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## **PACS BE WITH YOU; PATRIOT EATS EVERY DOT FOR 3,333,360 POINTS, BECOMING 'WAYNE GRETZKY OF VIDEO GAMES'**

By Daniel de Vise, via Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service.

**DATELINE:** MIAMI

Billy Mitchell is the first and only person in the world who has ever played a perfect game of Pac-Man.

His feat comes after 20 years of Pac-Man play and an estimated 10 billion coins plunked into Pac-Man machines worldwide. Arcade dwellers liken the accomplishment to pitching a Major League baseball game and striking out every player.

Mitchell, a 34-year-old hot-sauce manufacturer from Cooper City, has acquired godlike status among their ranks.

"Someone has to be the Wayne Gretzky of video-game playing," said Walter Day, the pre-eminent keeper of records for arcades nationwide. "So why not him?"

What Mitchell did, in a two-day marathon over Independence Day weekend with scant sleep and no food, is maneuver a pie-shaped protagonist through 256 levels of Pac-Man play without missing a single point.

His Pac-Man ate every dot, every energizer, every enemy blue man and every fruit along the way. And he never died; Mitchell used only one man.

Mitchell played for nearly six hours and scored 3,333,360 points in the record-setting game, played in a New Hampshire arcade. The victory cost him one quarter.

Already a titan in the video-game industry, Mitchell holds the world record on the classic Donkey Kong game. He once played a single game of Centipede for 47 hours.

Some people might consider such exploits a moronic waste of time. But to Mitchell, they are the essence of competition.

"I have an absolute passion, a fever, to be No. 1," he said. "I think that's where the thing grabs hold of me."

Once an adolescent video-game obsessive who spent up to 20 hours a day in the arcade at Grand Prix Race-o-Rama in Dania Beach, Fla., Mitchell is now a 6-foot-4, bearded adult who presides over a \$5 million hot-sauce business at Rickey's restaurant in Hollywood, Fla.

His quest for the perfect Pac-Man game goes hand in hand with a nationwide revival in classic video games.

Pac-Man, Ms. Pac-Man and their progeny are the royal family of video gaming. Created by the Japanese firm NAMCO in 1979, Pac-Man became an international smash and dominated the golden era of coin-operated video arcades, which lasted from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s.

Wildly popular among children and adults of both genders, Pac-Man spawned Pac-Man wallets, Pac-Man backpacks, a Pac-Man cartoon show and a song called "Pac-Man Fever."

After languishing through most of the 1990s, Pac-Man and its ilk have enjoyed a resurgence in the past year. Men in their 30s now compete to set records on the classic video games that they mastered as pimply teens.

Mitchell was just the right age to rise to stardom among the legions of arcade gamers.

But when Pac-Man and similar games faded in the mid-1980s, Mitchell stopped playing video games completely and turned to the family business. He is the son of Bill Mitchell Sr., owner of Rickey's restaurants in Hollywood and Pembroke Pines, Fla.

Mitchell returned to the arcades last year to join a new wave of competition. It took him 60 days of practice to regain his form.

The quest for the perfect game has played out between a handful of players.

Chris Ayra, a longtime friend of Mitchell's who works at a Miami-Dade Publix, holds the world record on Ms. Pac-Man. That mark is Mitchell's next target; he has been practicing on a Ms. Pac-Man machine at the Hollywood restaurant.

Last May, a Canadian rival beat Ayra's previous Pac-Man record and came within 90 points of a perfect game.

Mitchell, a patriot, was incensed. He traveled to the Funspot Family Fun Center in Weirs Beach, N.H., a sanctioned spot for official Pac-Man competition. Clad in red, white and blue, he arrived on July 1 -- Canada Day -- and vowed to break the record by the Fourth.

"I'm guaranteeing victory," he boasted, paraphrasing legendary football quarterback Joe Namath.

Mitchell's first attempt at the record ended ingloriously after two hours when a child accidentally unplugged an entire row of games.

He kept at it. Victory came around 5 p.m. on July 3.

Winning at Pac-Man isn't pretty. Screens 21 to 255 are identical, making for several hours of rather boring play. At screen 256, the last one, the computer itself begins to malfunction. Its memory full, the machine fills half the game screen with random letters and numbers. The player must navigate through the muddled playing field to scoop up the last few points. Then, every point exhausted, Pac-Man must die.

There is no ceremony, no parade of Pac-Men. Just an anticlimactic announcement: "Game Over."