

# PAC-MAN PROWESS

## Wood County man's skill gets him into world championship

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Jason Gahler probably could beat you at Pac-Man with his eyes closed.

This is not much of an exaggeration.

As a photographer takes his picture, Gahler turns his attention from a game in progress and stares at the camera. His hands, though, stay busy working the game controller, and on the television, Pac-Man continues his quest to gobble up dots and avoid ghosts, turning corners just in the nick of time as if using a sixth sense.

When it comes to playing the iconic '80s video game, Gahler is one of the best. He'll have a chance to prove it today when he takes part in the first Xbox 360 Pac-Man World Championship in New York.



Musician and teacher Jason Gahler keeps playing Pac-Man, even as he talks to a reporter. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

The 25-year-old from Troy Township in Wood County is one of 10 finalists from around the world in the event. He qualified by posting a score of about 2.5 million points - a feat that took him about five hours - during a tournament on the classic arcade game via Xbox Live Arcade, a feature of the video-game system that allows players from around the world to download and play games.

The game as played on Microsoft's Xbox 360 console is exactly the same as you remember, all the way down to the "wakka wakka wakka" sound Pac-Man made as he floated around the screen eating dots. It's a sound that hooked Gahler and a generation of youngsters.

"Pac-Man was a game that sort of broke the barrier," Gahler said. "It wasn't just in arcades. You saw it everywhere. I always tried to play it when I got the chance."

### LEADER OF THE PAC

Tips for playing Pac-Man from Jason Gahler, who is competing in the Xbox 360 Pac-Man World Championship today:

- Each ghost has a different personality. Study them all.
- Ghosts slow down in the tunnels. Use that to your advantage.
- Pac-Man slows down as he eats dots.

If you're in a tight situation, go through areas you've already cleared.

- Don't get too greedy trying to catch ghosts up until the last second.
- Relax. Don't hold the controller too tightly.

The game was released in Japan in 1980 and hit the rest of the world a year later. (The story goes that the idea for Pac-Man was conceived when a game designer looked down at a pizza from which one piece had been removed.)

What followed was madness: People loved the game, and it gave rise to a host of spin-off products, including a breakfast cereal, a Top 10 song in the U.S. called "Pac-Man Fever," and a popular cartoon.

The key to its success may have been its simplicity.

"Whether or not you are into video games or are a gamer ... Pac-Man is a fun thing to play. You don't need to learn a manual. There are no buttons to push. It's very simple and intuitive," said Aaron Greenberg, group product manager for Xbox 360 who helped put today's championship together.

More than 25 years after its release, the game remains one of the top downloaded titles on Xbox Live Arcade, he said.

Gahler didn't play much in junior high or high school, but he rediscovered the game while in college at Bowling

Green State University. These days, the bass player who works as a professional musician and teaches still finds time for plenty of Pac-Man.

When Gahler's really in a groove, he might play for a couple of hours a day. He's become a student of the game, picking up the tendencies of each of the game's characters during the thousands of times he's played it.

"Each of the ghosts actually has a different personality," he said. "They'll react the same way in every situation so you just have to start making mental notes and learn what they do."

Gahler enjoys other games too, including Ms. Pac-Man and more modern fare, but it's Pac-Man that's put him on a world stage. Top prizes for today's contest include 26 years of free Quiznos sub sandwiches and 100,000 Microsoft Points that can be used for games and movies.

But the biggest prize simply would be the acknowledgement of being the best.

"It would be really cool," Gahler said. "It's a silly video game, but certainly to be the best in the world at anything is pretty neat."

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