Instantaneously Punctuated Picture-Music: *Pilgrim in the Microworld* and an Alternative Evaluation of Videogame Expression

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INTRODUCTION
In the opening of his 1983 book *Pilgrim in the Microworld*, sociologist David Sudnow details the Christmas party where he first handled a videogame: a simplified Atari 2600 port of arcade hit *Missile Command* (1980). When the joystick was handed to him, Sudnow found himself immediately captivated. But it was not the dystopian narrative of *Missile Command*'s inevitable nuclear holocaust that grabbed Sudnow's attention, nor was it the cleverness of the underlying 'rules'. Rather, Sudnow found himself fixated on *Missile Command* as a new way to participate with the spectacle of the television set, the lights and sounds that pulled the body into distinct rhythms: "the pace of things. The speed. The fast twists and turns. The fireworks. The luminescence" (1983, 18). Sudnow found himself intoxicated by the ways the videogame reflected the movement of his hands back at him from the other side of the screen.

Sudnow was fascinated with the feeling of how his hands wrapped around the joystick had fused with his eyes tracking the cursor along the screen: "here 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 21-22, emphasis added). In a simplified port of an already simple classic arcade game, Sudnow succinctly identifies in the videogame a form of expression that game studies still struggles to elucidate today: a primary satisfaction not of meaningful virtual intent but of feeling as though you are participating *with* and being transformed *through* the animated interface. The pleasure of *Missile Command* was not simply in 'winning' or 'playing' the game, nor in feeling as though the body had been transported or immersed wholly to the game's virtual world, but in becoming incorporated into the audiovisual spectacle of the videogame as a played experience.

This is at odds with dominant modes of comprehending videogame expression that began to emerge fifteen years after the publication of *Pilgrim in the Microworld*. Foundational game studies texts such as *Cybertext* (Aarseth 1997), *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (Ryan 2001), *Half-Real* (Juul 2005), and *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Murray 1997) laid a preliminary and valuable foundation for understanding how videogames function as cultural works, but this foundation and the well-documented debates it sparked tips

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wildly between mechanical, technical, and narrative essentialisms. While few early game studies texts could agree on what videogames fundamentally were, there seemed to be a consensus as to just how much *potential* videogames might harness in the future, be that gameplay, technological, or narrative potential. However, videogames themselves have persistently resisted the various predictive models that attempt to comprehend the pleasures and meanings videogames might be capable of 'someday'. The 'non-interactive' cut-scene persists as a major mode of videogame storytelling; the full sensory immersion of virtual reality remains relatively unpopular compared to more traditional and 'distracted' screen engagements such as televisions and smartphones; videogames with retro and simplified visual styles far outnumber those seeking advanced photorealism while at the same time players remain deeply invested in supposedly interchangeable visual markers; experimental videogames without goals or challenges or other elements we typically associate with 'games' continue to dominate videogame industry and culture awards. Despite the best attempts of game studies to understand this now very much middle-aged medium, videogames themselves, it would seem, require neither complex mechanical systems nor engaging narratives nor cutting-edge technology for their playing to be meaningfully engaging. All that can really be said of the diverse spectrum of videogame forms of expression with any confidence is what Sudnow claimed back in 1983: that they allow a player to play with sights and play with sounds.

This paper argues that embedded in Sudnow's early descriptions of videogame play are methodological and epistemological interventions that could help contemporary game studies surpass its currently limited frames of reference for the videogame form. While no shortage of scholars, critics, and designers have lamented how rarely *Pilgrim in the Microworld* is cited (Huhtamo 2004; Irwin 2013; Anthropy 2011), few contemporary scholars have engaged with Sudnow's theoretical contributions in a committed fashion. This is understandable when one considers that Sudnow's work is almost exclusively descriptive, with only fleeting explicit proclamations about what his findings might mean for a broader cultural comprehension of videogames. In this paper I hope to resolve this by devoting significant time to summarising Sudnow's observations while drawing attention to the implications of some of his more enticing and evocative passages. The goal here is to excavate Sudnow's more powerful insights and methods so that they may provoke questions on videogame expression that contemporary game studies would do well to debate.

The insights drawn from this examination will point to two interconnected interventions for evaluating videogame expression. First, whereas game studies has traditionally approached videogames as primarily a subset of a broader 'game' category, Sudnow rejects this categorisation to instead consider videogames as primarily a newer form of *playable* audiovisual media, a different way of engaging with televisual screens. This suggests to Sudnow an alternative manner of comprehending the expressive power of videogames: not merely a continuation of an ancient form of 'game' but a particular way to incorporate lights and sounds into embodied experience. This leads to the second intervention: a richer understanding of how the embodied experience of the player incorporated with these lights and sounds is *innately* meaningful, even in the earliest, simplest forms of videogames that Sudnow observes. Through these two interventions, this paper will assist this earliest but oft-ignored serious study of videogame expression to more fruitfully provoke and assist contemporary game scholars.

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