he hopes to take from Billy this weekend.

There are several other documentary crews at the tournament, following various rivalries and controversies. I have become involved in one of the documentary projects myself, and had filmed Abdner's preparations and bus trip to Funspot. Everyone, media and players alike, is disappointed to learn that Billy and Chris are not in attendance. They both claim it is too hard to get away from family and work. In his absence, however, Billy did send along a case of collector's-edition hot sauce commemorating the event.

He has also overnighted a videotape, the contents of which, according to Billy's detailed instructions and telephonic micro-management, are to be gloriously revealed during the tournament. When Funspot closes at 10:00 P.M., forty people and half a dozen cameramen squeeze into a rental cabin across the street. Walter is presiding over the unveiling. From Florida, Billy has somehow ordered us pizza and beer.

There is eager speculation about what one player predicts will surely be "a very interesting film." Billy always talks about a "super ultra secret" he's working on, his own Manhattan Project of a video-game feat that will blow everyone's mind. Someone hits PLAY, and there is a roar of approval as Donkey Kong, level 1 appears. We never see Billy, yet everyone can tell it is him by the style. Billy gives Donkey Kong's hero, Mario, a jaunty confidence and flair, an extra spring to his step. The audience sits spellbound. Long stretches of attentive silence are punctuated by joyful eruptions. "Look at that stall!" "Oh man, that is *cold*." There is laughter at jokes, jokes told through Mario's movements, and genuine gasps at several near-death experiences. When Billy takes down eleven barrels with one hammer, the people are out of their



seats: "OH MY GOD," they shout, "WE NEVER KNEW THAT WAS POSSIBLE!" Later, that is topped with thirteen barrels, and a voice cries out from the back of the room: "Stop! It burns my eyes!"

Billy's tape is too long to watch in one sitting, so we pause at 1:00 A.M. The cabin fills with the clatter of forty different interpretations, a debriefing that lasts long into the night.

The next morning, Abdner takes a shot at Ms. Pac-Man. He makes his usual quiet contact with the console—"It's that deep stillness," Walter says, "that gives Abdner his strength"—and casually puts up nearly 900,000. This is no record, but still a cause for excitement in the room. "The guy creates miracles," Dwayne whispers, unable to look away from the screen.

Nearby, I overhear several players debating Abdner's mythical skills. In addition to the phantom boards, word is that Abdner has been working on ways to get more bananas.

"Is it the order of eating the dots?"

"Hard to say. Maybe some kind of continuous forward-motion regime."

"People think he might be manipulating the fruit cycle."

All this speculation is anathema to Billy and Chris' analytical process. As teenagers, they entered the world of Pac-Man precisely because it could be understood and therefore controlled. Pac-Man offered an escape from messy adolescence into a perfect world of forms. A sworn rationalist, Billy avoided the flow state when he played football, does not see enlightenment at the joystick, and certainly doubts that anyone can "manipulate the fruit cycle."

"Billy plays literally," Dwayne says. "He is a reductionist." Dwayne is good friends with Billy and holds his game play in high regard. "But the thing is," Dwayne adds, "Abdner takes an ecological approach. He'll take insights from anywhere, even from dreams. It's the consummate technician versus the artist." This is more than just a dichotomy in style. What Dwayne is proposing—what the players all propose, in fact, when they whisper among the consoles about Abdner's secret knowledge that can only be guessed at—is not technology at all but a kind

of magic. "Billy's the best at zeros and ones," Dwayne says. "But what if truth is in between?"

Later, the final half-hour of Billy's Donkey Kong tape is revealed on a special monitor set up on the floor of Funspot's arcade. Once again, Billy has carefully orchestrated the event, and everyone is there. The tension is especially high because that very day a serious challenger named Steve Wiebe had himself set a new record on Donkey Kong. Walter's voice is like a commentator's track as Billy's score mounts: "Looks like we may see a milestone here." At the kill screen, the final score is 1,047,200, a big advance over Wiebe's record.

Billy, who is receiving up-to-the-minute reports of the proceedings from friends, immediately asks Walter to update the Twin Galaxies website with the new score. This bypasses the normal verification process—Wiebe should be enjoying several months of championship status while Billy's record is being verified—and Abdner seems annoyed. He has been hoping to set the record here, in public, but he has been uneven, tensing with frustration at several false starts. The lights, cameras, and crowd did capture one Abdner kill screen, a rare treat for onlookers, but one that unfortunately results in no extra levels and a routine score.

For the most part, all the attention is on Billy. Walter controls history with his book, and the fight for entry, I am learning, can be bitter. Billy's self-created legacy is deeply inscribed in its pages, and he is willing to maintain that legacy with a certain amount of manipulation. As an official referee, Billy is able to put his challengers' scores through added scrutiny. And with his Donkey Kong tape, Billy somewhat incredibly managed to make himself the center of attention from 1,500 miles away. When I later look at the footage shot by our documentary crew, it becomes obvious: Billy was controlling the action on all of the screens.

Ten months after Funspot, Abdner's taped scores still have not been

verified. And a brand-new competition, sanctioned by the *Guinness World Records* book, has elevated the stakes. Walter has temporarily converted a strip-mall storefront into a small arcade to stage the tournament. A banner in front says THE DODGE CITY OF VIDEO GAMES.

Billy does not show up again, even though this time we are in Pompano Beach, which is just ten miles away from Rickey's. He claims to be busy, but it could also be fear. Abdner is flying in from New York to go after Ms. Pac-Man in person again and finally silence the skeptics. Steve Wiebe, the Donkey Kong challenger, is back as well, as are the camera crews, hoping to capture the challenger's struggle to find acceptance with his score.

More than just a fight for individual recognition, this is the tumult of transformation. Here is a community with a decades-long consensus, and new ideas have sparked a philosophical tug of war. Abdner is the Copernican outsider, threatening Billy's dominance over both Ms. Pac Man and the classic-gaming establishment he has led for decades. That desire for control, and the accompanying hubris, may undermine Billy. As Dwayne points out as respectfully as possible, Billy thinks he knows all, so he is "blind to the possibility Abdner represents."

It is late on Friday evening when Abdner arrives and puts his first quarter into Ms. Pac-Man. By the time he realizes he is on a record pace with a high banana count and more than 400,000 points, it is 11:00 P.M. and most of the other players have gone home. Walter is already asleep at his hotel. I'm not around either, and have to watch it later on the video our camera crew recorded. A single upside-down level appears after the kill screen and Abdner negotiates it from memory, picking up the last few dots that will give him a new world record.

Characteristically, Abdner barely reacts. He so quiet about it that Dwayne, entangled in a bout of Dig Dug off camera, doesn't realize what has happened at first. The sound of the last dot being eaten is followed by silence. Abdner takes a pause

and motions at the score in the upper left-hand corner. Struggling to describe his playing, Abdner once said that he tries to make “logic out of chaos.” There, on the screen, is the most logic yet created from Ms. Pac-Man, the strongest signal to emerge from the noise: 933,580. But it doesn’t last; Ms. Pac-Man’s kill screen erases everything almost instantly. A quick flash of kaleidoscopic static appears, and then the machine resets.

Billy visits the tournament the next day to quietly pay his respects. The hair and flag tie are in place, but Billy lacks his usual commanding presence. Billy says he wished he could have witnessed the score, “for the sake of history.” Walter wishes Billy had been there too, and doesn’t hide his disappointment, but at the tournament’s closing ceremony, Walter says he wants to let the controversy fade into the past. He officially accepts Abdner’s score and welcomes him to the community. “As far as I’m concerned,” Walter says afterward, “Abdner has demonstrated his abilities at the highest level, and we are lucky to have him.”

The next time I see Walter is in January of 2007. This is at the Slamdance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Classic gaming has, for the moment, captured the attention of the non-gaming class, and the result is two new documentaries on the subject: *Chasing Ghosts*, a series of profiles of gamers that is premiering at the Sundance festival, and *King of Kong*, a chronicle of Steve Wiebe’s efforts to usurp Billy’s Donkey Kong record, which is premiering at Slamdance. I am a “contributing producer” on *King of Kong*, a credit I received along with a few thousands dollars in exchange for licensing my footage to the filmmakers and helping them fit it into the film. Walter is here to promote Twin Galaxies, but Billy and the rest of the players have stayed away.

In *King of Kong*, Wiebe’s experience parallels Abdner’s, although the struggle is more bitter; Billy claimed that Steve’s board may have been hotrodged and therefore managed to invalidate his taped

Donkey Kong score. The director of *King of Kong* also gives credit to claims that Billy cheated on his own Donkey Kong tape from Funspot—a claim I strongly disagree with, but one that is not entirely out of line with the many ways Billy has tried to discredit Wiebe’s score. The movie gets a remarkable response and it finds distribution. Audiences love to hate Billy. When I first saw his defensive scheming during the editing, I was shocked, too. Billy’s ego may be his weak point, but I had never seen him so crippled by it. It may have been the pressure of having to defend multiple titles, or perhaps the presence of cameras encouraged Billy to overplay the role of Machiavellian manipulator.

When Walter finally sees the film, he is ambivalent. It is too hard on Billy, he says, and the film’s portrayal of Wiebe’s struggle to confirm his score neglects to show that Billy’s Donkey Kong tape was ultimately subjected to normal verification procedures. But the film has also reinforced Walter’s growing concerns about Twin Galaxies’ institutional integrity. Over the next year, the film arrives in theaters and is a moderate success at the box office. It also generates, within the Twin Galaxies community, bitter recriminations and counter-recriminations about the tiniest of details. “Who knew,” Walter laments, “that finding the truth would be so difficult?”

For Billy, however, what remains is the immutable fact of his Perfect Game. “No one can take that away,” he points out during a surprise call, long after the film has gone from theaters. “It’s something that cannot be undone.” Except, of course, in the unlikely event that the kill screen were breached. I ask Billy what he would do if a challenger somehow surpassed level 256. It is a potentially uncomfortable question, but I get a surprising response. “The truth is, I’d be happy about it,” Billy says, after a considerable silence. “Even if I had to give up my own score. I wouldn’t even mind paying the bounty. Because that would only mean that there’s something new to experience about Pac-Man. And who wouldn’t pay \$100,000 for that?” ■

