

THIS IS FOR CLASS?

Urban Pac-Man

NYU graduate students bring the video game alive in Washington Square

BY JAY DIXIT

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The game hasn't even started, but already the ghosts are talking trash.

"Pac-Man's days are numbered," warns Pete Vigeant, jabbing his finger from beneath his blue sheet. "Last time, the ghosts didn't have their act together. But I've been practicing."

Vigeant is playing Inky the Ghost. With the help of Blinky, Pinky and Clyde, his job is to tag Pac-Man.

Pac-Man himself, played today by Michael Olson, seems wary. "I don't have the physical prowess of the last Pac-Man, so this will be more of a stealthy chess match," he says. "My weakness is my speed."

The game is Pac-Manhattan, a large-scale version of the classic arcade game. Instead of an electronic maze, the game uses Manhattan's street grid. The ghosts - grad students wearing sheets - chase Pac-Man through the streets surrounding Washington Square Park. Pac-Man, meanwhile, tries to run the entire grid, gobbling virtual dots as he goes. As in the original game, Pac-Man can consume "power pellets," which briefly allow him to tag ghosts instead of the other way around.

Each player is teamed with a controller who is stationed at the control center, a third-floor balcony overlooking the park. The controllers stay in constant cell phone contact with their foot-soldiers, advising them on where to run, tracking their movements, and updating their positions on a Pac-Man screen.

It's noon and the game is about to begin. The controllers are huddled at their table, poised with their laptops, headsets, cell phones, walkie-talkies and street maps.

Pinky the Ghost, played by Megan Phalines, is helping Pac-Man suit up.

"I'm looking eye-to-eye with my nemesis," says Pac-Man, as Pinky uses fishing wire to fasten a highlighter-yellow dorsal fin to his back, completing the effect created by the home-made Pac-Man mouth already stitched to his front.

The players take their places outside and the game begins. Pac-Man takes off running west along



Washington Square, his cell phone pressed to his ear. At first, he is trailed by a retinue of press and onlookers, like Michael Jackson in one of his videos. But a minute later, Pac-Man is around the corner and out of sight.

The players are students in "Big Games," a class in game design at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications graduate program. Their assignment was to explore what happens when a video game is blown up to a large scale, invading public spaces in the real world. Pac-Manhattan is what the 12 students came up with.

There are four ghosts and one Pac-Man, but Pac-Man has an advantage: His controller tells him where the ghosts are. The ghosts' controllers, meanwhile, cannot see where Pac-Man is, creating a fog-of-war effect. "In the original, the ghosts were like Keystone Kops, bumping around," says Frank Lantz, the professor who teaches the class. "Pac-Man was more wily."

Outside, Pac-Man is rapidly clearing the board, racing up and down streets, darting across intersections and crouching behind sport utility vehicles.

"We were going to try to follow them," says print broker Kristin Ertel, 24, who has come to watch. "But now we're just letting them pass us by and saying, 'Ooh, look, there's a ghost!'"

At that moment, Pac-Man whizzes by, hotly pursued by Inky the Ghost.

Meanwhile, up in the control center, the ghost controllers are calling out information like NASA flight commanders.

"Recent activity!"

"Dots are cleared between Delta 5 and Delta 7!"

"Run up to Beta 2, you guys might be able to close in."

"Pac-Man is hot! Watch out!"

"Pac-Man just ate a power pellet!"

"Major activity at Beta 7!"

"Pac-Man is no longer hot!"

After 45 minutes, exhaustion sets in, Pac-Man reports his location incorrectly, and he runs straight into a ghost. Game over.

The ghost who tagged him is a woman. The next game will feature the first Ms. Pac-Man.

During the post-game wrap-up, Pac-Man explains his pacing strategy. "I was always paranoid they were closing in on me, but my controller would say, there's nobody headed toward you, don't run, save your energy," Olson says. "Someday, when real athletes play this game, Pac-Man will be running the whole time. But we're dissolute graduate students, so endurance management is something we have to think about."

That someday may not be as remote as it sounds. Saturday's game was the first to which spectators were

invited. But already, people as far away as Brazil and Australia have expressed interest, and www.pacmanhattan.com is getting hundreds of thousands of visitors a day.

"It's so interactive, even if you're not playing, you're playing," says Shannon Murphy, an NYU student who came to watch. "If you see a ghost run by, you just want to chase him. You can't not get into it. I would love to play."

The class is working on a free kit to send to anyone interested in playing. Users will be able to download the software application that controllers use to update the players' locations on the screen, Photoshop templates to create street maps that look like Pac-Man mazes, and a history of how the rules changed as the class tested the game.

"We want to spread it to as many cities as possible," says Dennis Crowley, the student who played Pac-Man in the last game. "The whole point of our class is to get people playing big games."

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