

Thinking on Our Feet: *Baby Steps* (2025) Towards (Im)balancing the Somatic and the Stoney

Dr Merlyn Seller

The University of Edinburgh

5.26 Evolution House, 78 West Port, Edinburgh, EH1 2LE, UK

merlyn.seller@ac.uk

Keywords

Lithic, ontology, phenomenology, post-phenomenology, *Baby Steps*, walking simulators, stone

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Left finger contracting, left leg arching; left thumb turning, left hip pivoting and body leaning. Grip released, foot planted; right finger grips, right leg lifts. The mountain seems to move under our toes. This is the micro loop of *Baby Steps* (Foddy, Cuzzilo & Boch 2025), an intensely difficult walking simulator of vertiginous scope, and *also* the core loop of *Baby Steps* (2025), a sublimely granular mountain simulator at a uniquely micro scale. In this extended abstract I argue that the emergent phenomenological and ontological complexity of this minimalist design demands a new perspective on walking simulators produced by thinking both at once: man feeling mountain, mountain feeling man.

Experientially, an absurdist foot-surface interface reveals the alien nature not just of mute minerals, but also the body, and the mutual affective constitution of sole touching slope. Combining auto-ethnographic (Deshbandhu 2023; Webber & Wilde 2025), phenomenological (Keogh 2018, Solnit 2000) and ontological (Cohen 2015; Marder 2012) approaches to analysis I will attempt to 'feel out' *Baby Steps'* sensations/representations. Building on the generative work of Melissa Kagen concerning wandering games (2022) and my previous close-reading of sand and stone in games (Seller 2022, 2024) I suggest this game provides surprising insights through what I term a powerful '(Im)balancing' of both difficulty and ontologies.

In *Baby Steps* our avatar is an embodiment of broken masculinity, a 'failson' or 'manchild' transported from a sedentary basement life to a surreal mountain, where the *Wizard of Oz* conceit suggests we must walk to the summit *sans* 'yellow brick road' or button-prompting yellow paint. While narratively we realize the challenge is learning to accept help/frailty in a powerful inversion of both Dorothy's encounter with the Wizard and gaming discourse's 'get good' mentality, mechanically and audiovisualhaptically (Keogh 2018) we play with the affects (Anable 2018) of frustration and ego-death in our myopic focus on the difficulty of each literal step.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Scholarship on Foddy's previous work has focused on themes of failure and the limits of interactivity (Dougglas 2019, Pöhlmann 2021), but the kinesthetic and haptic complexity of friction, inclination, weight and space in *Baby Steps* affords a more nuanced analysis of what we experience moment-to-moment. Where Kagen provides powerful ideological critique and an affect-oriented overview of walking simulators (2022) and Bailey (2019) and McCullough (2019) offer narratological and formalist accounts of the genre, this game focalises the embodied experience of walking *itself*.

Foddy et al. make the 'step' not the 'walk' the material of play, emphasizing the smallest of loops and the alienness of the most mundane of (able-bodied) movements using difficulty. We fall over. A lot. A map we lack during play traces our tangled repetitive attempts in the credits, and we feel the punctuated rhythm with feet that refuse even shoes. All we can do is tip our body and raise/orient one foot at a time, but from this emerges a rich and nuanced somatic knowledge of momentum, friction, stretch and restraint. Different configurations of space enable different paces, the side of the foot might anchor us in a nook that the toes would let slip, while gaps necessitate the overlapping motions of extending and trailing limbs at the right moments in the arc of our moving mass. Absurd constraint and minimalism gives renewed appreciation of what we once knew as a baby, that the "human gait is, in fact, a continually arrested falling" (Straus 1952: 244). Each step is a gamble, and our own body—head and knees bumping cave and crag—might betray us. As Schmalzer argues of "janky controls" (2020), the uncertainty of the outcome of input negates immersion to allow for more diverse expression, and Salamon keenly argues from an intersectional trans perspective that walking is far from neutral, frictionless or unproblematic (2015).

The awkward masculinity of our character and the plainness of a world composed of store-bought assets chastens the assumed cis-het-white-able-bodied-male player with oppressive banality. This forces us to be attentive to details of arrangement, geometry and the varying friction of every inch of ground. Moreover, a DualSense's analogue trigger's fine-grained input and resistance let us feel both our feet and the rock beneath. Indeed, touching is reciprocal between toucher and touched (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 133), which necessitates engaging with the mountain itself.

If in walking we're continually "confronted with things" (Straus 1952:240), realworld mountains also provoke and "confront" us with their indifferent awe-inspiring scale (Pöhlmann 2021:213). Both Douglass (2019:219) and Pöhlmann (2021:214) note Foddy's argument that obstacles in games can be made 'real' through real difficulty and uncertainty (2017). This resonates with Juul's sense of game's 'real' failures (2013), what Pöhlmann sees in the videogame mountains' ontological "thereness" (2021:212), but also enables a new perspective on the phenomenology and ontology of both human and mountain.

Rapid small steps on sand, slow and incremental on mud, confident bounds up rough stone but only at inclines of less than 60-degrees. As a 'radically slow' (Scully-Blaker 2022) game, we feel something of the deep time of stone that exists beyond the ordinary rhythms of human life (Marder 2012), and the quick consequences of the sticky and slippery negate the conventional neutrality of ground in many games and remind us of mineral agency that subtends our own (Cohen 2015). Friction allows fluidity, there is no progress without the resistance that affords grip. Furthermore, if our own body can become an obstacle, and slick ground can move our static form for us, *Baby Steps* forces us to realize that both our own subjectivity and our player

position is neither/both subject and object. As NPC dialogue continually reminds us, we cannot exist without help from an Other, but experientially we feel this more-than-humanly when our 'becoming walking' exists in the mutual aid (and touch) of foot and fictive feldspar, as well as real world skin and silicon.

This mountain is not experienced as a sublime totality but at the equally sublime micro-level of the pebble. Its stoney ontology is what allows for our phenomenology, and by touching/being-touched we are able to feel ourselves and not ourselves in a profound, wobbly (Im)balancing.

REFERENCES

Anable, A. 2018. *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Seller, M. 2022. 'Control (2019) and Concrete: The Haunting Thingness of Digital Assets'. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2022*.

Seller, M. 2024, 'Biolithic horror: Stone victim/victimisers in Resident Evil Village (2021)'. In *Re-Imagining the Victim in Post-1970s Horror Media*. edited by Hoedt, M. & Lucic, M. p. 191-212. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Bailey, A. R.. 2019. 'Shifting Borders: Walking Simulators, Artgames, and the Categorical Compulsions of Gaming Discourse'. *Press Start*. 5 (2): 125-136.

Cohen, J. J. 2015. *Stone : An Ecology of the Inhuman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Douglass, A. 2019. 'The Aesthetics of Failure in Beckett and Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy' In *Pop Beckett: Intersections with Popular Culture*. Edited by Paul Stewart and David Pattie. Stuttgart: Ibidem Press.

Foddy, Cuzzilo & Boch. 2025. *Baby Steps*. PS5.

Deshbandhu, A. 2023. Capturing the Holistic: The Need for Autoethnography in Game Studies. *Journal of Autoethnography*. 4 (2): 277–282. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/joae.2023.4.2.277>.

Juul, J. 2013. *The Art of Failure : An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Kagen, M. 2022. *Wandering Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press

Keogh, B. 2018. *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Marder, M. 2012. "On the Mountains, or the Aristocracies of Space," *Environment, Space, Place* 4 (2). DOI: 10.7761/esp.4.2.63.

Hayley, M. 2019. 'From Zelda to Stanley: Comparing the Integrative Complexity of Six Video Game Genres'. *Press Start*. 5 (2): 137-149.

Merleau-Ponty, M. 1968, *The Visible and the Invisible*, in *Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy Studies*, edited by Claude Lefort, , Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Pöhlmann, S. 2021. "Thereness: Video Game Mountains as Limits of Interactivity." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*. 2 (2): 213–245, DOI: 10.47060/jaaas.v2i2.101.

Scully-Blaker, R. 2022. 'Combatting Exhaustion and Reclaiming Leisure: Radical Slowness and the (Re)Generative Potential of Play'. UC Irvine. ProQuest ID: ScullyBlakeruci0030D17550. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5pg8wp5. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9fh8t3d2>

Solnit, R. 2002. *Wanderlust : A History of Walking*. New edition. London ; Verso.

Straus, E. 1952. *The Upright Posture*. New York, NY: Springer.

Webber, N. & Wilde, P. 2025. 'A Plague Tale: Autoethnography and Authenticity in Historical Games Research'. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2025*.