



Book review: Pilgrim in the microworld

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This could have been an essay.

When I first learned about this book from [Jacob Geller's video](#) just months ago, I thought this was another example in the vein of *The Power Broker* – a [perfectly Marcin-coded book](#) that somehow escaped me knowing about it for *decades*.

“Pilgrim” is from 1983, and is a story of a pianist discovering the classic videogame [Breakout](#), and trying to perfect his own gameplay.



I love so many stories of videogame mastery, because at times they feel the closest we got to Doug Engelbart’s dream of incredibly effective machine operation somewhere deep below the threshold of consciousness: You and the computer becoming one, eyes and fingers forming feedback loops so perfect they cease to be noticeable.

Here I am alone in a pitch-black hotel room, a middle-aged man with some time to kill, getting ready to check out some jazz clubs in Greenwich Village, in possession of an early cretinous offering from a gold rush grab bag of tuby thingies coming our way from hundreds of decision-making puzzle peddlers throughout the new electric “entertainment” industry. And now instead of playing the game it’s packaged up to be, I’ve gotten into more or less occupying myself by outlining invisible triangles across the screen of a TV doodling machine. What am I doing?

Unfortunately, as you can maybe already sense, the book is an overwritten, ponderous, and pretentious mess. “Beach reading, it ain’t,” [quipped a Kill Screen reviewer in 2013](#). But there are some interesting parts in it.

Before, the piano was the quintessential human instrument. Of all things exterior to the body, in its every detail it most enables our digital capacities to sequence delicate actions. Pushing the hand to its anatomical limit, it forces the development of strength and independence of movement for fourth and fifth fingers, for no other tool or task so deeply needed. This piano invites hands to fully live up to the huge amount of brain matter with which they participate, more there for them than any other body part. At this genetically predestined instrument we thoroughly encircle ourselves within the finest capabilities of the organ.

Then a typewriter, speeding the process whereby speech becomes visible, the extraordinary keyboard for sequencing and articulating perhaps

the extraordinary keyboard for sequencing and articulating perhaps awaiting a still truer sounding board, strings, and tuning, a still more suited canvas for thought.

Then TV.

This arrives at page 26. Alas, it's kind of downhill from here.

The author visits Atari (imagine that!) to learn that the programmer of Breakout doesn't really understand what makes Breakout so alluring. The game perhaps lucked in to being so imminently playable, and then replayable.

I'm interested in *designing for mastery*. We should not rely on luck that separated a classic like Breakout from a hundred other games from that era that felt awful to play and were immediately forgotten.

Sure, Sudnow definitely takes Breakout way too seriously:

Maybe I can remember the five shots by putting pieces of tape on the TV cabinet to mark each paddle destination, I say to myself, even though it seems that would undercut true learning. It's bad practice to learn the piano by writing the names of the notes on the keys, much better not to use a code, to grasp the layout of things by their own looks and feel. And I can't carry Scotch tape to a Breakout tournament.

But in a way: why wouldn't you?

In fact it's already happening. I've found myself playing with the cursor on my word processor just for the hell of it, seeing if I could track it across screen and get it to stop at every comma in the text.

The word processor (or any other app you use often) operating at the speed of fingers unlocks superpowers, and then some.

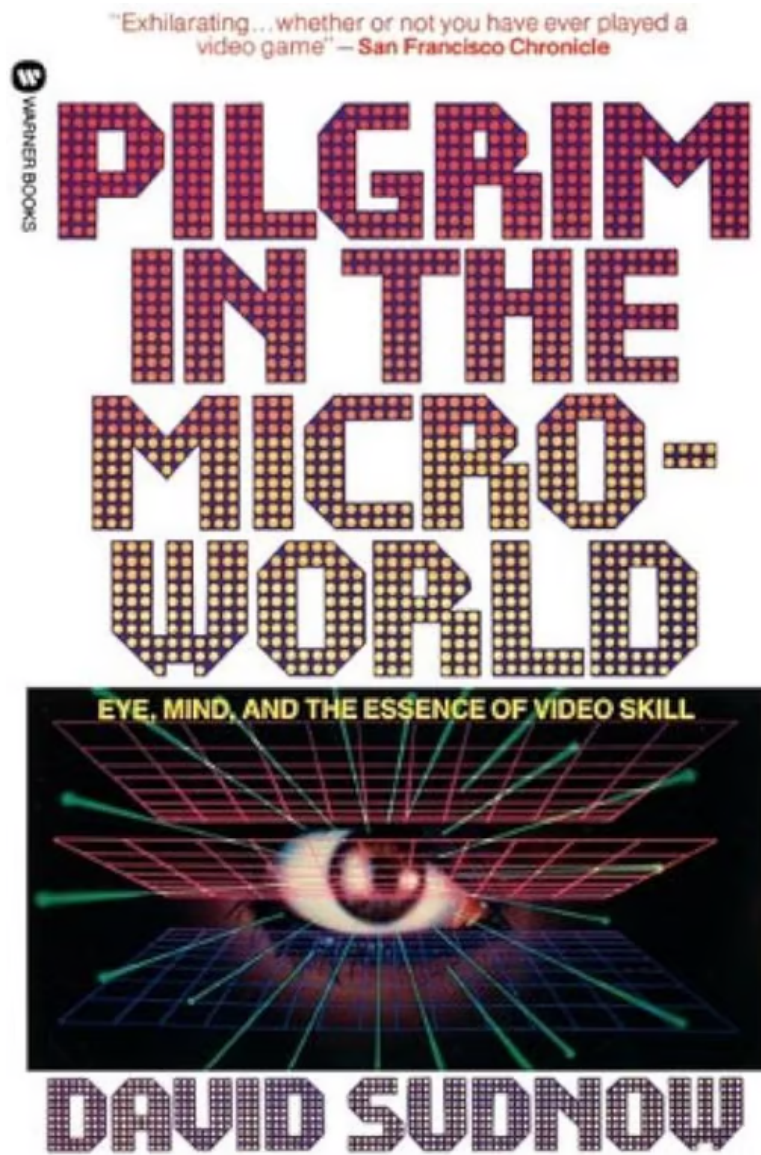
There's one experience in particular at the word processor that gets me downright angry at times. There's no more of that room for finger breathing while you awaited a carriage's return. You reach the end of a processed line of text and if your word becomes too long for the margin while there's still allotted space to get it underway, it splits in the midst of your articulation and your voice instantaneously reappears six inches to the left, a quarter of an inch lower. The computer can't know what you're about to write, not yet, not a word or even a letter in advance, has to wait and merely calculate how things are going in order to then "decide" where to put the sound. ¶ Before, you felt a big word welling up, hit the carriage return, lifted off from the keyboard just a bit, reorganized your grasp, and dug back into the improvisation with a renewed rhythmic mobilization to continue. And some of the things you found to say, you found because you said them that way.

This was a fascinating tidbit, this reflection on how small interactions can change the nature of creative process.

If this book was cut to 20% of its size, those fascinating tidbits would stand out more, and the book would still be of value today.

But despite this complaint, I miss people writing about using computers this way. Such a big chunk of my struggle with computers today is fighting with it because I expect a better connection between my fingers and what's happening onscreen.

I wish more designers understood how important that is.



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