

Hiking (Dis)Pleasure Island: Enjoyment & Critical Gameplay in *Baby Steps*

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INTRODUCTION

In 2025, Gabe Cuzzillo, Maxi Boch, and Bennett Foddy released *Baby Steps*, a sort of follow up to Foddy's earlier physics games *Getting over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017) and *QWOP* (2008). Early impressions dismissed *Baby Steps* as a "meme game," designed to be yet another difficult, rage-bait game targeted at streamers for its ability to gain views from the extreme reactions it provokes from players. While it can be brutally difficult, it slowly reveals itself to be a pensive mediation on toxic masculinity and the permeable boundary between games and the real world. This talk examines *Baby Steps* as a critical game that leverages difficult gameplay to facilitate critical reflection and, in so doing, models a kind of antifascist approach to game design.

In *Baby Steps*, players take control of 35-year-old Nate, a character modelled after the gamer stereotype. He is first seen wearing a onesie, reclined on a couch in his parents' basement in front of a glowing television. Nate is suddenly teleported to the wilderness and players learn they must climb a mountain (as in *Getting over It*) by manipulating one leg at a time (as in *QWOP*). Nate is welcomed by Jim who also offers assistance, but Nate declines, opting to continue the hike barefoot and without a map or other supplies. *Baby Steps*'s narrative focuses on unpacking Nate's character to understand why a barefoot man in a onesie would choose to suffer rather than confront his fear that accepting help diminishes his masculinity.

Its gameplay is interwoven with elements from *Pinocchio* (drawing on Carlo Collodi's (1883) original story and likely also Disney's (1940) and Guillermo del Toro's (2022) adaptations), focusing primarily on the chapters concerning Pleasure Island. As the story goes, after months on the island, the boys turn into donkeys and are sold at the market. While the parallels are too numerous to develop here, crucially, Nate learns that those who arrived before him are now zoomorphic donkeys. Pleasure Island serves as a moral tale about the consequences of giving into impulse and desire and

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while *Baby Steps* draws on this story to explore similar themes, it does so in the context of a critique of game culture, escapist fantasies, and toxic masculinity.

Though players suffer through gruelling challenges as a consequence of Nate's obstinance, its developers claim that it is not a difficult game, rather, as they explain, players "make it difficult" (FSG). Unlike Foddy's earlier games, *Baby Steps* offers alternative paths of varying difficulty — though players are tempted off this path. That the game remains frustrating, however, is crucial to its underlying social critique. Its difficulty is necessary not only to fuel players' frustrations with Nate's refusal to accept help, but also to inevitably accept some responsibility for their situation. This insight reaches a critical moment when the player is faced with the choice to ascend the next summit by climbing "The Manbreaker" path or Jim's spiral staircase. Choosing the vastly more difficult path earns the player nothing, while taking the stairs rewards the player with an achievement for joining "the hallowed ranks of the Jiminy's Crickets."

Such moments create space for critical reflection, inviting us to reexamine Nate's social struggles, our contradictory enjoyment of failure (Juul), and which choices might lead us to become donkeys. I argue that the game responds to Alfie Bown's call to challenge the conservative ideologies of many games by reconstructing our relationship to enjoyment. From this perspective, it is insufficient to rewrite or reskin games to resist hegemonic ideologies; we must instead more deeply consider how games shape our desire. As Bown asks, "Could we conceive of a videogame which aims at reprogramming desire against the fascist, corporate, and capitalist tendencies found in videogames in general, or would the only 'morally ethical' game be the kind which denaturalized desire, showing our wishes to be not natural but the naturalized wishes of the other?" (78). At a time when far right extremism is growing (Schlegel and Kowert), this talk aims to understand how games might not only imagine the world to be otherwise, but also how they can disrupt the values and ideologies of the far right. Much like how Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio* rewrote the tale to oppose fascism; *Baby Steps* too reimagines this tale but in a way that, like Bown describes, attempts to denaturalize the hypermasculine ideals that produce fascism. In a certain way, *Baby Steps* inverts the tagline of Foddy's previous game ("A game I made for a certain kind of person. To hurt them") by offering help instead. This talk delves further into Bown's psychoanalytic reading of games and Jesper Juul's account of the paradox of failure to outline how enjoyment and failure are mobilized to create critical gameplay.

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