

The Bozeman Think Tank Pioneers of Ms. Pac-Man

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I have recently been reading 5-7 year old discussions on Ms. Pac-Man playing history and lore. I thought I might add some of my remembrances and comments. As with most things from 25-30 years ago, my memory doesn't always impress me with its complete accuracy. Though, taken together, the stories from many individuals probably paint a fair picture. I will probably offend some and surprise others, but I have no intended malice. So here goes.

The Beginning. I played my first game of Pac-Man in the summer of 1981. I played enough to understand that the game would yield to pattern play and even used this "method" to reach past the ninth key. I was never a serious player and, truth be told, never was significantly inspired by the game. That was about my only brush with video games until I moved to Montana in the winter of 1982. It was then that I first saw a Ms. Pac-Man machine in the Bank Bar in Wilsall. Now this game was much more interesting! I played off and on during the spring. But typically broke and busy, I did not dedicate much time to it.

The Think Tank is Forged. During the summer of 1982 I got a real job and moved to Bozeman. I supported myself in those early years working on dairy farms, and I found myself drawn to Ms. Pac-Man. It was a personal challenge to understand this game. The dedicated players are naturally drawn together. So it was that Spencer Ouren, Don Williams, Joe Wingard and myself fell into the habit of playing and studying the game together. Initially, we had no idea that anyone was keeping track of high scores. We were playing for ourselves. There is a story that we obtained a Ms. Pac-Man machine and used the rack advance feature to improve our game quickly. This story is false. We never owned a machine nor did we have access to (or even knowledge of) the rack advance feature until *after* solidly setting our record scores *at Twin Galaxies* in the presence of Walter Day. But I get ahead of myself.

First Strike. Joe Wingard was the first person I know of to achieve a score of over 200,000. He did this sometime in June of 1982. There is some chance that he was actually the first to accomplish this feat, though maybe not. Later that summer it was reported on the August High Scores poster from Twin Galaxies that Jody Cagle had achieved a score of 283,680 on July 6, 1982. (I have personally come to doubt this score as legitimate, though I don't intend to enter into a discussion here. I will only say that most of the top Ms. Pac-Man players of early 1983 would probably agree with me, not out of any egotism but through skill set analysis.)

Breakthrough. The fall of 1982 and winter of 1983 was the breakthrough period for us. We were honing our skills in monster grouping and manipulation, devising strategies for eating all monsters at all opportunities, and exploring the nature of the randomness of the fruit. During this time, the high scores reported by Twin Galaxies were staying ahead of us, but we were gaining. The claimed scores of the day were rapidly rising through the 300,000s.

None of these scores exist today, having been discarded as fraudulent. It is during this time that I am fairly certain that we were the best of the best ... and we did not know it.

I achieved my first 300,000 score sometime around November 1982. Spencer attained the first “perfect” game that winter. (At the time, we coined the term perfect to mean eating all possible fruit and monsters.) Early in 1983, when we were pushing our scores through the mid-300s and working on slow board clearing strategies, we began to contact Twin Galaxies. We were still just shy of the official world record, now claimed at 388k. And recall the December 1982 That’s Incredible competition? Any one of us could have eaten the competition for lunch.

Proof! This was also the beginning of the era of “proof”. Billy Mitchell had come on the scene and was enforcing change at Twin Galaxies in how high scores were validated. Ms. Pac-Man was one of the hottest games at the time and we were up against a lot of resistance. We began to carry around verification forms with us just in case we attained the record. That day came on May 5, 1983, when I achieved a score of 393,000 at an arcade in Great Falls, Montana. I had six witnesses. I sent in the forms and called Twin Galaxies. I got a call from Billy Mitchell during which I had to defend my score by questioning. But I was for real. Billy did not know the game as I knew the game. Their next step was to put me in contact with Darren Olson. The idea was for me to meet Darren and “prove” my ability. I suppose Darren was chosen as a referee (as we now call them) both for his prowess on Ms. Pac-Man and his relative proximity to me. He had scored 257,100 on March 20, 1983 and lived in Calgary. I met Darren in Spokane Washington at a Pizza Hut (I think). The best game I managed was something around 330k. He told me that he was convinced. So I was disappointed to find out later that my high score was not added to the record books. I was still held at arms length with great caution. Rather than argue the point, I decided that they would have to see for themselves.

Twin Galaxies. I arrived in Ottumwa by Greyhound bus in late May 1983. I remember playing a game of Ms. Pac-Man in front of Walter Day. I had him mesmerized. He admitted that he had never seen anyone play Ms. Pac-Man with such complete control and mastery. Sure, such words are exaggeration, but the thought was correct: I was by far the best player that Walter had ever witnessed. The main weakness in my game was that we did not yet have a satisfying strategy for slow junior boards. Walter was soon on the phone with Billy confirming that I was the real deal. Later, I convinced Spencer and Don to drive down to Ottumwa. The three of us would be at Twin Galaxies when Chris O’Brien and Doug Nelson arrived to “prove” their claim of one million points on Ms. Pac-Man. Suffice it to say that they had to admit fraud in the face of the experts. Spencer hit 411,050 on June 6, 1983 and I managed 419,950 the next day. It was during this trip that Walter coined the phrase Bozeman Think Tank to describe our trio.

Opponents and Friends. We did not hide any secrets. We played for anyone anywhere. We helped all. It was inevitable that there would quickly be many contenders. Billy Mitchell was the first to strike pay dirt: 436,500 on July 1, 1983. I am sure that Chris Ayra was playing at the time, but I do not know his score history during summer 1983. In August,

Walter, Billy and I traveled along the east coast (you can read about it in the TG book). At that time we witnessed another unsung Ms. Pac-Man player: Darren Harris. I am not familiar with Darren's scoring history, but he is remembered by me as the man with a very good slow junior board strategy. It was the use of his basic ideas that allowed Billy to reach 557,120 (9/20/1983) and I to reach 681,130 (10/2/1983) just a couple of months later. Sure, we would have attained these scores eventually on our own, but meeting Darren provided a significant boost.

Aftermath. The job of the Bozeman Think Tank was done. We had helped show the way. None of us were really serious Ms. Pac-Man players after that autumn. I did play several games over the next year or so in attempts at the world record. I recorded several games in the 500s and 600s during which I meticulously recorded fruit distributions and ideas related to de-randomization. Darren Harris recently reminded me that I also played some Ms. Pac-Man at the 1985 Ironman competition in Vancouver, BC. That truly must have been near the end of my playing days. From time to time, I still notice Ms. Pac-Man machines and wonder

My Take on the World Record Progression. I have been unable to locate my Ms. Pac-Man notes after having moved recently. So, much data is missing as of this writing.

201,xxx	6-?-1982	Joe Wingard
...		
30x,xxx	11-?-1982	Tom Asaki
...		
393,xxx	5-5-1983	Tom Asaki
411,050	6-5-1983	Spencer Ouren
419,950	6-6-1983	Tom Asaki
557,120	9-20-1983	Billy Mitchell
681,130	10-2-1983	Tom Asaki
703,560	1-27-1984	Billy Mitchell
820,150	4-17-1984	Chris Ayra
874,530	6-30-1985	Chris Ayra
910,310	9-8-1998	Rick Fothergill
920,310	9-16-1998	Chris Ayra
933,580	4-6-2006	Abner Ashman