



Jordan Mechner

The Making of

PRINCE OF PERSIA

Journals 1985-1993



Introduction

I STARTED KEEPING A JOURNAL in college, and kept it up for several years afterward. During those years I created my first games, *Karateka* and *Prince of Persia*, on an Apple II computer.

It was the start of a journey that would see my shape-shifting prince transform into a modern video game hero, LEGO minifigure, and even Jake Gyllenhaal in a summer blockbuster movie. But in 1985, he existed only as a few scribbles on a yellow-lined pad. In my old journals I recorded his birth pangs.

Rereading these notebooks twenty years later, reliving the creative, technical and personal struggles that brought the prince into being, I thought others might find them of interest. So I began posting daily entries on my website at jordanmechner.com, as a “developer diary from the past.”

The response has been more than I hoped for. The old journals seem to resonate not only with game developers, but with writers, artists and creators of all stripes, some of whom weren't born yet in 1985.

Here it is—the first “Making of” *Prince of Persia*. I hope you enjoy it.

Note: In the interest of accurately portraying the ups and downs of this period of my life, over twenty years ago, I’ve resisted the temptation to edit out statements that today I find embarrassing, cringe-inducing, or flat-out wrong. Please understand that the journal entries reflect my state of mind when I wrote them, not what I think now.

Jordan Mechner

PART 1: APPLE II

"Do I Really Want to Make Another Game?"



MAY 6, 1985

[*New Haven*] Picked up my Mac from Technical Services; they'd run it for a few hours without crashing, so they just packed it back up again. On the way back I bought a surge suppressor at the Coop. Hope that takes care of the problem.

Wrote my two-page Psych paper. Now there's just one lone Music exam between me and the rest of my life. I practiced by trying to transcribe the beginning of *Raiders*. It's hard, even with Music Shop to test my work out on.

Dad called. *Billboard's* top-ranked program for this week is, indeed, *Karateka*. That's Step Two in my convincing myself of this. Step Three will be when I see it for myself.

MAY 7, 1985

I'm done.

I'm done with *Yale*.

The music exam was pretty tough — I blew the dictations — but, hey, I did my best. I might get a B in the course. After the exam I spoke to Dwight and Tom, in a whisper because a lot of people were still writing. They wanted to know what I'd be doing next year.

“Write computer games,” I whispered.

I bought *Billboard*. *Karateka* is indeed number one. Me and Madonna. Yow.

MAY 10, 1985

Dinner with Bill Holt at Whistler's. He brought me up to date on what everybody at Broderbund is doing. He also asked me about my summer plans. I said I was thinking about doing another game. He said Gary would love to have me back.

So, I figure I'll fly up there around the middle of July, stay with somebody for a while, see if I can get a new project lined up. I'll call Gary on Monday and tell him.

Note: *call* — not write. *Gary* — not Ed. Writing to Ed hasn't worked

for me too well in the past. He's a Busy Man. I have a feeling they don't use letters much out there, anyway.

Bill suggested I ask Gary, not Ed, to pick up the tab. "If your dad ever disowns you," Bill said, "I think Gary would adopt you."

I'm psyched to Return to Marin.

Lunch with Jeff Kleeman. Afterwards, he came over and I recorded the score to *Vertigo* for him. I'll look him up in L.A. this summer. Also, jogging this morning, I ran into Mike Saltzman and Eve Maremont.

MAY 14, 1985

Stopping by the post office after jogging, I found the letter from Ed I've been waiting for for nearly two months. I was amazed at how happy it made me. It didn't say much — basically, just "sure, come on out" — but it lifted a weight off my chest, one I hadn't even realized I was carrying. I *am* going out there in July. And I'm seriously looking forward to it.

The issue of who pays hasn't yet been addressed, but I think they'll probably agree to pay for my ticket. If not (don't tell them this), I'll go anyway.

Dad had a useful insight on my upcoming negotiations with Broderbund. My position should be: I don't need an advance, or a salary,

or a guarantee that they'll publish the program when it's finished. I'll take all the risk. I just want the highest royalty rate I can get. And the pressure to negotiate the contract should come from them, not from me.

MAY 17, 1985

Breakfast at Naples with Dwight Andrews. We talked about computer music.

A pleasant surprise: Got my first royalty check for *Karateka*, for \$2117. 2000 units sold in April. The advance is now paid off.

MAY 24, 1985

The Baccalaureate address was pretty good. Giamatti always brings a lump to my throat when he does his routine about a liberal arts education and learning for learning's sake.

The Class Day exercises boasted a very funny routine by a pair of senior stand-up comics, and a good speech by Paul Tsongas. The thrust of it was that one should maintain perspective as one strives to Get Ahead in life; material gains are empty; nobody wishes on their deathbed that they had spent more time on their business.

Friday must have been ninety degrees, but like a fool I wore a jacket and tie under the heavy black gown. Boy, was I sweating. The proces-

sion to Old Campus was a very big deal; we took a rather circuitous route through the New Haven Green, where we stopped and waited in a long line while the band and the President's party paraded by. We doffed our caps to Giamatti as he passed. Ward, Larry, and Dominic whistled Elgar and Sousa marches to keep from getting bored. Larry had fun with the parasol he'd brought along.

Our parents snapped picture after picture as we passed. We smiled and basked and kept moving. It all seemed unreal. Filled with an ocean of chairs, packed with people, approached by an unusual route through gates that had always been locked, the Old Campus felt like no place I'd ever been.

Once we got in our seats, we were graduated almost before we knew it. A hymn, a prayer, and then, suddenly, one-thousand-some-odd "IN NUMBER," we were graduated "as designated by the Dean." And it was over.

JUNE 4, 1985

[New York] I turned 21 today.

Irv Bauer dropped by. We chatted for a couple of minutes. He congratulated me on being a boy wonder and asked me what I had in the works. I told him I was writing a screenplay.

"It's a hard business," he said. Then he said: "I'm going to give you a

gift.” He thereupon recommended James Agee’s two books *On Film*. I thanked him profusely. I guess I’m supposed to buy the books myself.

I saw Aviva off (to Australia via LaGuardia) and went to see *Jules and Jim*.

JUNE 5, 1985

A cold, drizzling day. I was a little grouchy, I guess because I’m feeling confused and indecisive about my future. Kay from Broderbund called and told me it’ll be OK for me to stay at Dane’s place. I booked a flight to L.A. and S.F. on July 5th. So everything’s set. Except –

Do I really want to write another game? Can I do that and write screenplays at the same time? *Can* I write screenplays at all?

I played the *Gremlins* soundtrack to evoke last summer and get me psyched about movies. It worked. Tomorrow I’ll write something.

The Commodore version of *Karateka* must be out, because I got a copy in the mail. Shrink-packed and everything.

JUNE 15, 1985

Chris Columbus must be a happy guy. Steven Spielberg latched onto him and now Chris is cranking out fun movies one after another. I loved *Gremlins*. I liked *Goonies*. A lot.

I'm glad I'm going to San Rafael in two weeks. I think I'm going stir crazy. My social life here is zilch. I never do anything. I'm turning into a lump.

I'm not crazy about the prospect of sitting down to write another video game and getting up a year later. But it *would* be good for me to live in Marin and work at Broderbund. Meet new people. My own place, my own car. Get around. Yup — I'm set on that.

JULY 4, 1985

[L.A.] Staying with Robert Cook in Huntington Beach. Beach party last night with his family and about 500 other people. We talked about computer games, movies, and our future.

Today we drove into Westwood and saw *St. Elmo's Fire*. The first movie I've ever seen about people my age, i.e., just out of college. Usually it's either the summer after high school, or freshman year in college. It's refreshing to see these actors who've been playing 17-year-olds for the past five years get a chance to act their age.

Karateka is #2 on Billboard's bestseller list.

JULY 5, 1985

Robert is all psyched up to do a new game now. My presence seems to have that effect on him. Me, I've been having serious doubts about

doing another computer game.

On the one hand, if I live at home for much longer I'll go stir-crazy. What I need is a place to go. Friends. Work. Moving to Marin and doing another game for Broderbund would give me that.

But it would take time away from screenwriting. In the time it'll take me to do a new game, I could write three screenplays. And... the games business is drying up. *Karateka* may make me as little as \$75,000 all told, and it's at the top of the charts. There's no guarantee the new game will be as successful. Or that there will even *be* a computer games market a couple of years from now.

JULY 10, 1985

[*San Rafael*] It was fun walking into the Broderbund offices and seeing everybody. Had lunch with Gene Portwood and spent a couple of hours sitting around his office with Lauren Elliott and Gary Carlston, talking about ideas for my new game. David Snider showed me the Amiga — wow! — and Chris Jochumson showed me Mac *Print Shop*.

Broderbund's doing well. *Print Shop* is doing *insanely* well. I'm almost convinced I want to move out here and do another game.

After I write my first screenplay.

JULY 16, 1985

Danny Gorlin took me to his house to show me *Airheart*, which, a year later, is now double hi-res. He asked for feedback.

It had the same problem it did the last time I saw it. Small detailed objects against a black background. It *should* be cosmic, mind-boggling; people should look at it and say “I can’t believe I’m seeing this on an Apple II.” But the truth is, right now, it doesn’t look especially impressive.

I said: “You’ve gone the honest, hard-to-program, hard-to-represent route at every step. You need to put in some cheap effects so people will notice the expensive ones.” I offered a bunch of suggestions. He was listening, but I could tell he really wanted to believe it was almost there and he could be finished in a month.

Danny’s sunk a lot of time and money into this. I’m worried. Technically, it’s a wonder, but the universe he’s chosen to represent with this awesome piece of programming is so exotic that I’m afraid people won’t respond to it. It’s what Gene Portwood calls “an effect in search of a game.”

JULY 17, 1985

Gene and I came up with a setting for the new game before lunch. Ali Baba; Sinbad. It’s versatile, familiar, visually distinctive, and — in the video game field — hasn’t been done to death.

Robert, Tomi, Steve and I had dinner at Acapulco. The waitress wouldn't believe I was 21, because my New York learner's permit didn't have a photo on it. "You could have written this yourself," she said. So Steve ordered a Margarita, then pushed it across the table to me. I was on my third sip when the manager came by and whisked it away from me with a curt "Thank you." He was so steamed, even after that, he had to come back to the table and give us a lecture.

What gets me is that they charged us for the drink.

JULY 18, 1985

Driving me to the airport, Tomi said:

"I think you should pursue screenwriting. Go for it."

I was surprised and asked her why. She said that Broderbund is a really nice, warm, friendly place to work, but for programmers it's actually not that great a deal. The older ones, like Chris and David, are starting to get scared, because programming's the only marketable skill they have, and it's a young man's game. The new crop of kids coming up are willing to work harder and cheaper, and don't have girlfriends or families yet to cut into their working hours. And nobody knows how long the games market will be around, or what it'll be like next year.

I never would have thought of it quite like that.

AUGUST 28, 1985

[*Chappaqua*] One of those rainy late-summer days. Woke up at 11:30, drove Mom into town and back.

Finished that letter to Ed Bernstein at Broderbund. I needed to come up with some kind of storyline, so I just wrote something off the top of my head. I sealed the letter and mailed it.

Then a strange thing happened. I started getting images in my head of the characters: The Sultan. The Princess. The Boy. I saw the scenes in my mind as if it were a Disney movie. So I wrote up a scenario — churned it out in an hour. It came out pretty well, I think. It's just similar enough to *Karateka*, but more plausible, more intricate, and most important, more humorous. Gene will love it. Maybe the back story could even be written up and illustrated, like a comic book, and published with the game.

My night thoughts lately have been along the lines of: “Do I have it in me to do another computer game? Is this what I want to do? *Can* I do it? What if the code-writing part of my brain has atrophied? Will I fail ignominiously? Should I just turn to screenwriting full-time?”

Today made me feel better.

AUGUST 30, 1985

Another good day on the game. (Screenplay? What screenplay?) I'm getting to the point where I want to rush out and buy a video camera, a VCR and a digitizer and get to work.

Atari *Karateka* arrived FedEx. It looks great, sounds awful. Dad and I spent the day troubleshooting the music. It should be OK, but nowhere near Commodore quality.

I'm unutterably happy that I'm getting psyched up for this new game. It fills me with joy and confidence in the future.

Then again, maybe *feeling* good doesn't necessarily mean that what I *write* is good. Maybe the best stuff is produced out of blackest despair. Or maybe not.

SEPTEMBER 24, 1985

I passed my driving test, despite hitting the curb while parallel parking, failing to check the rear-view mirror, stopping at a green light, and having trouble getting the key out of the ignition. So now I've got a driver's license. Scary, isn't it?

Got a letter from Ed. He waxed enthusiastic about the new game and proposed they fly me out to discuss terms "as soon as it's convenient." How cool is that?! (Sorry, Mom, Dad... can't make dinner. Gotta fly out to California for the weekend. Business. You know how it is.)

SEPTEMBER 25, 1985

The Diners Club VCR and video camera arrived. It's scary to have \$2500 worth of equipment I don't own and can't afford. David and I (mostly David) spent the day fooling around with it. It's a fantastic piece of technology, but I'll breathe easier when it's out of the house.

I feel so dishonest.

OCTOBER 2, 1985

Last night I was kept awake by anxiety about the new game. All the *detail* I'm gonna have to put in... it just seems so daunting. How did I do it for *Karateka*? I can't remember. I'm not sure I can do it again.

The Doubt is still there in the back of my mind. It talks to me from time to time. "Jordan!" it says. "What are you doing? You're taking a step backward. You want to be a filmmaker. It's time to move on! You brought the Apple-computer-game thread of your life to its climax a year ago. You caught the industry just before it started to die, before you started to lose interest in games yourself. Now you want to do 'just one more game'... why? Timidity! Fear of breaking loose! You'll waste a year, man! If you're going to try for Hollywood, *now is the time!*"

"Shut up," I say, and Doubt grumbles and crawls, for the moment, back into its hole.

OCTOBER 17, 1985

I ought to videotape David this weekend, because I have to return the camera by Tuesday. Problems with using David as a model: By the time I figure out what additional footage I need, he'll be 3,000 miles away (and probably several inches taller).

Ed Bernstein called back. "I get the feeling I'm supposed to make you an offer," he said. "Why don't you make me a counter-offer?"

I wondered how you can make a counter-offer when there's been no offer to begin with. But I said: "No advance, no salary, and a 20% royalty. That would be my ideal."

He came right back with: "My ideal would be no advance, no salary, and a 15% royalty."

I hate negotiating with people I like. My impulse is to be nice. I don't want them to think I'm greedy. On the other hand, I want as much money as I can get.

This morning I sat in the sun and reread *My Side of the Mountain*. It got me thinking about how far removed from nature my life is. Staring at a computer screen all day. Fast food, fluorescent lights. I'm only 21; my eyes should be bluish-white, instead they're bloodshot.

The yen to wander is still in me. It's not dead. Thanks, Jean George.

OCTOBER 20, 1985

Videotaped David running and jumping in the Reader's Digest parking lot. It'll do for a start.

Negotiating



OCTOBER 23, 1985

Ed said there was no way he could go above 15%. I said OK. I'll draft a contract and send it.

MARCH 13, 1986

I have to get out of here. This isn't even half a life. It's like living under house arrest. Moving to California is no longer a career move, it's an escape hatch.

MARCH 20, 1986

This negotiation with Broderbund has dragged on so long and gotten so frustrating, it's pretty much cured me of any lingering sentimental feelings of being part of the "Broderbund family." I still feel affection

for Doug and Gary, but the reality is, it's a corporation. To the people I'm actually dealing with, it's just business.

Mom just showed me an article in *Venture* magazine about how Electronic Arts gave Timothy Leary a \$100,000 advance for his new game. Why am I still talking to Broderbund?

MARCH 28, 1986

Bill McDonagh called to tell me that *Karateka* has sold a quarter of a million units in its first month of release in Japan.

APRIL 15, 1986

Got a new contract draft from Broderbund. They're still offering \$0 advance, but I think it'll be OK.

APRIL 29, 1986

The digitizer arrived. I fired it up and quickly determined that the tape I shot in October is useless.

Basically, the digitizer recognizes two shades: black and white. The background needs to be dark enough to be perceived as black even when the brightness is turned up high enough to make David's arms and face and feet visible.

Second, it can't reduce or enlarge.

Maybe if I paint his skin white and give him a white turban and shoot it against a black wall?

I still think this can work. The key is not to clean up the frames too much. The figure will be tiny and messy and look like crap... but I have faith that, when the frames are run in sequence at 15 fps, it'll create an illusion of life that's more amazing than anything that's ever been seen on an Apple II screen. The little guy will be wiggling and jittering like a Ralph Bakshi rotoscope job... but he'll be alive. He'll be this little shimmering beacon of life in the static Apple-graphics Persian world I'll build for him to run around in.

APRIL 30, 1986

Spent the day getting DRAY to pack and unpack, load and save. Another couple of days and it'll be doing everything DRAX should've done all along.

This is the utility I should have had for *Karateka*. It seems like a lot of work now, but it'll pay for itself many times over when it comes time to cut out all those frames and put them in order.

MAY 17, 1986

I think the best way to do the digitizing for the game may be to shoot it in Super 8, put it on the Moviola, then train the video camera on the screen and feed it directly into the digitizer. That'd result in a cleaner picture, eliminate the freeze-frame noise. Also, I could manipulate image size by zooming in and out.

One disadvantage is the hassle of getting Super 8 film developed. And I'd need a movie camera as well as a video camera.

How's this: Buy a video camera now, shoot on video the best I can, digitize it – noise and all – and use it as a dry run placeholder, while I program the rest of the game. Then shoot the final stuff on Super 8 once I have a clearer idea of what I need.

JULY 7, 1986

Got a call from Ed Badasov at Broderbund.

“I understand you want to come out here,” he said.

I explained: “I figure it'll take me a year to do the game, so what I'd like to do is relocate to the Bay Area. If I could stay with someone for the first couple of weeks until I find an apartment, that'd be a big help.”

He asked if the project was a sequel to *Karateka*. When I told him it

wasn't, his enthusiasm dimmed noticeably. I felt like I was talking to a studio executive.

JULY 25, 1986

Moving 3,000 miles away on the strength of nothing more than a vague idea – “an Arabian Nights-type-game” – feels kind of scary, and appealing.

JULY 31, 1986

Just looked at the “final” version of PC *Karateka*. It seemed OK, I guessed, except for overall sluggishness, frequent disk accesses, and a few minor graphics glitches. Then I booted up the Apple version to compare... and it was so smooth, it made me want to cry.

The PC version is maybe 50% of what it should be. I can't even tell these guys what to fix... it's a million little things, and they're just not up to the hassle. That kind of attention to detail is why the Apple version took me two years. This version is probably the best I'll ever get out of them.

Oddly enough, this makes me more psyched to do the new game. It reminded me why I'm good at this – of what I can do that others can't, or won't.

AUGUST 1, 1986

Ed sent sketches of someone's ideas for *Karateka II* – Gene's, presumably. I wasn't too enthused at first, but now it occurs to me there is a way that this could work.

If I get actively involved in the game design – make up a storyline, draw up sketches, brainstorm with Gene, etc. – and stay on in a kind of supervisory capacity, while turning the programming over to Steve Ohmert – that'll let me keep some control over the project's development, and also justify asking for a higher royalty rate than if I weren't involved at all.

It makes sense. They can't very well turn me down – I own the copyright to *Karateka*, so there's no sequel unless I agree to it.

AUGUST 2, 1986

I told Ed Badasov I'd like to design *Karateka II* for them. He said:

“We already have two designers, Gene and Lauren. We don't need a third. After all, designing it is something that, basically, anyone can do.”

As for royalty, he offered 3% — one-fifth of the original rate — and seemed to think that is basically a gift and they are doing me a huge favor.

He went so far as to point out that they could release *Karateka II* under a different title and pay me nothing, and word would get around that it was in fact an unofficial sequel to *Karateka*, so they'd still benefit from *Karateka's* success without having to pay me a royalty. I'm proud of myself for not having lost my temper.

Dad advised me to hold out for 15%, the same as on *Karateka*. I'd be happy with 10%, which is what Doug Smith got on *Championship Lode Runner*. But I don't think they'll give that much.

SEPTEMBER 3, 1986

It's official – I'm going to California. I have a plane ticket and everything.

“Actually,” Ed said, “I was expecting you today.”

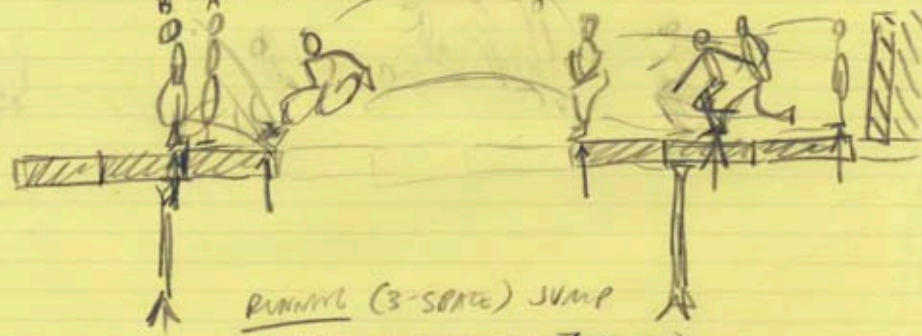
My life is about to change.

California



STARTING (2-SPACE) JUMP
(initially covers for 3 spaces)

Can control this by pulling back on 3rd (A).
Nearly need to go to B.
Need to find → key msg.



RUNNING (3-SPACE) JUMP
~~initially covers for 7 spaces~~

Need 3 spaces
for msg start.

SEPTEMBER 10, 1986

[*San Francisco*] “I thought you were the pizza man,” Tomi said when she opened the door to the Baker Street apartment and saw me there at the top of the steep steps with my two bags.

Now I’m reclining in luxury in one of their new armchairs, listening to Maurizio Pollini play Chopin preludes on their new CD player. There’s a stunning view of San Francisco Bay out the windows that makes my stomach contract every time I look at it.

Did I mention that I’m scared? Getting a ride to work this morning with Tomi, pulling into the Broderbund parking lot – that was scary.

Now that the day’s over and it’s clear that I had nothing to be scared of, I’m not scared any more – I’m terrified. I’m scared shitless.

I have to rent a car. I have to drive it. On these insane twelve-lane racetracks they call freeways. I have to find an apartment and rent it. I have to *move in*. I have to *buy* a car. I have to buy insurance. I've never done *any* of this stuff before... and now I have to do it all at once.

And on top of this – or rather, at the bottom of it – I have to make a computer game.

It's gonna be fun.

SEPTEMBER 11, 1986

Visited Danny Gorlin. He's sunk more money into developing the development system to end all development systems. Saw the final version of *Airheart*. It's got some staggering special effects and it's no fun at all to play.

Danny thinks spending a million bucks on a development system will give him an edge. He might be right. But the best Apple games have been developed on a plain Apple II with two disk drives. Lucasfilm spent a million bucks to make *Rescue on Fractalus* and *Ball Blazer*, and those games aren't significantly better than, or different from, the competition. The real strides forward – *Raster Blaster*, *Choplifter*, (what the hell) *Karateka* – were the work of solo programmers with no special resources.

Maybe Danny is leading game design into the 21st century. Maybe he's just flushing money down the toilet.

I'll stick with my Apple II.

SEPTEMBER 11, 1986

Met with Gene, Lauren, and Ed Badasov and showed them my *Baghdad* ideas. (Ed B. made up the working title *Prince of Persia*.) The storyline didn't impress them much, but I think they saw promise in it.

It doesn't really matter a whole lot what they think – I'm the one that has to do it – but it sure as hell wouldn't hurt to have them enthusiastic. In a few months I should have something to thrill them.

I'm starting to get psyched to write this game. Slowly.

SEPTEMBER 12, 1986

Apartment hunting with Steve Patrick. We checked out one place with a pink carpet, dusty chandeliers, and an old-lady landlord who said she doesn't like renting to kids. "They make a lot of noise," she said. "They invite their friends over."

"Not me," I said. "I just got off the plane from New York. I don't have any friends."

“Oh, you will,” she said, ominously, sounding like Yoda in *Empire*.
“You will.”

Steve and Tomi told me I can stay with them until they kick me out.

“You should live in the Marina district,” Doug advised. “You’d meet a lot of... (pause)... yuppies.”

SEPTEMBER 18, 1986

Looked at a house in Mill Valley, on a shady road winding through the redwoods. When I rang the doorbell the lady peered around me and said, “Is your mother down there?”

She spent fifteen minutes showing me the house, but I don’t think I ever quite convinced her I was serious.

SEPTEMBER 23, 1986

Spent much of today working on the logistical problem of how to get the footage from a VHS tape into the computer. I finally (tentatively) settled on photographing the frames one by one with a regular 35mm camera, getting prints made, then (after retouching as needed) digitizing the prints with a regular Sony video camera. It sounds like a pain but I think it’s the best way.

SEPTEMBER 25, 1986

Another solid workday. Today I stayed till around 7 and got DRAY pretty much finished. I tested it out by digitizing a page out of MUYBRIDGE. It'll do what I need it to do. It could use another day of work. Actually, I could keep working on it for a month, if I didn't have so much else to do.

SEPTEMBER 26, 1986

Ed Bernstein called his last P.D. meeting this afternoon. He's leaving to head up Broderbund's fledgling board games division. DOUG HIMSELF will be taking over as acting head of P.D. He'll be taking my desk, the better to stay in touch with the people. So I'll be moving into Ed's office. Life is strange.

P.D. is throwing Ed a goodbye party. "Better the devil we know than the deep blue sea," Steve said.

At lunch, Doug said: "You seem to have a very strong entrepreneurial bent." I was surprised, and said something about how I'd probably inherited it from my father.

Coming out here was definitely the right thing to do. In Chappaqua, I was in a rut. Now, I'm in the thick of it. It's great.

SEPTEMBER 27, 1986

I have a car.

SEPTEMBER 28, 1986

I have an apartment.

SEPTEMBER 29, 1986

Today I moved into Ed's office. Obviously, this is a temporary arrangement; eventually some new guy will be hired to run P.D. and I'll get booted to some other part of the building. But while it lasts, it's great.

Besides vast amounts of space, a couple of armchairs for visitors, my own phone, and a door that I can close, the office has the most important thing of all – *equipment*. A printer. An amber screen. An Apple IIc. It didn't occur to me until I was actually confronted with two Apple II's on my desk and I had to figure out what to do with the extra one – but it's perfect. Now I can run programs without destroying the source code in memory. It's...(gulp)... a development system.

OCTOBER 14, 1986

David Stenn read my screenplay. He said it has promise but would need at least one more rewrite to be saleable. Perhaps sensing my disappointment, he said: "Look, it's great for a first script – it really is.

I wouldn't show you my first screenplay. You obviously have talent, you should stick with it."

He was more impressed with the reviews of *Karateka* I'd sent him. "You're in the right business," he said. "What do you want to get into this one for?"

OCTOBER 15, 1986

Bought a camera at Whole Earth. It was more expensive than I'd anticipated — \$250 with the lens — but it's a good camera, and I imagine I'll find some use for it even after the game's done.

I shot my first roll of film (David turning around) and had it developed at the local one-hour photo stop. I think this will work. The real problem, obviously, will be going from a sheaf of snapshots to the 280 x 192 Apple screen, and the loss of accuracy entailed therein. It almost makes me want to do it in double hi-res.

OCTOBER 19, 1986

Shot four more rolls of film: David running and jumping in the Reader's Digest parking lot. One year ago tomorrow. Red and orange leaves... God, I'm homesick.

OCTOBER 21, 1986

Today I wrote the first lines of code of the game (not counting the hi-res routines). It Begins.

OCTOBER 23, 1986

Everyone in the office has been playing a lot of *Tetris* – a Russian submission for the IBM PC. It's a classic, like Breakout. But I don't think Broderbund is going to publish it. The knaves.

OCTOBER 25, 1986

Yesterday I implemented the running animation. Next I'll do the jumping... then the stopping... then the "jumping from a stopped position"... oh boy, this is great!

I restrained myself from taking all my work papers home with me yesterday... and I'm restraining myself from going to work today. There must be Balance.

OCTOBER 31, 1986

Ed was pretty thrilled with the rough running and jumping animation, now under joystick control. So was Tomi. Lauren, Doug and Gary didn't act all excited, but I think they were secretly impressed.

I love the quality of the just-digitized roughs, but I'm having trouble preserving that fluidity and realism when I clean it up and stylize the figures. This is going to be a problem.

I beat out Ed and Steve for the #1 spot on the *Tetris* high-score list.

The Mets won the World Series.

NOVEMBER 9, 1986

God, I miss New York.

Fifth Avenue... Christmas shoppers... rich ladies in furs laden with shopping bags and kids... crisp cold autumn air... the smell of burnt pretzels... St. Peter's... the steel drum players wearing woolen gloves with cut-off fingers, breath condensing on the air...

I'm looking out the window at the San Francisco skyline across the bay dotted with white sails. It looks unreal. Like some kind of paradise.

NOVEMBER 10, 1986

Called Kyle Freeman in L.A. (he's at Electronic Arts now) and asked him what he'd charge to license his Apple music subroutine. He spent half the phone call dumping on Broderbund. I realized after I'd hung up that this was the first thing I'd done independent of Broderbund since I got here. Interestingly, it actually strength-

ened my confidence that Broderbund is the right place for me. It reminded me that I *am* independent.

NOVEMBER 18, 1986

Digitized the running skidding turn-around that was so amusing on videotape. It looks OK. I'll need to redo the straight running, but I think everything else will work as it stands.

About half the animations are in now. Next step will be getting the character to interact with the environment (climbing a rope ladder, pulling a lever, etc.)

At this juncture I think I'll redirect my attention to the game design.

DECEMBER 2, 1986

Spent most of the day trying to figure out the velocity of a falling human being as a function of time. Enlisted practically everyone at Broderbund at one point or another. They all seemed to find this a more interesting problem than whatever they were working on.

DECEMBER 24, 1986

Home for the holidays. It's good to be back. Not much has changed except that David has taken over my room. We played a game of go. He's seven stones stronger.

Pizza at Mario's with David and his friend Andy. We pumped about six bucks into a three-player game called *Gauntlet*, which has pretty good graphics and a great appetite for quarters.

People tend to be pretty bowled over by the animation test I've been showing them. "Don't you realize what you're looking at?" Jon Me-nell said. "*This is the light bulb.*"

JANUARY 11, 1987

Macworld Expo '86 was pretty slick. The coolest thing there was the Radius 8 ½" x 11" tall screen.

Dad called all excited because David did well in the *dan* tournament. I hadn't stopped to think about it until now, but the speed of his rise has been really startling. From total beginner to shodan in nine months. If he keeps this up another year or two, he could be one of the best non-Asian go players in the history of the world.

That's something.

JANUARY 22, 1987

The Nintendo game machine has sold a million units in the U.S. over Christmas. As of now, only a handful of cartridges are available. Nintendo is keeping a tight rein on new titles, presumably to avoid a flood of product like the one that sunk Atari a couple of years ago.

Broderbund — thanks to Doug’s Japan connections — has three of the coveted slots.

Karateka would be a natural, but Doug is apparently leaning toward choosing some older titles — *Castles of Dr. Creep* or *Spelunker* or *Raid on Bungeling Bay* or even *Choplifter* — instead.

I talked to Ed and Alan with great passion, trying to convince them. This is the first time in my life I’ve had to lobby so hard for something I desperately wanted, and it’s exquisitely frustrating. It’s so painful wanting something from someone, being reduced to wishing and hoping they’ll give it to me. I hate it.

If I’m going to be a screenwriter someday, guess I better get used to it.

JANUARY 23, 1987

Progress on *Prince of Persia* has slowed to a snail’s crawl. I’ve been drifting in to work around eleven or twelve, and between that, the Butchery and the Sport Court, my workday is about forty-five minutes long. Ed and Gene and Lauren keep checking in to see what new and exciting stuff I’ve got up on the screen, and they go away disappointed.

Instead, I’ve been spending my time playing with my new Mac, Radius screen, and Scriptor screenplay formatting software. Shiny new toys.

JANUARY 26, 1987

Got up early for a change and put in a full day's work on the game. Corey talked me into switching assemblers, operating systems, and disk media (from DOS 3.3, S-C Assembler, and 5 1/4" floppies to ProDos, Merlin, and SCSI hard drive). The change should take about a week, but I think it'll pay for itself in the end.

JANUARY 29, 1987

Roland spent the whole morning helping me switch over to Merlin and ProDOS.

It was kind of a thrill to watch. Roland is a hacker of the old school. He's polite and unprepossessing in his dress and demeanor, careful about money and contracts. He drives a Saab with license plate SNABBIL. But under that conservative surface is a demon – a guy who will put his day job on hold for 72 hours and sit down and reverse-engineer an Apple II conversion of Tetris, just for the pleasure of it.

Watching him do what he did for me today, I felt a little of the old joy come flooding back. I'd almost forgotten the most basic thing: programming is fun. I've grown middle-aged these past couple of years. Roland is 23 but he's still young at heart.

Thanks for checking
out the "Making of
Prince of Persia."

The complete 330-page
ebook is available at
jordanmechner.com and
Amazon Kindle Store.