

Punctuate a Moving Picture: David Sudnow's *Pilgrim in the Microworld* and an Alternative History of the Study of Videogames

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INTRODUCTION

The serious study of videogames is typically considered to have commenced in the late- 1990s with the rise of the narratology/ludology debate. When earlier literature references videogames, it is typically an offhand mention through secondary fields such as sociological or anthropological accounts of play, or literary accounts of narrative. However, published in 1983 and predating both Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) by fourteen years is phenomenologist David Sudnow's *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983). Sudnow's book provides a committed and considered phenomenological account of early console videogames as both a new cultural form and a new form of embodied experience. Whereas much early game studies found itself unhelpfully forced into one of two camps that studied videogames either primarily 'as games' or 'as narrative', Sudnow's earlier but largely forgotten work is concerned with neither, instead tracing an alternative path where videogames are understood as a particular audio-visual-haptic way of interfacing with a television set that we just happen to call 'games'. That is, Sudnow's early work strives to understand videogames uniquely *as videogames*. Through his extensive engagements with *Missile Command* (Atari 1980) and *Breakout!* (Atari 1976), Sudnow enticingly points to a descriptive mode of analysis that privileges neither the haptic nor the audiovisual nor the mechanical but sees each as irreducible and inseparable in the embodied and cultural experience of playing a videogame.

As videogames today continue to dramatically morph into a great plurality of forms and creative intents, looking back at Sudnow's work provides game studies with both new and long-forgotten avenues of understanding. Writing at a time when the critical language used around videogames was not yet set in stone, Sudnow proposes terms and descriptions of the videogame play phenomenon that remain enticing and fresh today. For instance, when Sudnow first sits down with a console port of *Missile Command*, he notes that "I could watch a mysterious transformation of my movements taking place on the other side of the room, my own participation in the animated interface unfolding in an extraordinary spectacle of lights, colors, and sounds" (1983, 20). Whereas early game studies would focus, on the one hand, on *Missile Command*'s mechanical rule systems or, on the other hand, the dystopic tale it tells of nuclear obliteration,

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in 1983 Sudnow found a language for the fundamentally phenomenological and audiovisual-haptic pleasures of videogame play—a pleasure that game studies is only in the past decade is discovering the true importance of—that is at once both inquisitive and critical.

This paper highlights the significance of Sudnow's phenomenological approach and his commitment to media specificity to trace an alternative history of the analytical study of videogames that circumvents both the mechanistic and textual essentialisms of the ludology/narratology stalemate of the early 2000s and its lingering legacy. Tracing this alternative history proposes new avenues of potential research and comprehension that could add a greater robustness to current modes and frameworks of videogame analysis. In particular, this paper focuses on three core interventions that Sudnow's research provides contemporary game studies: 1) an alternative critical vocabulary (and thus epistemology) that pre-dates the consumerist terms that game studies adopted from the enthusiast press during the 1990s; 2) an alternative formalism of videogames as a haptic augmentation of audiovisual media rather than as simply digitalised non-digital games; and, most significantly, 3) a way to account for the embodied knowledges of the player's hands that contemporary game studies is only recently developing an interest in. These three interventions will together allow this paper to imbue an appreciation for one of the earliest but oft-forgotten serious studies of videogame experience, and to highlight the ways its can be of benefit to contemporary researchers.

BIO

Brendan Keogh is an academic and critic based in Brisbane, Australia. His research focuses on the textual, phenomenological, and cultural aspects of videogame play. He is a lecturer of Game Design at SAE Media Institute, and an Adjunct Research Fellow at RMIT University's School of Media and Communication. He has written for a variety of publications including *Polygon*, *Edge*, *Overland*, *Ars Technica*, and *The New Statesman*. He is the author of *Killing is Harmless: A Critical Reading of Spec Ops The Line*.

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