



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

**BENNETT
FODDY**

Getting into it with the man behind
some of the stiffest challenges
in modern videogames

BY KHEE HOON CHAN

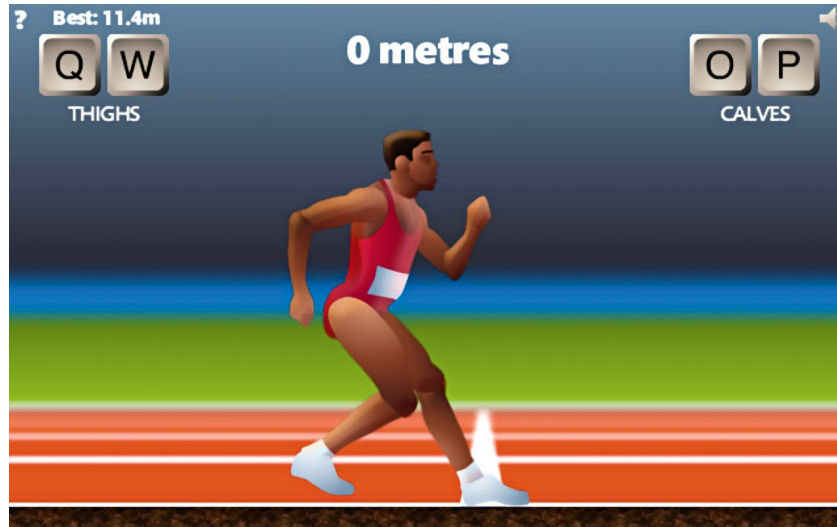
Bennett Foddy's games are likely to evoke extreme and often painful emotions. There's the agony of trying to control an athlete's individual thigh and calf muscles in *QWOP*, the frustration of attempting to climb a mountain using a hammer while stuck inside a metal cauldron in *Getting Over It*, and, of course, the perils of hiking with onesie-encased jelly legs in his most recent release, *Baby Steps*. The reactions generated by the developer's work are perhaps best encapsulated in an email he once received: "I hope you step on a piece of Lego. I mean it."

Throughout his career as an academic, Foddy focused on the philosophy of addiction; during his earlier years at the University Of Melbourne in Australia, he also had a brief stint as the bassist in electronic band Cut Copy. His videogame oeuvre is a reflection of his experiences in both worlds – education and music. Specifically, he notes that there are similarities between addiction and the pursuit of self-imposed goals and rewards in games, something he first explored with *QWOP* in 2008. Arriving during the heyday of browser-based Flash games, the sprinting 'simulator' established Foddy as a developer with sadistic intent, whose games were intentionally painstaking to control. To some extent, however, he disputes that characterisation. "People used to say to me that *QWOP* was the hardest game in the world. I was like, 'No, it's only hard because you expect to be able to do this easily'. Difficulty is like this idea that [the artist] Joseph Albers shows in his book, that colour always looks different depending on what you put it next to."

Nonetheless, thanks to 2017's perennially vexing checkpoint-free platformer *Getting Over It* and the bitter slapstick of open-world walking sim *Baby Steps*, Foddy's reputation as digital torturer-in-chief remains intact. He tells us why he has such a penchant for challenge, delves into his fascination with movement and mobility, and explains how, even if he made an easier game, it would still be an absolute pain.

Let's start at the bottom of the mountain. How did you get started making games?

In 2005 or 2006, I was working on a PhD in philosophy and I was procrastinating, bingeing TV shows, and endlessly scrolling the Internet. I started to get wind that there was something happening with indie games. I've always loved games. I'd tried several times to make them before, and it was always too hard, but because of the technologies that were around, such as GameMaker and Flash, it had gotten a lot easier,



"I COULDN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT MAKING GAMES. YOU COULD SQUEEZE IT IN, LIKE MOONLIGHTING"

and the technical bar was not as high. I didn't really have any education in programming or computer science. I followed tutorials, made a game called *Too Many Ninjas*, and immediately got some very nice, warm, welcoming feedback.

The thing at the time is, there was actual press coverage for that kind of thing. It was a bit of a phenomenon – there were so many Flash games coming out – and I got the bug for doing it. I wanted to keep making them, even though I was supposed to be finishing a PhD, and I had a job as a philosopher, but I couldn't stop thinking about making games. You could squeeze it in, like moonlighting.

It wasn't like it took years of full-time work to make a game. You could put it up on your website, make a couple of bucks putting ads next to it, and there's a little side business.

You've worked in music and games, and have a background in philosophy. Those things feel quite different in certain ways, but where do you think there is a crossover?

Everybody would agree that music is an art form – it's a creative art – and people have started to agree that making games is a creative art. My philosopher friends hate it when I say this, but I also think that philosophy is similar. It feels to me like a creative art, made up of arguments and facts and logical inferences, ►

QWOP was named after its control scheme, with players trying to clock up as much distance as possible by tapping those four keys



Like most of Foddy's games, *Getting Over It* is punishing. You risk losing all your progress if you fall off the mountain

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Getting Over It was inspired by *Sexy Hiking*, an early Flash game by Czech developer Jazzuo

“MAYBE WHAT YOU’RE THINKING WHEN YOU’RE CLIMBING IT IS: ‘AM I DOING THIS BECAUSE I’VE BEEN TOLD I CAN’T DO IT?’”



CV

After making *Too Many Ninjas*, Bennett Foddy moved to the US to be a postdoctoral researcher at Princeton University, continuing with game creation in the background. During that period, he released *QWOP*, then rock-climbing simulator *GIRP*. 2013 marked a turning point in his career as he taught his first class in game design at New York University. He continued to craft games such as *Last Word and Zebra*, and then *Getting Over It* in 2017. He also created a small space-combat feature for *Universal Paperclips*, and contributed art to *Ape Out*, shifting to full-time game production in 2021. Made with Gabe Cuzzillo and Maxi Boch, *Baby Steps* was released in 2025.

but it still wells from the same basic human processes: inspiration, research, reading inspiration, and then exploration, iteration, looking for ideas, clarifying ideas, making them accessible to people.

At a fundamental level, I don’t think there’s that much difference between what musicians, philosophers and game developers are doing. Philosophers are reading and writing words, and the words are arguments. Musicians are playing music, writing lyrics, and trying to evoke emotions. Game designers are doing something very diverse. Maybe they’re trying to make something that’s fun to play, engaging, exciting or upsetting. We’re just using different technologies and tools.

Your academic research was focused on cognitive science, medicine and addiction. Does that influence the themes of your games?

There are lots of ways to look at that. One is that some of my games are interested in using parts of human experience. *Getting Over It* is trying to make something pleasurable out of frustration, almost like a philosophical argument: isn’t pleasure sometimes made of frustration? Is frustration always displeasurable? Or do we start to sometimes take pleasure in it?

My work on drug addiction was similar. There’s a puzzle around drug and alcohol addiction: these things start out being very pleasurable but, over time, people can develop a serious drug problem and they continue to do it, in spite of the fact that it might be bringing them mostly experiences that we think of as unpleasurable. They’re feeling sick, tired, malnourished. They’re having difficulties with human relationships. This is the puzzle of alcoholism: why do people do it?

As a philosopher, I was interested in understanding pleasure more broadly. It’s not just about summing up whether a person’s happy, or whether their life’s going well. Maybe we can understand a lot of behaviour that seems irrational as pleasure-seeking behaviour, as long as we take a rich understanding of pleasure. What if pleasure also can include frustration, pain, disappointment, or anger?

Compared to some of your other games, *Baby Steps* feels quite accessible, and less painful.

We wanted players to have a place to ask themselves why they are playing the way that they are. We kept watching our playtesters try to do one little hill or one little rock over and over again, and we wanted to get players to think about, ‘What am I hoping to get out of doing this? Why am I trying this challenge, and what do I expect to happen?’

When we’re playing a triple-A game, a lot is laid out for us. You’ll get 500 gold pieces, a skill upgrade and a perk, maybe a cutscene, maybe a little bit of backstory or lore, and then maybe an achievement. There’s this menu of overt rewards. But players also do stuff that doesn’t have rewards like that. They explore, they speedrun, they glitch through things – they’re looking for stuff that’s broken. It’s so many million different ways that people play, but they don’t often stop to be like: ‘What’s driving me here?’ So we came up with characters and scenarios that create a space in which to ask this yourself.

The Manbreaker [a tough optional route] is maybe the most intense version of this. It’s very frustrating, it’s very difficult, it’s very unfair. But maybe what you’re thinking when you’re climbing it is, ‘Am I doing this because I’ve been told I can’t do it? Am I doing it because there’s intrinsic fun in this?’ Maybe there’s beauty in the difficult level design. Maybe it’s to spite Jim, who says you can’t go up the Manbreaker. Or maybe it’s something else entirely, but that gives you a moment to be asking these questions.

A lot of your games focus on mobility, or restrictions on mobility. Where does this fascination with movement come from?

Soren Johnson has this podcast called Designer Notes, and he was interviewing Patrice Désilets, the designer of *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* and *Assassin’s Creed*. He was saying that every time you have a UI, like a button prompt, an explanation or a gauge, you broke a rule. In *Assassin’s Creed*, there are beams ▶



Baby Steps was initially pitched as a kind of upgrade to *QWOP*, set in a world bigger than a 100-metre track



Donkey men with exhibitionist tendencies traverse the world of *Baby Steps*, although their appendages can be pixellated out



Baby Steps' Nate was deliberately designed to be a bumbling, insecure man-child, a contrast to the charismatic heroes of most games

Foddy provided the motion data for *Baby Steps* himself, with voice-acting duties falling on the game's three developers. Many of their lines were improvised



There's a perverse thrill to balancing precariously on most surfaces in *Baby Steps*, even if there are very few incentives to do so

"EVERYTHING IS ABOUT EXPLAINING AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE. IN *BABY STEPS*, WE DON'T WANT TO EXPLAIN ANYTHING"

you can climb and perch on. But there are also houses that, because they need to look realistic, also have beams on – but you can't walk on those. He would say, 'Take those out, because if you have beams that we can and cannot walk on, we need UI to tell the player which is which? I thought it was a very interesting point. Everything in a game is about explaining as little as possible, always. Playing a game like *Baby Steps*, we don't want to explain anything. It's all about discovery, mystery and exploration. Like the *Assassin's Creed* team, we wanted to take all the UI away if we could.

As a game designer, I'm always looking for ways to cheat. I want to get things for free, and the way we do that is by giving people things they already understand. In the case of *Baby Steps*, you understand how to walk. You have a body, you can look at some rocks, and you can reason about whether you could climb them. You can think about it because you have experiences with your body. It's like when you're making a game that is a sports game – if it's based on a real-world sport, then I don't have to tell you the rules. That explanation saves me from having UI. That's why I've been fascinated with bodies, mostly because I hate UI. I hate having to explain, so I'm trying to pick situations that are self-explanatory in most of my games.

But you put a twist on it, right? By making entire games about just moving around, you're doing something different from a lot of other developers.

I love *Prince Of Persia*, *FIFA* and *Assassin's Creed* – games that are driven by automatic movement, where you say where you want to go and then this incredible, beautiful animation happens. Your gameplay becomes about caring where you're going to go, not how you're going to get there. That's very much the centre of the mainstream of triple-A games.

As an indie game developer, you're looking for something that's not explored too much because we don't have as much time, as many people, or as much



money, so we can make a splash doing something other people are not doing. Have there been any other 3D games where you are responsible for doing the walking? You can make some arguments for one or two of them, but not really in the same way. It was empty territory. It's not really too played out.

In *Baby Steps*, it seems that mobility is a metaphor for Nate's emotional immaturity. But for people who actually have mobility issues in real life, do you think the meaning of the game changes?

It's complicated because he starts out quite immobile. He has trouble walking around, but by the time that you get to the end, he's walking fluidly, and he's also stronger and more stable than real humans are. He goes from being less able than an average person to being more able-bodied over the course of that playthrough.

I don't know. I'd have to ask somebody who deals with this specific type of mobility issue, because I could see them reading it in different ways. In my head, though, in *Baby Steps*, Nate's not disabled. He's quite able-bodied. Maybe he starts the game a little bit stoned. He's confused, maybe he's uncoordinated, but he's not suffering a specific disability. I wouldn't want people to be reading it like we're trying to poke fun at somebody with actual difficulty walking around.

Having said that, this deep connection to bodies has been of interest to the accessibility community, even though my work's known as being hard. Difficulty is not thought of as being accessible, but there was one guy who beat *Getting Over It* with his feet or his toes. Very early on, when *QWOP* started to get popular online, I heard from somebody with one arm who asked me to make a second key binding for it so that he could play it with one arm. We've had people trying to play *Baby Steps* using their legs.

Difficult games such as *Dark Souls* are still in vogue, but their type of difficulty, which is marked by understanding the flow of battles and other ▶



Baby Steps charts your progress through the game on a map at the end, but doesn't include any in-game maps or markers



An early Foddy game, *Little Master Cricket* distills the joy of swinging a bat and hitting a ball – something he points out is missing from most cricket games

Foddy's first game, *Too Many Ninjas*, has you, a lone, katana-wielding warrior, warding off an ambush by ninjas as they slash at you and toss shuriken

factors, is quite different from yours. What do you make of their particular approach?

If you look at the reviews of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, somehow in that three-year period between, you can see that the zeitgeist has changed. Journalists are always very on top of where the culture is, but they do not get why you want to have this very difficult game in 2009. But by 2012 they're completely on board with [the approach of] FromSoftware projects.

Leading up to 2009, with games like *Sands Of Time* and *Assassin's Creed*, or the *Uncharted* games, there was a shift in the other direction. People started to take away [the threat of] losing progress. Think about *Sands Of Time*. It's a very radical game. It's not so easy to die, because you can rewind time, and people start to have automatic checkpointing. Games were getting easier.

When *Demon's Souls* comes along, you can lose all your souls if you die twice. That felt very radical. *Dark Souls* is so influential that we've had years of people exploring that. *Dark Souls* is probably my favourite game, but it's a little bit deceptive. It seems incredibly punishing, but it's always giving you a little bit of progress. No matter what, you are never really stuck, even if you're double cursed and can't get to the next checkpoint, or there's a boss you can't beat. You're always gaining a little amount of souls, making a little bit of progress.

If I'm known for the harshness of *Getting Over It* – and this is true in *Baby Steps* as well – it's because there's nothing to pick up. There are no perks, no RPG systems, no level ups. It's very different, and difficult in a way that FromSoftware games are not.

"IF YOU WANT TO PLAY A HARD GAME, YOU PLAY A NINJA GAIDEN GAME. THOSE GAMES ARE ACTUALLY HARD"

In *Getting Over It*, I'm never asking for a skill check like *Dark Souls*. What I'm interested in is a sense that there are high stakes or consequences, and you can't get that without being more strict about making people lose progress when they mess up. There is some overlap, but I feel like the *Souls* games are trying to set up the idea of an indifferent world; trying to build a vibe, more than anything else, but acting like they're harsher than they really are.

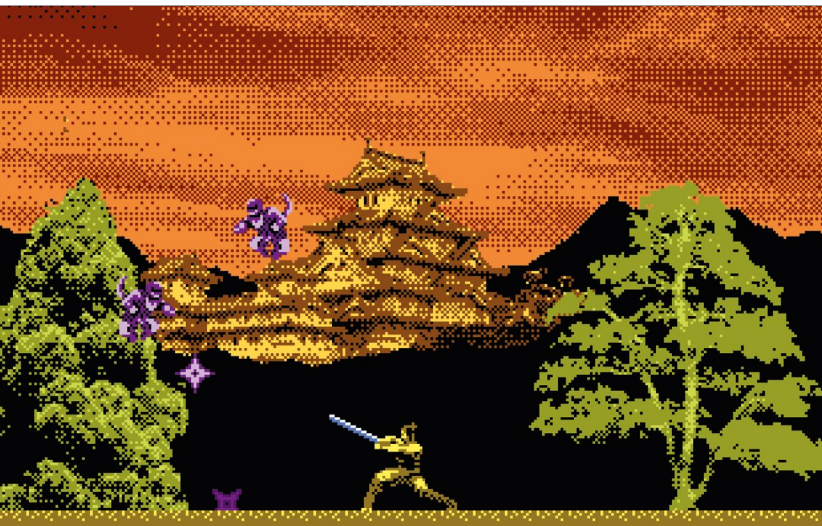
If you want to play a hard game, you play an Itagaki game, a *Ninja Gaiden* game. Or you play *Nioh*, for example. Those games are actually hard. You can't grind out any progress.

If you had to sum it up, what is the essence of your design philosophy with games?

Part of it is not wanting UI, and not wanting to explain anything. Part of it is about this idea of wanting to build stakes and consequences. The fail state for games [as a medium] is that nothing that happens in them matters at all, especially in singleplayer games. We [developers] are trying to build up to people caring about what happens in a game. We can try to do it in the way that films and books do, by having a story and characters, but we can also use other tools.

So, a lot of my design philosophy is about building something up to a point where you care about what happens. My approach to difficulty is about that as well. What we were saying about the human body, an angle you can take is that it's about relatability, about getting you to care about what happens in the game because you care about your own body. That's how slapstick works: something's funny because somebody fell over. It's because you have a body and you can fall over, and you feel it if you see somebody take a big hit to the elbow or face.

This is the idea I'm warm to. We start with nothing with a game – nobody should care what happens – and we have to build up, brick by brick, to a place where people do care.





To climb the cliff in *GIRP*, you need to press and hold the letters corresponding to those on the rocks. Meanwhile, seagulls hinder your ascent

Do you think your games are fair? Even if there are frustrating and difficult elements within them, do you think about treating players fairly as part of the design process?

There's this idea that game designers talk about, which is telling the player that they're in good hands, so they're not wasting their time. It's a question of trust. For example, if you see a sign pointing you into a very long, difficult maze, you trust that if you get to the end, there will be something good there. It would be deliberately wasting your time if it's not.

As we worked on *Baby Steps*, we started to feel that if the player feels too much like they're in good hands, no amount of exploratory or creative play will ever yield anything unexpected. It will only yield expected outcomes. But if you're in bad hands, people stop playing because they start to feel like they got to an area that's not really finished, or the developer didn't expect them to go here, and it's not really supported by the software. They feel like they've gotten to a fail state, and should restart the game or quit.

You've got these two extremes, so we're trying to chart a line so the player can always see that we thought about your experience. We wouldn't waste your time, but maybe we'll give you space to waste your own time. We're trying to balance it, maybe a bit more than the average well-designed game.

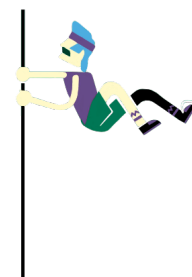
Yet there are a lot of places in *Baby Steps* where you go into a maze and there's nothing at the centre.

Exactly! But we have cutscenes where you'll be warned: 'Hey, there's nothing up there. Don't go up there. There's nothing at the top!'

If difficulty, or at least exploring the idea of difficulty, is so core to your games, do you think you will ever make a game that could be called 'easy'?

If I did, it would need to be getting meaning and a sense of importance from somewhere else. I could imagine making a co-op game that is easy to finish because you're getting that from the other player. I could imagine making a game that's just completely a narrative game that's easy to finish, because then hopefully it's [led by] the story or the writing.

But you have to get that juice from somewhere, and it's been fruitful to look for it in difficult play. I feel like there's so much in the world of difficult play that has not been explored. It's a toolset that games have that other media doesn't. It's partly to do with the interactivity, partly to do with the fact that just getting a game and learning how to play it is already difficult. If people are playing your game for more than ten minutes, they're already up for doing something hard. I may make an easy game, but probably not a singleplayer one. And even the easiest game is still a pain. There's a lot of beauty in that. ■



As part of party-game compilation *SportsFriends*, *Super Pole Riders* is a sequel to Foddy's original pole-vaulting game