

# ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

Originally produced for the arcades, variations of Pacman have appeared on many home computers — although Atarisoft has guarded its copyright jealously and these have all differed, at least cosmetically, from the original. Atarisoft has now produced 'official' versions for the Spectrum and Vic-20.

Pacman was the original arcade maze game, and set the formula that has since been followed by home computer software like *Atic Atac* and *Jet Set Willy*. In such games the central character must travel through a network of corridors or rooms, all the while picking up treasure and avoiding the various hazards along the way. Under certain conditions, it is possible for the player to turn the tables on the attacking monsters — in *Sabre Wulf*, for example, running over certain orchids makes the player invisible to the creatures in the jungle. This idea was borrowed from adventure games, in which the possession of a magic sword or similar item gives the player an advantage.

In Pacman, the title character is placed at the centre of a maze, and the player must attempt to guide this figure around the screen while swallowing the dots that litter the path. A careful eye must be kept on the pursuing ghosts, which exhibit a dogged determination to trap the Pacman in the various dead-ends throughout the maze. Eating a 'power pill' allows the player to chase and eat the ghosts, thus scoring extra points, and pieces of fruit make random appearances and add to the score if eaten.

The comparison of different versions of the same game may be a little unfair — after all, a game designed for a particular machine will obviously make the most of that micro's capabilities. This is particularly true for games designed specifically for Atari machines, which have an enviable reputation for high-quality, if expensive, arcade-type software. But it must be said that the new versions of Pacman do not match up to the original.

Pacman on the Atari home computers features a large maze with excellent sound and graphics, smooth sprite movement and various skill levels, and, allowing for the fact that the game is not played on a dedicated machine, this version is a faithful

replica of the arcade game. The Spectrum and Commodore versions are not in the same league. With the Vic-20, the programmers were faced with the usual problem of trying to fit a quart into a pint pot — the maze is only a quarter of the size of its Atari counterpart, whereas the sprites are twice as big as they were originally, and the cramped space makes it very difficult to avoid the ghosts. However, the graphics are well-defined, the movement is smooth and the sound is as good as that on the Atari version. The Spectrum Pacman gives fuller instructions, and allows the player the option of keyboard control instead of the joysticks that are required for Atari and Commodore versions. There is little that the Atarisoft programmers could have done about the Spectrum's pathetic sound facilities, but the jerky graphics are extremely disappointing — although the maze is very similar to the original, the flickering movement makes playing the game rather like watching a silent film. The Vic version's limitations are explained by the hardware restrictions, but it is difficult to understand why the Spectrum game is so poor.

When Pacman first made an appearance in 1980, it very quickly became a sensation, but today it appears somewhat dated. Atarisoft was quick to threaten legal action against rival software companies that brought out Pacman-type games, but the company has delayed too long in releasing these 'official' versions for other machines. A few years ago, Atarisoft could have sold thousands of copies of Pacman, but today there are many better arcade-style games on the market, and it would be a pity if Spectrum and Vic owners bought the Atarisoft Pacman in the mistaken belief that they were getting a close copy of the arcade original.

**Pacman:** For all Atari computers and Commodore Vic-20, £9.99. For the Spectrum, £7.99.

**Publishers:** Atari Corporation UK Ltd., Atari House, Railway Terrace, Slough, Berkshire.

**Authors:** Atari

**Joysticks:** Required

**Format:** Atari and Vic-20, cartridge; Spectrum, cassette