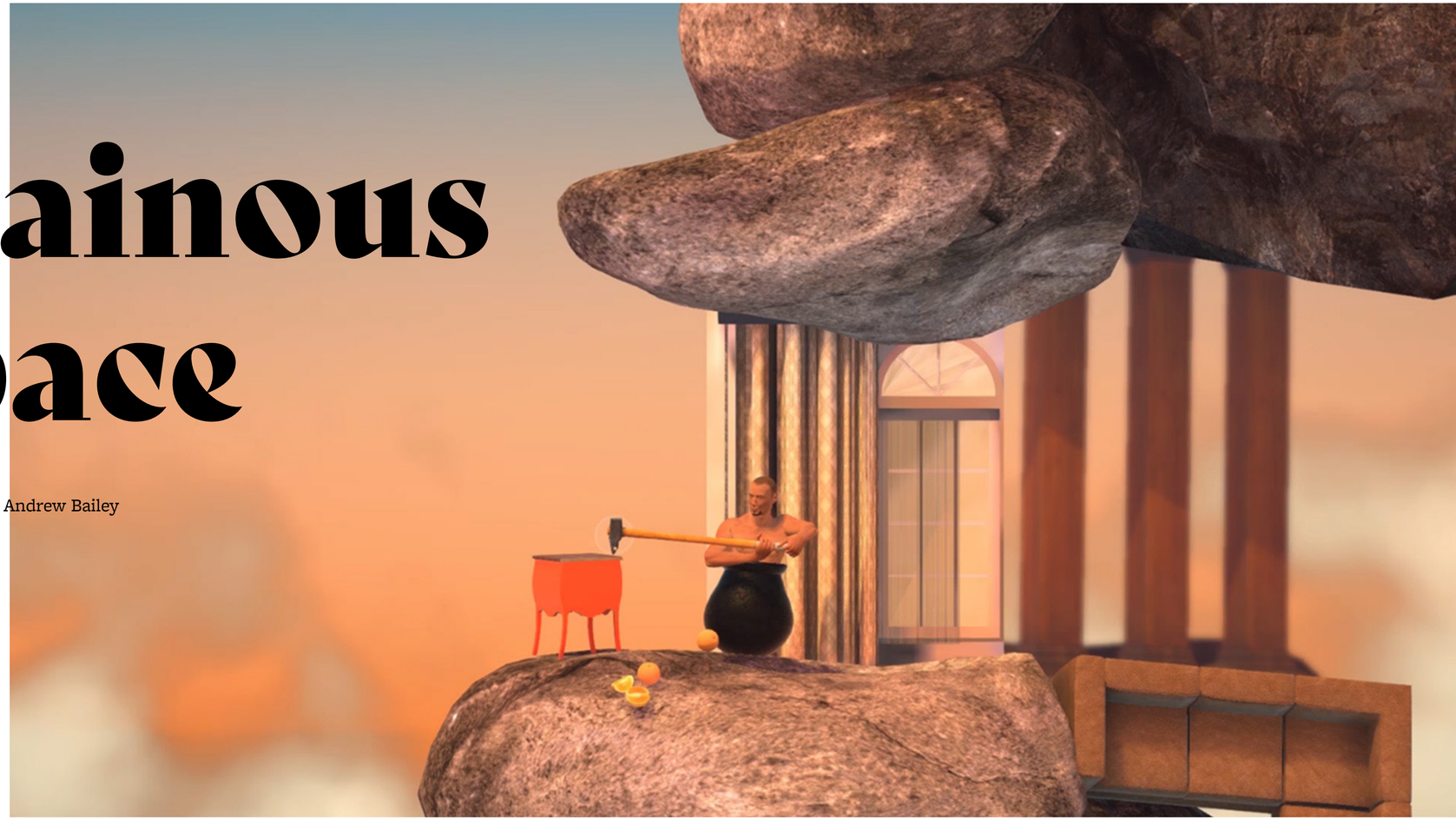
Mountainous Junkspace

materiality Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy | Andrew Bailey



Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy inexplicably places you in control of a bald, naked man, who sits in a large cauldron. He is equipped only with a sledge hammer. From there you must attempt to scale a towering mountain of garbage. There are no other tools at your disposal besides swinging the hammer at a surface to propel the cauldron—learning the small differences the arc and speed have on trajectory—and using the metal head to hook on to a crevice and pull the vehicle upwards. This may sound simple; it is anything but.

I first encountered *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* by watching someone stream it on Twitch. As with most players, they were struggling with the mouse-based control scheme, which demands careful precision with each small movement. It's easy to mess up, and when the streamer does, the cauldron and its passenger often fall a substantial way back down the trash mountain. When this happens, the streamer is spoken to directly by the game's creator—the eponymous Bennett Foddy—who either cheekily comments on their loss, or sometimes encourages them to take a break. In one of these moments, Foddy changes who he is addressing, directing it away from the streamer playing the game and towards their audience—which includes me. "Now I know most likely you're watching this on YouTube or Twitch while some dude with 10 million views does it for you. Like a baby bird being fed chewed up food. That's culture too. But on the off-chance you're playing this, what I'm saying is: trash is disposable, but maybe it doesn't have to be approachable. What's the feeling like? Are you stressed? I guess you don't hate it if you got this far. Feeling frustrated? It's underrated. An orange is sweet juicy fruit locked inside a bitter peel. That's not how I feel about a challenge. I only want the bitterness. It's coffee, it's grapefruit, it's licorice."

Previous page: Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy (Andrew Bailey).

Foddy is known for designing games that easily give way to frustration and repeated failure. His 2008 game *QWOP* has you use four keys on a keyboard to control the individual limbs of a track-and-field runner. Trying to run even 10 meters is a challenge that the majority of players fail to surpass. *Getting Over It* is just one in a series of games by Foddy that reflect his attitude about the role of frustration in games. "A game that is completely devoid of frustration is likely to be a game without friction, without disobedience," Foddy writes in a 2017 blog post titled 'Eleven Flavors of Frustration'. "Games that are perfectly obedient are mere software." What distinguishes *Getting Over It* from his previous games is that Foddy has lent his voice to it. This allows for a candid self awareness to permeate the game.

During that first stream I watched, with each of the streamer's cyclical trips up and down the mountain, I noticed a single coffee cup that would trundle down the mountain if it was hit by the hammer. Eventually, the coffee cup—through the streamer's repeated failure—made its way all the way to the bottom, acting as a small reminder of the scale of the streamer's fall. In terms of the rest of the garbage portrayed around Foddy's trash mountain, the coffee cup is insignificant. However, it's singular in the fact that it's one of the only moveable objects in the entire game. Another such object is an orange that sits closer to the mountain's peak. The coffee cup and orange hold no mechanical value: they do not hinder the player's progress, unlike so many of the mountain's more treacherous trash objects. Instead, their singular movability—in combination with Foddy's prompting, antagonistic dialogue—mark them as key signifiers of the game's ethos towards the productive potential of frustration and failure.

Foddy's carefully chosen metaphors, the orange and the

"Like a baby bird being fed chewed up food. That's culture too."


Don't worry, I'll save your progress, always. Even your mistakes.


Alright, thanks for coming with me on this trip. I'll understand if you have to take a break at any point...

coffee cup, find further meaning within Foddy's disjointed monologue. At one point he begins to make an offhanded connection between streaming culture and what he refers to as 'trash culture'. "You can build culture out of trash, but only trash culture... Maybe this is what digital culture is. A monstrous mountain of trash, the ash heap of creativity's fountain. A landfill with everything we ever thought of in it. Grand, infinite, and unsorted." In earlier sections of the monologue, Foddy works hard to define exactly what he means by this, stating that when objects and ideas are transposed from the context in which they were originally meant to be experienced, they become a part of trash culture. He provides the example of how when you take food and put it into your sink it transforms into trash. In this case, Foddy is not referring to literal garbage, but is commenting on the way digital media is capable of endlessly reproducing and reassembling into new contexts. "Over time we've poured more and more refuse into this vast digital landfill we call the internet. It now vastly outnumbers and outweighs the things that are fresh and untainted and unused. When everything around us is cultural trash, trash becomes the new medium, the lingua franca of the digital age." This statement, in combination with his earlier acerbic comment on Twitch audiences being akin to baby birds, works to reveal Foddy's wry pessimism towards the current state of digital culture.

Critique of this kind towards the seemingly endless expansion of digital culture is not unique to Foddy. It has, in fact, been explored in various subsets of academia. One example that conforms almost seamlessly with Foddy's towering mountain of garbage is an essay written by famous architect Rem Koolhas. Starting with the intriguingly simple title of *Junkspace*, Koolhas goes on to define his concept by stating that if the garbage floating around in outer space is called space-junk, then the residue that people leave behind on the planet is called junkspace. Throughout the rest of the essay, Koolhas makes many similarly stylized declarations as to what junkspace is and how it can be categorized. Many of these statements reflect the critical stance Foddy expresses towards media—that it's made for easy, universal consumption, and doesn't provide any barrier that would otherwise prompt reflective thought.

Early on within the essay Koolhas states that junkspace "substitutes hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition. More and more, more is more. Junkspace is overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of seduction... Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends... A fuzzy empire of blur." Although he returns repeatedly to discussing commercialized non-places like airports, malls, fast food franchises, and big box superstores, Koolhas also includes screens, television, the internet, and other technological media within his lengthy definition of junkspace. And just as Foddy states that trash has become the "lingua franca," the common language, of the digital age, Koolhas argues that the easy consumption of junkspace has spread around the planet like some sort of rapidly reproducing virus. However, although initially their arguments may seem united in their pessimistic criticality towards digital culture, Foddy does not share Koolhas's seemingly full acceptance of this as a complete and final state. Where Koolhas only sees the corporate residue of Starbucks when looking at the bitter cup of coffee, Foddy has been able to find a productive way to reuse the discarded drink container as a tool to subvert the slow expanse of junkspace. As he states: "Trash is disposable but maybe it doesn't have to be approachable."

"Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends."

Previous page: Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy (Andrew Bailey).


You can build culture out of trash, but only trash culture: B-games, B-movies, B-music, B-philosophy.


When everything around us is cultural trash, trash becomes the new medium, the lingua franca of the digital age.

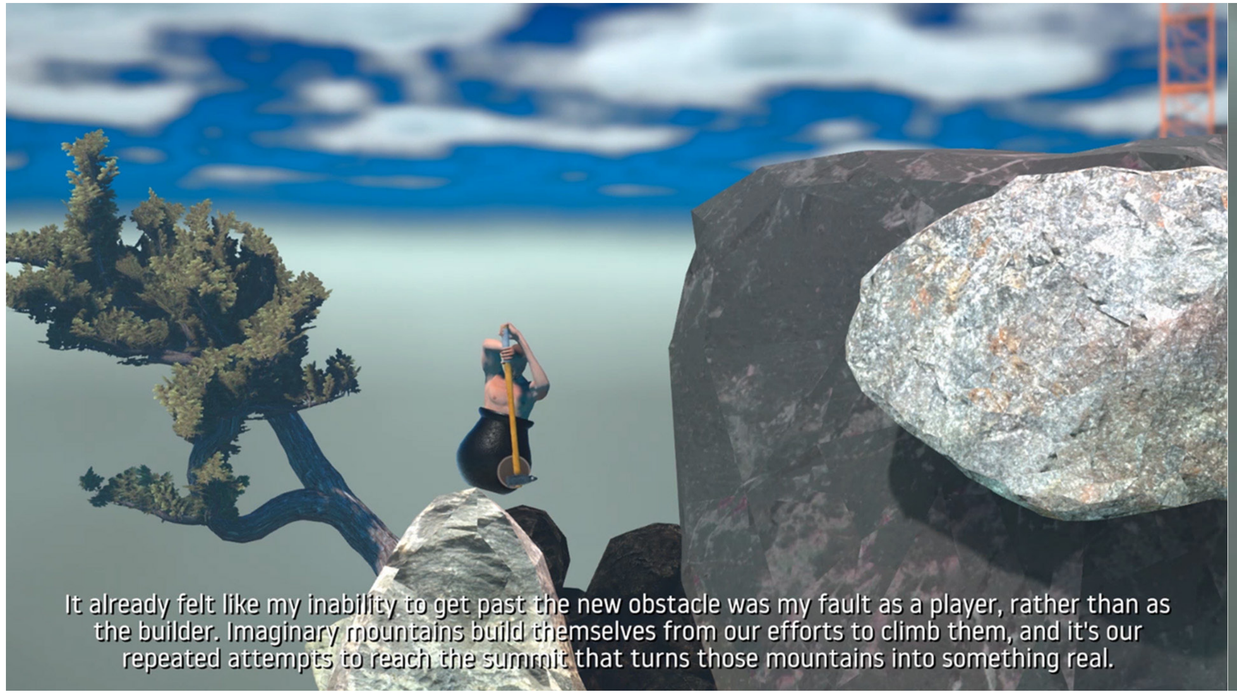
To elaborate on this point let's return to the very beginning of the game. Before the player reaches any sort of considerable height with their climb in *Getting Over It* one of the first interjections from Foddy reveals that he based the idea of his game on a much older one called *Sexy Hiking*. In that game the player must use a hammer to try to climb up various obstacles presented to them in two-dimensional space. One of the most immediate differences between these two Foddy games, however, is that *Sexy Hiking* looks to have been made with animated MS Paint images rather than more advanced sprites or a polygon-based game engine. Foddy doesn't go into these visual comparisons within *Getting Over It*, but he does tell the player that, at the time of its release, *Sexy Hiking* was a prime example of what he refers to as a "B-game." He goes on to explain that a B-game is often one that is extremely rough and unfriendly towards its players, and that they're usually assembled quickly from premade, appropriated game assets for no other purpose than the creative joy that comes along with game design. These days, the online gaming discourse, as it's upheld by YouTube comments and Steam user reviews, sees these same qualities in pejorative terms, as a symptom of the type of games that are labelled "asset flip." An asset flip can loosely be defined as any game that has been made using prefabricated models and animations bought from an asset store. Like B-games, these game are often quickly made and can contain a large number of glitches or bugs. However, according to the reactionary YouTubers who deride them, these asset flipped games are apparently made to resemble popular games in order to trick people into purchasing them, rather than being designed for any genuinely creative purposes.

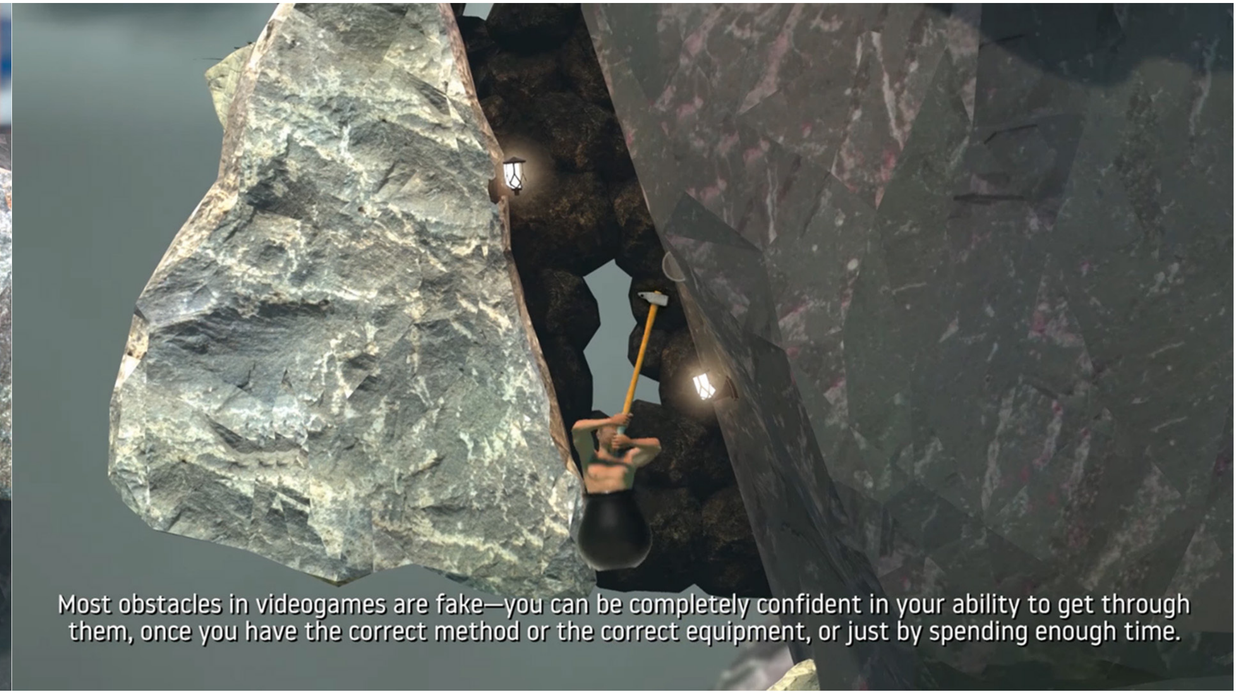
I don't want to debate whether these opinions are false or not—and, in any case, there are definitely an exorbitant amount of games made to cash in on recent trends (ironically enough, there now are a number of copycat versions of *Getting Over It*). But I do want to analyse the tension point of how *Getting Over It* can easily be defined as an asset flip, in that it was made in direct reference to another game, and was almost entirely constructed from prefabricated objects. Viewed from this angle, Foddy could be seen as underscoring his claim that if everything in the environment becomes trash, then trash will become the new language. In this case the preponderance of easily accessible, premade objects and tools in digital storefronts such as the Unity and Unreal asset stores have redefined the culture of gaming into the same kind of expanding trash culture Foddy describes. Later on in the game he reflects on this specific point stating: "In this context it's tempting to make friendly content... That's gentle, that lets you churn through it but not earn it. Why make something demanding, if it just gets piled up in the landfill. Filled with bland things?" Turning back to Koolhas, this description of a landfill filled with gentle, bland objects doesn't sound all that dissimilar from the way he used security blankets and hot tubs in his definitions of junkspace, except that in the case of *Getting Over It* junkspace can be used to represent gaming culture rather than commercial architecture. In this videogame version of junkspace, Foddy questions the point of producing a small work that requires critical engagement if it will just be immediately and endlessly buried under a garbage pile of content that is far easier to thoughtlessly consume.

Over the course of *Getting Over It*, Foddy never explicitly answers his question regarding the utility of difficult or rough game design. If the player is able to persevere and approach the top of the mountain Foddy gradually talks less and less about trash culture and instead begins to address the player with an air of camaraderie—impressed by their progress and encouraging

"A landfill with everything we ever thought of in it. Grand, infinite, and unsorted."

Previous page: Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy (Andrew Bailey).


It already felt like my inability to get past the new obstacle was my fault as a player, rather than as the builder. Imaginary mountains build themselves from our efforts to climb them, and it's our repeated attempts to reach the summit that turns those mountains into something real.


Most obstacles in videogames are fake—you can be completely confident in your ability to get through them, once you have the correct method or the correct equipment, or just by spending enough time.

them to keep trying. By this point the player will have had to master the game's intentionally frustrating control scheme and level design through a number of falls and failed attempts. Although they haven't yet reached the end of the game, it could be argued by this point that they would have come to understand Foddy's design philosophy—regarding the potential allure of repeated failure—through the experience of the game itself, rather than any textual aspect of his narration. However, it should be noted that Foddy intentionally front-loads his criticisms of trash and digital culture so that they reach as wide an audience as possible, meaning those who abandon the game for an easier one can arrive at the same thought process as those who acquire it empirically.

Within interviews, Foddy has said he intentionally constructed the game as an asset flip in order to subvert the way they've typically been used as a form of gatekeeping within game culture. Some may think it's these asset flipped games that Foddy is referring to when he speaks of landfills of bland objects, but remember how he positions his own unapproachable trash game as a counterpoint to the constant deluge of new, easily consumable games. The junkspace that Foddy actually seems to be critiquing is the industrialized game economy, especially the games-as-service model, where experience points, loot crates, progress bars, and skins all mesh together into one uninteresting, homogenous mess. It's here in this hazy big budget zone where we find an easy parallel to the commercial non-spaces of Koolhas's junkspace. Just think of the explosive growth of the battle royale, strategy card, and battle arena games that have cropped up in direct reference to one another within the past few years. Each of these intersecting genres all subscribe to the model that Koolhas observed where accumulation and addition are prized. The popularity of these continually patched and polished games has created a standard for consumers where smaller, more hastily made projects are often seen as irrelevant or, for some, even unacceptable. Not only does this restrictive attitude target games that are made as a cheap cash grab, it also vastly excludes the work of those who fall outside of the mainstream game industry, such as fine artists or designers from marginalized communities.

Being constructed out of prefabricated assets, *Getting Over It* may be an example of Foddy's own definition of trash culture, but through its indifference to ensuring progress or pleasure, along with his playful musings, it has managed to reach a wide audience without directly entering into Koolhas's all-consuming junkspace. In comparison with larger budget games, *Getting Over It* may at first glance seem like an oddly intriguing piece of disposable game junk—worth a quick laugh while watching some streamer yell as they struggle up the mountain. But those who stick with it, who adapt and reinvent themselves to the rough and not infrequently sharp edges of Foddy's game, are rewarded with not just the pleasure of a difficult task accomplished but also a new critical lens with which to think about game design. For some players it may take hours upon hours to learn the intricacies of Foddy's mountain of trash as there are no checkpoints or ways to save progress upon reaching a new height. Through this time the player will most certainly experience a wide range of emotions as they discover more efficient methods to climb and make inevitable mistakes. It is in this way that *Getting Over It* avoids the bland artifice of junkspace and produces an experience that can feel transformative and real. Around the midpoint of the game, Foddy comments on this stating: "Imaginary mountains build themselves from our efforts to climb them, and it's our repeated attempts to reach the summit that turns those mountains into something real."

The productive potential of frustration and failure.

Previous page: Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy (Andrew Bailey).

In much of big budget game design—especially the open worlds that have become so prevalent in recent years—the player is smoothly ushered through the experience, assisted with tutorials, waypoints, skill points, and levelling up along the way until they reach the end. In these games the imaginary mountain the player is tasked to climb is constructed through a slow accumulation of fetch quests, collectibles, map markers, craftable items, and equipment to upgrade. Much in the same way that Foddy describes the constant churn of new games as contributing to a giant landfill of ultimately bland things, this accumulative game design can be considered a flat mire to haphazardly wade through, not a mountain to ascend. The studios that sink millions of dollars into these games don't want to include too many acutely difficult experiences for the fear that doing so will cause players to stop playing the game before they finish it. So, instead, this slow accumulation is drip-fed to players in such a way as to always reward the smallest of efforts with permanent progress, so that practically every player will experience success, albeit an easy and bland strain of it. The sheer popularity of this kind of accumulative design is why Foddy's tone switches so drastically when the player begins to the reach *Getting Over It*'s endgame. They have stuck through the roughness, the difficulty, and repeated failure, and in the process fully engaged with Foddy's personal philosophy of design. Rather than abandon it for more accessible games, players who reach the end of *Getting Over It* have had to transform and reinvent themselves according to the shape of Foddy's alpine critique of junkspace.

Foddy argues that frustration and bitterness are underrated. Conversely, this implies that placation and sweetness are overused. Not coincidentally, these are also the qualities that constitute Koolhas's observation that the globalized world has transformed into a kind of junkspace, a condition that he defines as both overripe and undernourishing. Within the mainstream of contemporary game culture it's the polished and smooth play experiences that are often lauded as seminal. By disjunctively combining his wandering, vaguely academic essay on the nature of trash with an asset flip of an old B-game, Foddy has managed to slyly subvert this slowly expanding junkspace of easy consumption, forcing both players and streaming audiences to engage with the conceptual structure of his project. With this, *Getting Over It* manages to exist as a succinct critique of the mentality behind quality assurance and consumer advocacy that has spread throughout game culture over the past few decades, but also functions as a meditation on the nature of repetition, failure, and what we consider to be junk. Together, these two qualities coalesce to champion the existence of short, janky trash games—ones that may not be immediately comforting, familiar, or approachable, but that can within their odd roughness rework the way we perceive the role of videogames within broader culture.

AB

Andrew Bailey is a PhD candidate within the Art History and Visual Culture program at York University in Toronto, Canada. His research focuses on digital and new media art that is in dialogue with video game culture. He has also previously written for Unwinnable and First Person Scholar.