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**Do the Locomotion:  
Obstinate Avatars, Dehiscent Performances, and the Rise of the Comedic Videogame**

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In recent years, independent gaming has witnessed an explosion of bodies: gangling and ungainly bodies, hapless and haphazard bodies, bodies stretched, strewn out, their limbs and gestures de-articulated into component parts. Spurred on by a combination of technical advances in physics simulation, new digital distribution options for games with niche appeal, and the emergence of YouTube fan videos as an amplifier of cult games' viral potential, a cluster of games with similar themes and mechanics have begun to radically re-assess the role of the avatar as embodied entity.

Affixed by critics with the colloquial designation “fumblecore,” the games within this burgeoning micro-genre have gained notoriety not only for their frequent lapses into tremendous difficulty, but also for the unusual source of this difficulty: the control of bodily movement itself.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For some examples of the genesis of the “fumblecore” designation, see Kirk Hamilton, “*Octodad: Dadliest Catch* - The Kotaku Review,” *Kotaku*, January 30, 2014, <<http://kotaku.com/octodad-dadliest-catch-the-kotaku-review-1512040710>>; Andrew Todd, “Game Review: *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* Has Eight Wobbly Arms, One Big Heart and Half a Good Game,” *Birth. Movies. Death.*, February 4, 2014, <<http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2014/02/04/game-review->

In more traditional videogame genres, such as the platformer, challenges arise from the terrain to be traversed, rather than the act of traversal. Fumblecore games break with this tradition, offering up abrasively granular control schemes that challenge the assumptions that avatars and their control schemes should act as transparent conduits of player intention. In fumblecore games, gesture becomes spread out into globs of constituent motor acts, with players tasked with tactically managing muscles and tendons acting in concert. Here, even the maintenance of standard bipedal posture is rendered into a nontrivial task, requiring constant vigilance. Fumblecore games offer up new ways of seeing and feeling the onscreen bodies of games, which cease to be treated as simple entry points into the complex system of a game, and are instead acknowledged as a complex systems in and of themselves.

From the description offered thus far, it may seem as if the fumblecore genre would appeal only to masochistic anatomy students. This, however, overlooks one of the key pleasures of these games, and one of the reasons they have been able to achieve relatively widespread popularity outside of the usual market for impossibly difficult games: Playing them is quite funny. These games' success hinges upon those ecstatic moments in which masochistic difficulty lifts off into effervescent physical comedy, and the frustration normally associated with player failure dissolves into the giddy pleasure that arises in witnessing an exquisitely executed pratfall.

Videogames have long carried with them a potential for physical comedy, though this potential has most often been dormant, hidden from immediate view, emerging only in moments of felicitous accident. Certain breeds of gamer have made it their business to hunt down such accidents: Modders, glitch-seekers, and YouTube machinimators have long used games as a

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octodad-dadliest-catch-has-eight-wobbly-arms-one-big-heart-and>, and Jorge Albor, “*Octodad: Fumblecore Families*,” *Experience Points*, February 18, 2014, <<http://www.experiencepoints.net/2014/02/octodad-fumblecore-families.html>>.

platform for comedic performance.<sup>2</sup> But this pursuit of physical comedy usually requires ignoring game objectives, or outright breaking game physics, in order to reveal latent possibilities of cartoonish mayhem.

Fumblecore games, by contrast, enthusiastically embrace comedy as their *raison d'être*, building game features out of what had previously been considered amusing bugs. The sports game genre—especially titles such as *Skate* (EA Black Box, 2007)—has long carried potential for amusing wipeouts. Sports-themed fumblecore games such as Bennett Foddy's 2008 *QWOP* (which offers its players control over the independent movement of the left and right thigh and calf muscles of a sprinter) and South East Games' 2014 *Probably Archery* (which requires the delicate sequential manipulation of the wrist, elbow, and shoulder muscle clusters of an archer) readjust the balance between athletic success and failure, erecting such insurmountable obstacles to the former that the hilarity player-character's maladroitness becomes the games' primary pleasure. On the technical side of things, ragdoll physics—a simulation technique originally designed to allow dead or unconscious bodied to realistically collapse into a heap of rigid limbs and limber joints—had always carried an edge of cartoonishness.<sup>3</sup> But it was not until the appearance of games such as the student project *Octodad* (DePaul DG2 Game Experience student team, 2010) and its commercial follow-up *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014) that its penchant for over-exuberant exaggeration of human limberness became properly employed as a tool for physical comedy. Here, laborious click-

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<sup>2</sup> For a good example of the comedic potential of games as exposed via the machinations of mischievous players, rather than stemming from developer intent, see the channel of YouTube user HelixSnake, <<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCq66ERLWztjA4HtgxBV1-zw>>.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Bukatman offers some background on ragdoll physics and lamentation over the fact that its comic potential seems to only have been recognized by machinima creators, rather than game developers themselves, in Bukatman, "Some Observations Pertaining to Cartoon Physics, or, The Cartoon Cat in the Machine," in *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 312–315. *Octodad*, in particular, can be seen as a step forward in answering Bukatman's call for games more explicitly based upon cartoon physics.

and-drag mouse movements are required to position the slippery limbs of the title character—a crafty octopus who, for his own personal reasons, has decided to settle down as the patriarch of a nuclear family, determined to pass, undetected, as a human—while performing everyday household tasks such as clearing off the kitchen counter, climbing a ladder, walking forward, and just generally not collapsing into a pile of wriggling tentacles.

Assessing the pleasures of *Octodad*, critic Marty Silva proposes that, over the past few years, videogames have made their first forays into the genre of slapstick comedy.<sup>4</sup> It is worth dwelling upon the aptness of this assessment. Considered as a historical cinematic genre, slapstick is founded upon the acrobatic depictions of spectacular bodily catastrophes—and here, certainly, it shares visual qualities with the physical comedy on display in fumblecore games. But spectatorial engagement with cinematic slapstick follows contours seemingly at odds with those available to videogames. Certainly, it is arguable that part of our emotional engagement with slapstick finds its ground in processes of muscular sympathy: “We *feel for* [Buster] Keaton’s earnest characters,” writes Jennifer M. Barker, advancing this view, “precisely because we *feel with them*.”<sup>5</sup> But there are other, darker and more distancing moves simultaneously at work. As Muriel Andrin points out, slapstick’s principle set pieces are organized around “[v]iolence, cruelty, ugliness, and destruction.”<sup>6</sup> Beneath audience laughter there always lurks an undeniable current of, if not proper sadism, then at least your garden-variety *Schadenfreude*.

In cinematic slapstick, this mean-spirited residue is insulated by our knowledge of the fictionality of the events portrayed onscreen: We reassure ourselves by pointing out that we are not

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<sup>4</sup> Marty Silva, “PAX ’12: What the Hell Is *Octodad*?” *Freelancer: 1UP’s Free and Indie Gaming Blog*, August 31, 2012, <<http://www.1up.com/do/blogEntry?bId=9113114>>.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 92.

<sup>6</sup> Muriel Andrin, “Back to the ‘Slap’: Slapstick’s Hyperbolic Gesture and the Rhetoric of Violence,” in *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. Tom Paulus and Rob King (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 227.

really enjoying the sight of the Little Tramp’s hapless pratfalls, but rather are enjoying the superb athleticism that allows Charlie Chapin to so perfectly perform such magnificent physical stunts. (Alex Clayton pinpoints this dual consciousness of a pratfall as both mishap and expert performance—“the skill of appearing inept”—as integral to our appreciation of the genre.<sup>7</sup>) Turning to games, however, this buffer of performance shifts. After all, popular rhetoric frequently portrays the pleasures of gaming as the pleasures of *becoming* a character. Watching *yourself* stumbling and falling, failing to perform basic tasks, over and over again, is not usually considered to be very fun, or very funny. Has the fumblecore genre carved out a heretofore-unexplored space of masochistic slapstick? Or is something subtly different going on here?

In the pages ahead, I argue that, rather than fit the mold of classic cinematic slapstick, the fumblecore genre opens up new possibilities within the realm of physical comedy, embracing unique and medium-specific modes of performance and reception based upon a playful perversion of the expected relation between player and avatar. This perversion has far-reaching outcomes. In challenging players’ conceptions of how game user interfaces are supposed to operate, fumblecore games foreground the collaborative dimensions of human-computer interaction, bursting apart the un-thought unity of player and machine actants into a form of comedic repartee I refer to here as *dehiscent performance*. By raising surprisingly deep questions concerning the limitations of intention and agency, fumblecore games enact a clever reversal of the usual mind/body dynamic that has long dominated the theory and practice of physical comedy, bulldozing traditional mechanisms of identification along the way. Fully describing these effects requires a close attention to how the fingers and bodies of players and avatars move, to the amplification and diminution of gesture that takes place at the porous site of the input device. What follows, then, is a formal and descriptive account of genre that proceeds by way of an exploration of bodily comportment (and contortion),

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<sup>7</sup> Alex Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), 8.

drawing from strains of thought that range from phenomenology to human factors, from Bergson's theory of comedy to contemporary developments in embodied cognitive science.

Videogames have arrived on the scene of physical comedy, and, in arriving, have upset its most basic assumptions. Following one of the classic models of the gag, fumblecore games thrive upon the incongruous thwarting of expectations—and the results are as profound as they are hilarious.

But however profoundly fumblecore games upset the expectations of physical comedy, a question remains as to what ends they marshal comedy toward. Comedy, of course, has long veered between being a positive force for social good, and serving to keep those on the margins of society in their place (two trends sometimes referred to as the dichotomy between “punching up” and “punching down”). Given that fumblecore games present some of the few instances in which games' otherwise monolithic trend towards corporeal power fantasy—towards offering player a chance to occupy a body that is not only abled, but super-abled—begins to break down, it makes sense to ask: Do fumblecore games productively use humor in the service of empathy to those with less-than-transparent relations to their own bodily actions? Or are they simply the digital equivalent of pointing and laughing? The formal inventiveness of fumblecore games, I argue, makes the former at least a strong possibility—although not one, perhaps, that has been adequately met at this time. In this article's conclusion, I offer a tentative and exploratory assessment of the genre as a possibility space for experimentation in empathetic game design.

### **Dehiscent Performance in *Surgeon Simulator 2013***

From obscure freeware titles and student projects to genuine (if left-field) commercial hits, the rise of fumblecore's popularity has been swift. One contributing factor here has been the emergence of YouTube as a platform for sharing fan videos—particularly those of the “let's play” format, in which YouTube personalities record themselves playing games while providing a running commentary, often ridiculing either the game or their own proficiency at it (if not both

simultaneously). *Surgeon Simulator 2013*, one of the genre’s biggest sleeper hits, has proved successful in this arena, inspiring thousands of gamers to upload footage of their keyboard-flinging bloody failures for the amusement of others.<sup>8</sup>

*Surgeon Simulator 2013* makes an obvious fit for the let’s play format. Let’s play videos work best when games gel with their host’s often over-the-top personalities, and when failures are obvious, spectacular, and amusing, rather than quick and confusing. *Surgeon Simulator 2013* certainly fits this bill. The game presents a clean view of an occupied operating table, interrupted only by a floating disembodied left hand, supposedly connected to an unseen surgeon, known only as Nigel. Players control this single hand with both of their own hands, prompting the grasping motions of individual fingers via their computer’s keyboard, while managing wrist rotation and vertical position with their mouse. Thanks to a combination of the cumbersomeness of this control scheme and the twitchy hypersensitivity of the game’s simulated physics, things start to go wrong very quickly. Often, something as simple as the initial gesture requires to lift and remove the cloth covering the patient’s pre-exposed ribcage will be severely botched, with the designated transplant organ being flung across the room and into an inaccessible corner before the patient is even uncovered. Failure in *Surgeon Simulator* can begin immediately and compound continuously, and is nearly always amusing to watch. (The fact that it is difficult for the game *not* to be amusing goes a long way toward its popularity among let’s play creators.)

Despite being a perfect match for the needs of the format, however, there is a very real way in which to watch a video of someone else playing *Surgeon Simulator 2013*—or any other fumblecore game—is to miss the point. “Watching is no substitute for playing” stands as an ancient dictum within videogame studies, to be sure, but it takes on special life here, going far to expose the generic

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<sup>8</sup> As of this writing, a YouTube search for “let’s play surgeon simulator” results in roughly 240,000 hits, with the most popular videos having been viewed over ten million times—  
<[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=let%27s+play+surgeon+simulator](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=let%27s+play+surgeon+simulator)> (conducted January 14, 2015).

fissures between fumblecore and traditional slapstick. To view a let's play video of *Surgeon Simulator 2013* is to marvel in the extreme klutziness the game has been rigged to produce, and the gleefully macabre displays of medical malpractice that result. This successfully relays some major facets of the game's humor, but it retains a traditional focus on the physical failures of *others*, rather than oneself. What these videos cannot capture is the way in which the *Surgeon Simulator's* control scheme fully folds players themselves into the game's absurd, violent logic. Viewed as a moving image, *Surgeon Simulator* is a bit of bumbling black humor. When one is wrestling with the willful obtuseness of the game's control scheme, the experience hews closer to a comedic brawl. And, in what feels like an homage to the great split-personality comedic performances in cinema history—the two halves of Steve Martin's body nearly pulling each other apart in *All of Me* (Carl Reiner, 1984), or Bruce Campbell duking it out with his own uncooperative hand in *Evil Dead II* (Sam Raimi, 1987)—it is a comedic brawl takes place within the confines of one (virtual) body.

In this way, the trials and travails of Nigel's hand are a product of what I am terming *dehiscent performance*: the emergence of a single onscreen character from an uneasy collaboration between human and machine. The traditional player-avatar relation is, of course, always intensely collaborative: When coaxing an avatar into motion by nudging an analog stick, players are propped up by the labor of character animators and interface programmers working together to ensure that graceful movements of avatars can be performed with relative ease, and that, within a few minutes of play, consciousness of the apparatus will fade into the background. The end goal here is for player intention and machine action to meet seamlessly within an avatar that behaves as a “primary locus of agency” for players, an effortless “vehicles” of human intentions, or players' “emissaries” in the gameworld (to borrow some of the most prominent descriptions of avatar functioning in academic game literature).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Specifically here, “primary locus of agency” appears in Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 60; the “vehicle” description appears in James Newman, “The Myth of the Ergodic



The “collaboration” that characterizes dehiscent performance is, by contrast, more charged and contentious, always threatening to burst apart along the seam of the user interface. Any expectation that Nigel’s lone appendage in *Surgeon Simulator 2013* will behave as a frictionless point of mediation between player intention and onscreen action will be swiftly met with a feeling of betrayal. Fumblecore games require an adjustment of attitude. Rather than a surrogate, the avatars of fumblecore games—if we could even properly call them that—are best conceived of as composite characters co-constructed by a human/nonhuman comedic team, with the control scheme acting as the player’s full-fledged performance partner. Player input and computer response here becomes a form of agonistic shtick, as the unavoidable dehiscence between bodily gesture and computational process is emphasized and celebrated. The machine adopts the position of comic abuser, whereas the player slots into the resigned, long-suffering “straight” role. Powered by the friction along this fault line, the fumblecore avatar, thrust to center stage, emerges as the spastic and acrobatic breakout star.<sup>10</sup>

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Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames,” *Game Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002), <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>>; while “emissary” appears in Diane Carr, “Play Dead: Genre and Affect in *Silent Hill* and *Planescape: Torment*,” *Game Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003), <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0301/carr/>>. More recently, critics and theorists have begun to challenge simplistic notions of avatar as transparent “emissary,” championing games that attempt to portray the lived experience of those whose freedom is constrained by a lack of privilege and political power, or disrupt standard models of identification. See, for example, Samantha Allen, “TransMovement: Freedom and Constraint in Queer and Open World Games,” *The Border House*, February 4, 2013, <<http://borderhouseblog.com/?p=10113>>; as well as Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> The division of labor I have posed here in my description of dehiscent performance takes as its model the single-player fumblecore game, in which human, control scheme, and avatar emerge as the major actants. A more complicated theory would be needed to account for the comedic repartees enabled by multiplayer fumblecore games—a category which includes the four-person cooperative mode of *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (in which each player controls one

In order to fully examine how *Surgeon Simulator 2013* and other fumblecore games facilitate this comic division of labor, it is necessary to describe the myriad ways in which they pervert the norms of game UI design, particularly control schemes. Surprisingly, given their centrality to the game-playing experience, control schemes have received relatively little theoretical attention in game studies, but a few broad terminological signposts can aid us in analysis here. Rune Klevjer offers the dichotomy of *direct control* versus *indirect manipulation* of avatars, each of which carries with it a different philosophy of user interface design. Direct control, such as the smooth translation between joystick and spaceship movement found in *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, 1962), attempts to simulate physical interaction with objects represented onscreen, and in so doing follows a logic of “tangible” interface design. Indirect manipulation, on the other hand—such as one finds in the point-and-click interfaces of classic graphical adventure games and isometric role-playing games—remains more stoically symbolic, leaving players feeling as if they are “designating” avatar behavior through the issuing of commands rather than “controlling” it through physical interaction.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the distinction between direct “control” and indirect “designation” is not always clear-cut. In fact, it is rarely employed in any strict fashion. Direct control frequently involves forms of *amplification*: The actions avatars undertake onscreen are almost invariably more impressive than those players perform on their controllers, complete with animation flourishes that do not map onto any player input.<sup>12</sup> When Arno Dorian leaps over gaps between Paris rooftops in *Assassin’s*

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limb), as well as such competitive games as *Mount Your Friends* (Stegersaurus Software, 2013) and *Pole Riders* (Bennett Foddy, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Rune Klevjer, “What Is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games” (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Bergen, 2006), 118.

<sup>12</sup> I am borrowing the term “amplification” here from Klevjer, who uses it to describe certain player-avatar relations on *ibid.*, 141; the term also used in a similar manner by Lev Manovich in “Generation Flash,” in *Total Interaction: Theory and Practice of a New Paradigm for the Design Disciplines*, ed. Gerhard M. Buurman (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser, 2005), 73.

*Creed Unity* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014), without the need of any player input beyond holding down the designated “free run” buttons and the tilting the controller’s analog stick, can we truly say that players are tangibly “controlling” him, rather than merely “designating” the path of his movements? Surely, the gap between Arno’s movements and player input here is different in degree, rather than in kind, from the gap between character movement and player input in a point-and-click adventure game.

Standing in stark contrast to *Assassin’s Creed’s* middle ground, *Surgeon Simulator 2013* marks out the hyperbolic extreme of direct control, cleansing nearly all forms of amplification from avatar responses to player input. Forced to abandon the notion that a single digit of their avatar should be able to move in the absence of explicit instruction (even the pinky!), players of *Surgeon Simulator* must adjust their expectations to a severe new credo, “what you do is what you get.”

Here, we see how hard fumblecore games work to break our most basic expectations of how game user interfaces are supposed to be designed. Usually, one would associate direct control with philosophies of “transparency” in UI design. Freeing players of pointers and other artifacts of WIMP (window, icon, menu, pointer) interface design, direct control initially seems to be allied with rhetorics of “invisibility” or “immediacy” in human-computer interaction theory.<sup>13</sup> The hyperbolic approach of fumblecore, however, goes full circle—through transparency and back again, as it were. Rather than being immediate, intuitive, or invisible, the tangible control Nigel’s digits in *Surgeon Simulator 2013* becomes radically obtrusive, an experiment in sadistically inhumane interface design. Lashing out at all-too-comfortable end users, and imagining a future of human-computer interaction in which hacks and software artists were to subvert the norms of UI design, software studies guru

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<sup>13</sup> For a critical overview of rhetorics of “transparency” in game UI design (focusing primarily on visual and aural elements, rather than on gestures required for interaction, which is more at issue here), see Kristine Jørgensen, *Gameworld Interfaces* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 24–38.

Matthew Fuller provocatively asks: “Why use one mouse-click when ten-thousand will do?”<sup>14</sup> A fumblecore game such as *Probably Archery*—a first-person (arrow) shooter that uses ten-thousand mouse clicks to fire a projectile, rather than the usual one—offers a very literal response to this design challenge.

As game scholar Jesper Juul has pointed out, the idea that a game’s interface is something that can be cleanly separated from its “gameplay,” long a guiding assumption within the neighboring fields of UI and game design, falls apart in the face of games that exploit inefficient and cumbersome control schemes as one of their primary sources of difficulty.<sup>15</sup> Fumblecore games engage in a similar move, but their difficulty is re-cast as comedic abuse directed at their players, rather than challenge for its own sake.

Most masochistically difficult games draw the player in with the thrill of hard-earned progress, whether that takes the form of completing a level in *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010), making it to another bonfire with one’s souls intact in *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011), or making it through one more set of pipes in *Flappy Bird* (Dong Nguyen, 2013). Fumblecore games, however, largely cast off notions of “progress”—here, suffering through failure is re-cast as the price of admission into a comedic mechanism. The crazy machine has long been a staple of comedy, from the unruly contraptions Keaton designs and then suffers through in *The Electric House* (1922), to the instruments of control Chaplin finds himself trapped inside in *Modern Times* (1936), to the Taylorist abuse Lucille Ball suffers at the conveyor belt of the “Job Switching” episode of *I Love Lucy* (1952).

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Fuller, *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software* (New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2003), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Jesper Juul, “Easy to Use and Incredibly Difficult: On the Mythical Border between Interface and Gameplay,” paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games, April 26–30, 2009, Disney Wonder Cruise Ship (Departing from Port Canaveral, FL), <<http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/easydifficult/easydifficult.pdf>>. Here, Juul names *Rag Doll Kung Fu* (Qi Studios, 2005) and *Toribash* (Nabi Studios, 2006) as examples, both of which could be considered early precursors to the blossoming of the fumblecore genre in 2008–2015.

In their very user-unfriendliness, fumblecore games offer a chance for players to not just watch such crazy machines onscreen, but actually be caught up within one, submitting to its rhythms as part of the push-and-pull of dehiscent performance. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno claimed that Donald Duck must receive a beating in his cartoons so that “spectators can accustom themselves to theirs,” but the popularity of fumblecore games proves that this identificatory middleman can be cut out: viewers will happily accept their abuse directly, as players, for the privilege of having a role in a comedic performance.<sup>16</sup>

Earlier, I characterized the moments in fumblecore games in which difficulty blossom into physical comedy as “ecstatic.” I should emphasize here that I mean this literally. Comedy erupts in those moments when one stands outside one’s avatar—when one realizes that any tight identification they once had with this onscreen figure was, in fact, a mis-recognition. A measure of distance opens up, and we begin to appreciate these flailing masses of ragdoll limbs not as surrogates, but as aesthetic objects in their own right. They are not us. Or, at least, they are not solely us. They are, rather, the integrated products of our fingers’ motion and the computer’s simulated physics—strange assemblages, to be tweaked by a disinterested (though thoroughly amused) observer. Born from systems, they are the result of an agonistic man-machine performance mechanism. They need not charm us with the “skill of appearing inept,” because, in their very construction, they complicate the intentional/unintentional divide.

Here, I do not simply mean that fumblecore avatars distort player intention through the intervention of the machine partner. I also mean that, on a certain level, concepts of “intention” or “agency” are always foundationally at issue within the genre. The activities we are used to controlling in games are activities we normally associate with conscious intention. “Run, think, shoot, live,” commands the tag line of *Half-Life* (Valve Corporation, 1998)—nice, clean,

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<sup>16</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 110.

uncomplicated verbs, with “running” and “shooting” assigned directly and distinctly to individual buttons on players’ keyboard and mouse. Those actions rendered as pithy verbs are those actions that make sense to us, those actions we can reasonably credit *ourselves* with undertaking. We do not say, “I am going to bend my leg joints so as to put one leg in front of the other,” we say “I am going for a walk,” because, as philosopher Taylor Carman puts it, “what I’m *doing* is not moving my legs, but *walking*.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, as Susan Hurley points out, undergirding the actions we think of ourselves as intentionally performing one finds nigh-innumerable bodily processes that have nothing to do with our conscious intention. Put bluntly, “at some point your intentions run out: you do not intentionally (move your finger by firing a neuron).”<sup>18</sup> Our sense of ourselves as unified, acting agents inevitably dissolves as we push downwards into the anatomical realities of motility. And it is this precisely uncomfortable realm between high-minded agency and brute physiology that forms the *Spielraum* of fumblecore games.

This is how fumblecore games negotiate the problem of failure. The sporadic attempts to build games out of physical comedy that little the past of the medium have often attempted to sidestep frustration by casting their players in the role of godlike cartoon tormentor, or deliberate agent of mayhem.<sup>19</sup> *Surgeon Simulator 2013*, by contrast, invites players to help out our hapless hero

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor Carman, “Conceptualism and the Scholastic Fallacy,” in *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, ed. Joseph K. Schear (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 170.

<sup>18</sup> Susan L. Hurley, *Consciousness in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 357.

<sup>19</sup> Up until the emergence of fumblecore, games based upon physical comedy have been rare, but those sporadic games that have attempted it generally have opted to treat the suffering of pratfalls as a primary objective, necessary for progressing in the game. *Starring Charlie Chaplin* (Canvas Software, 1987), for instance, places players in an explicitly performative/directorial role, staging physical comedy for a camera. Other comedic games have taken similar (though less literal) approaches to re-casting bodily harm as the stated end goal of play. *Stair Dismount* (tAAAt, 2002) and its follow-up *Turbo Dismount* (Secret Exit, 2014) base their scoring mechanisms around the amount of bodily harm players can inflict upon a unsuspecting ragdoll figure. *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014), meanwhile, casts players as a puckish goat inhabiting a universe of equal opportunity cartoon violence, in which head-butting a pedestrian

to whatever degree we can. It is a half-hearted sort of help, as we know that the game's control scheme is a duplicitous partners in this endeavor, sewing the seeds of slip-ups, and that failure is the most likely outcome for Nigel and his even-more pitiable patient. Any desire we have to press on, then, takes on an Olympian tenor. Forging a link between the infinitesimal and the infinite, we push through the intimate level of finger tendons and wrist ligaments, only to somehow suddenly find ourselves at a cosmic remove for the events onscreen, now able to aesthetically appreciate, in our distance, the many downfalls of these maladroit meat machines, alongside their rare successes.<sup>20</sup>

### **Obstinate Avatars in *QWOP* and *Probably Archery***

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into an oncoming car or flinging oneself across the map from a roller-coaster present equally valid paths towards a high score. In cases such as these, violent mishap becomes coded as an integral part of success at a game. Fumblecore games break this mold, in that the violence that upsets the best-laid plans of their protagonists does not proceed from anything quite so straightforward as perverse scoring systems. (The grades on performance *Surgeon Simulator 2013* doles out, for instance, are actually rather straightforward, rewarding speed and precision rather than blood loss or tissue damage.)

<sup>20</sup> This is not to claim that fumblecore games consistently succeed in maintaining their tactic of distanciation. Although these games are celebrated for their most ecstatic moments, any amount of time spent with them will likely also include lengthy intervals of undiluted frustration. The critical reception of *Dadliest Catch*, in particular, seems to have been weighed down by critics' dislike of the sections of the game that borrowed mechanics from better-known genres, with frustration arising during the game's more elaborate stealth sections being frequently singled out as particularly deleterious to the game's comedic tone (See Hamilton, "Octodad: Dadliest Catch - The Kotaku Review;" and Nathan Grayson, "Wot I Think - Octodad: Dadliest Catch," *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, February 2, 2014, <<http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/02/02/wot-i-think-octodad-dadliest-catch/>>). Here, the intrusion of traditional "videogame-y" tasks—to borrow a term from Grayson—brings to the fore Octodad's deficiencies as a traditional videogame avatar, forcing players into a mindset actively at odds with a comedic appreciation of the game.

Of course, the opposite end of the spectrum also poses a problem: Given that a certain segment of the so-called "hardcore" gaming audience will always seek out extreme challenges, there have been those who have approached games such as *QWOP* as just another platform for virtuosic performance, overcoming the game's attempts to stymie mastery and becoming master speedrunners of it. Here, the critical distance between player and avatar is worn down through pure persistence.

The 2008 viral hit *QWOP* puts tasks players with guiding its titular sprinter to the finish line of a race. Qwop, however, does not know how to run (or even walk, really), so the game does its best to transfer this lack of knowledge from avatar to player, by translating the act of locomotion into a delicate balancing act played across the “Q,” “W,” “O,” and “P” keys of the player’s keyboard. “O” and “P” control the contraction of the muscles in Qwop’s left and right calves, respectively, and “Q” and “W” control the contraction of his left and right thighs. The end result has been charitably described as “masochistically difficult.”<sup>21</sup> More to-the-point commentators have simply labeled the game “evil.”<sup>22</sup> The game’s creator, Bennett Foddy, a senior research fellow in the Programme on the Ethics of the New Biosciences at Oxford turned indie game designer, has embraced the game’s reputation, forthrightly admitting to wanting to create “painful” or “nauseating” experiences for players. In response to what he perceives as mainstream games becoming “too comfortable” to control, Foddy has announced a deliberate aim to create games so “anti-ergonomic” that they are “physically challenging to play”—with his dream game being one that players could boast they “had to go to the hospital” after playing.<sup>23</sup>

*Probably Archery*, released in 2014 on the gaming service Steam, presents a good contrast point with *QWOP* in charting fumblecore’s rise as a genre, from initial offerings that depended upon free, browser-based distribution as a way of finding an audience for their jokey premise, to

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Brown, “Games Work ‘Neurological Magic,’ Says *QWOP* Creator,” *Wired*, March 29, 2011, <<http://www.wired.com/gamelifelife/2011/03/qwop-girp/>>.

<sup>22</sup> Mike Rose, “How *QWOP*’s Creator Grieves Players with a Unicorn,” *Gamasutra*, August 3, 2012, <[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/175351/How\\_QWOPs\\_creator\\_grieves\\_players\\_with\\_a\\_unicorn.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/175351/How_QWOPs_creator_grieves_players_with_a_unicorn.php)>.

<sup>23</sup> Brandon Sheffield, “The Benefits of Making Your Players Suffer (And Maybe Throw Up),” *Gamasutra*, October 5, 2012, <[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/178952/The\\_benefits\\_of\\_making\\_your\\_players\\_suffer\\_and\\_maybe\\_throw\\_up.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/178952/The_benefits_of_making_your_players_suffer_and_maybe_throw_up.php)>.



commercial releases on the most visible storefront in PC gaming.<sup>24</sup> In terms of gameplay, however, family resemblances abound. *Probably Archery* does players some favors by dropping all locomotive aspects, removing the egregious tumbles that often all-to-quickly end *QWOP* sessions. It compensates for this, however, by pushing the granularity of its control scheme even further. Here, mouse movement will twist the avatar's right wrist when unaccompanied, twist the right elbow when the "E" key is being held down, and swing the right shoulder when "Q" is held down. Left arm movement is achieved by additionally holding down the "shift" key. As the movement of each joint can only be undertaken sequentially, rather than concurrently, the game arrives at a strange hybrid of real-time and turn-based movement, replacing *QWOP*'s rhythm-game like flow with the careful planning and quick execution of small, discrete gestures. While players with a few hours experience with the game may begin feel comfortable enough with its control scheme to take on some of the game's more advanced challenges, new players will likely struggle for minutes on end wrapping their heads and hands around the task of simply nocking an arrow. (The game awards an achievement for simply pulling back the string and letting an arrow fly, affixed with the gentle mockery, "How hard could it be?")

In wrangling *Qwop* and the *Probably* archer, inept hunks of virtual meat that they are, it seems apt to turn to the theory of the comic provided by philosopher Henri Bergson, a frequent reference point in theories of cinematic slapstick. Famously, for Bergson, comedic feelings stem from the impression of "[s]omething mechanical encrusted on the living."<sup>25</sup> In Bergson's view, the machine is a perfect encapsulation of the principle of *inelasticity*. Whereas human beings tend towards adaptability and responsiveness, machines are rigid, their repetitious actions governed by simple

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<sup>24</sup> Steam does not officially release sales numbers, making it difficult for researchers to adequately judge the relative popularity of PC games, but according to Sergey Galyonkin's unofficial "Steam Spy" analytics tool (<http://steamspy.com/>), the game has sold somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000 copies.

<sup>25</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Los Angeles, CA: Green Integer, 1999), 39. Italics in original.

automatism. Since society requires elasticity to function, laughter, Bergson proposes, serves the necessary social function of shaming its absence. Usually, this absence is made most manifest in the behaviors of our bodies. Whereas the intelligence of the human soul is supple, graceful, and “eager to rise aloft,” Bergson characterizes the human body as a “heavy and cumbersome vesture.”<sup>26</sup> Laughter erupts precisely when we confront bodies, sheared from the elasticity of the intellect, suddenly revealed as “stupidly monotonous” and “perpetually obstructing everything with its machine-like obstinacy.”<sup>27</sup>

Approaching the operations at work in both *QWOP* and *Probably Archery*, Bergson’s theory seems, at first glance, a perfect fit. On one side of the screen, we have the “soul”—here, the guiding intelligence of player intention—and, on the other side of the screen, the obstinate avatar. Whereas traditional avatars act as transparent mediators of agency, we might say that fumblecore avatars remind us of the mechanical intransigence that lurks within our own flesh. In doing so, they provoke laughter—our usual response when confronted with the inelasticity of bodies.

Bergson’s dichotomy between the graceful and mechanical is attractively clean, and seems to provide a solid theoretical base for an appreciation of the comedic strategies at work in fumblecore games. We should ask, though, if it is *too* clean. It is worth pointing out that bodies get a bad rap in Bergson: Advances in cognitive science, artificial intelligence, and robotics over the past several decades have allowed us to appreciate that, far from being “stupid,” our bodies actually provide a strong foundation for our intelligence. Much of what we consider intelligent behavior does not spring, fully-formed, from Bergson’s airy realm of the “soul,” but rather exploits raw physiological features distributed throughout our bodies.

To take a few examples: Human limbs are able to perform small adaptive movements without the need of neural control, simply by dint of tendon elasticity and the influence of external

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 50.

physical forces. When walking, for instance, the forward swing of our legs is mostly passive, governed by gravity, pendulum-like, rather than by neurons stimulating muscle contraction. Control of our arms is made easier by the fact that they have preferred default positions that they drift to in the absence of neural control, governed by the elastic properties of muscles, and tendons in our shoulders, elbows, and wrists.<sup>28</sup> The more our bodies exploit physics, the more the resources of our nervous system are freed from micro-management. In this way, our bodies demonstrate the design principle roboticists Rolf Pfeifer and Josh Bongard refer to as *ecological balance*: The resources we draw upon when undertaking physical tasks are distributed, with admirable economy, “between morphology, materials, control, and environment.”<sup>29</sup> The end result is a balanced spread, with neither body nor mind being over-taxed. Rather than standing as reminders of the “deep-seated recalcitrance of matter,” our bodies, when examined closely, prove to be loose and adaptive dynamical systems, displaying an effortless responsiveness to the demands of our environment, and an eagerness to reduce our minds’ workload.

The intervening century since the publication of Bergson’s notes on comedy has granted us insights into bodies that he, unfortunately, did not possess. This does not mean that his theory of comedy is not useful, but it does require some refinement and supplementation. The comedic enjoyment we get from games such as *Probably Archery* or *QWOP* does, in fact, stem from the rigid inelasticity of the bodies onscreen. But it does not proceed from the nervous recognition of the material stupidity of our own bodies. Our laughter doesn’t arrive at the expense of bodies at all—ours, or those on the screen. Rather, it is our sense of self-possessed intellect that finds itself on the

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<sup>28</sup> These examples of bodily behavior have been adapted from Rolf Pfeifer, “On the Role of Morphology and Materials in Adaptive Behavior,” in *From Animals to Animats 6: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Simulation of Adaptive Behavior*, ed. Jean-Arcady Meyer et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 26; and Rolf Pfeifer and Josh Bongard, *How the Body Shapes the Way We Think: A New View of Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 125.

<sup>29</sup> Pfeifer and Bongard, *How the Body Shapes the Way We Think: A New View of Intelligence*, 124.

receiving end of the gag. Severely lacking in the morphological base of motor competence, the *Probably* archer refuses the offloading of intelligence from brain onto body. In doing so, it provokes laughter by starkly confronting us with the limits of our own conscious agency—that supposed suppleness and gracefulness of the “soul” proposed by Bergson. However much players may want to believe in the powers of abstract, disembodied intellect, in brute force of will, the fumblecore avatar punctures these pretensions, revealing our utter incompetence once the neglected intelligence of our bodies is pulled out from under us.

In this way, fumblecore games can be considered unconventional instances of the *revenge through refusal of labor* trope in comedy. The most archetypal and canonical instances of this trope usually break down along highly gendered lines. A standout example would be Max Linder’s 1908 film *Vive la vie de garçon*. Here, Linder’s character is initially elated by his wife’s departure from his household, but his subsequent displays of gross incompetence while attempting housework illustrate the ignorance in his devaluation of “women’s work.” Order is restored at the end of the film when the wife returns home: By her taking pity on Max, the standard dynamics of domesticity, with their expected division of labor, are stabilized.

Fumblecore games offer us a glimpse of the refusal-of-labor gag structure applied to divisions of *ecological balance*, rather than gender binaries. Here, it is our avatars’ bodies that refuse their labor, standing idly by, exposing our incompetence. We may want to shoot arrows or sprint, but the bodies onscreen have decided they are under no obligation to cooperate. Their nonparticipation takes the form of an evacuation of all forms of bodily intelligence, one so forcible that it even jettisons the basic material properties we would normally associate with bodies.

Take the wrists of the *Probably* archer: As outlined above, under normal biological conditions, human wrists have preferred default positions. If you outstretch your right hand, palm up, it will remain in this position only for as long as you are actively controlling this gesture. Afterwards, it will eventually twist in a counter-clockwise direction into a more neutral position.

The wrists of the *Probably* archer do no such thing—if the player twists them into a position most people would consider awkward, they will remain in that position indefinitely, until the player once again actively controls the wrist in question. What we have here is not merely a case of players being forced to learn to consciously control what previously lurked beneath our conscious awareness. The drifting of wrists into default position is not even something that our brains “non-consciously” control: It is entirely governed by the material properties of the muscle-tendon system. The inertness of the *Probably* archer’s body is so profound that it descends to a purely morphological level. Its denial of labor is so complete that it defies even (simulated) physics in its refusal to lend us a hand.

Qwop’s body suffers from similar design problems. Although gravity has great effect on Qwop’s torso, frequently causing him to tumble forward or backwards in the hands of the non-expert player, his calves seem oddly immune to it, thanks to the unnatural stiffness of his knees. There is very little passive movement in Qwop’s legs as he stutters into a sprint; players must actively, consciously control every swing of his joints. Maintaining the careful, coordinated timing required to produce a consistent game is a virtuosic task.

Normally, gaits—whether a horse’s walk, trot, canter, and gallop, or our own human gaits of walking, skipping, jogging, or running—are examples of what are called attractor states. Attractor states are stable phases a complex physical system such as a body tends to be drawn to when in motion: A horse in a trot will, after a brief burst of momentum, enter into a new “basin of attraction” that allows it to stabilize its movement into a canter. Horses and humans have a basic tendency, defined by the interaction of environment, body, and nervous system, to settle into well-defined gaits: Once on the cusp of a particular basin of attraction, our bodies fall into them in the absence of physical or mental effort. Human hands, though, do not have attractor states

comparable to human legs.<sup>30</sup> In this way, *QWOP*'s translation of leg movement into finger-based inputs is more than just a prankish change of expectations. It is a cruel removal of the very foundational physical conditions that allow the motions of running to be efficiently, economically sustained.

Bergson's theory of comedy has proved quite profitable when applied in the analysis of performance in cinematic slapstick—from Chaplin's swerving between balletic grace and clockwork rampages to Keaton's climactic shifts from comedic inflexibility to triumphant adaptability, the play between rigidity and suppleness is a frequent feature of the embodied styles of master comedians.<sup>31</sup> Comedic videogames, however, with their need to integrate their players into the structures of dehiscent performance, have had to take a different tack, one turns the usual assumed roles of body and intellect in comedy on their head. Players submitting themselves to controlling *Qwop* or the *Probably* archer for a few minutes will chuckle at the cumbersomeness of their bodies, yes—but they will also potentially gain a newfound respect for what Maurice Merleau-Ponty at one point refers to as “*ce corps qui en sait plus que nous*”—“this body that knows more than we do.”<sup>32</sup> Susan Kozel muses that perhaps we should be more appreciative that “when we get out of bed in the morning the puppet that we are manages to string itself together once again,” given how radically obscure many of our bodies' tasks actually are to our conscious mind.<sup>33</sup> *QWOP* and *Probably Archery*, in their own humble way, inch their players to a greater awareness of our status as

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<sup>30</sup> Human hands do have attractor states; they just do not have as many as are observable in human gaits—and *QWOP*'s control scheme doesn't take advantage of any. See H. Haken, J. A. S. Kelso, and H. Bunz, “A Theoretical Model of Phase Transitions in Human Hand Movements,” *Biological Cybernetics* 51, no. 5 (1985): 347–56.

<sup>31</sup> For an example of Bergson being profitably applied to Chaplin's performance style, see Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick*, 32–36; for Bergson and Keaton, see Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor and Bodily Coping* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 45–55.

<sup>32</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 275.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 255.

inept wranglers gifted with efficient instruments, the distributed intelligence of which we should never take for granted.

## Conclusion

Of course, the feeling of being alienated from one's body is not something that was simply dreamt up by game developers looking to put a comedic spin on the player-avatar relation. Even when following figures such as Pfeifer and Bongard in working to reinstate bodies into accounts of our thinking, gradually correcting the persistent Cartesian divisions that infect popular and scientific accounts of intelligence, it is important to acknowledge the dangers of becoming too normative when writing accounts of "the body." Not all of us, after all, enjoy the sort of elegant offloading of tasks from nervous system to body that Pfeifer and Bongard's conception of ecological balance presupposes. Injury, illness, and disability all present situations in which the material properties of our appendages refuse to aid in our intentions—and, not incidentally, situations in which we typically begin to become aware of our limbs *as* material, rather than as unproblematic extensions of will. Drew Leder has coined the term "dys-appearance" to refer to those moments in which our bodies show up to us as unusable or obtrusive, as tools poorly fit to the task at hand.<sup>34</sup> Often in such moments, a newly-necessary focus on the minutia of motor acts intrudes upon our usual attitude towards tasks: "should I injure my hand," S. Kay Toombs writes, "my hand's unaccustomed ineffectiveness as an instrument of my actions" forces attention to the matter of "how it is that my fingers grasp the handle of the cup."<sup>35</sup> Our bodies cease to be things we look *through* on the way to tasks, and instead things we—and others—look *at*. We are confronted with what Dorothée Legrand

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<sup>34</sup> Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 84.

<sup>35</sup> S. Kay Toombs, *The Meaning of Illness: A Phenomenological Account of the Different Perspectives of Physician and Patient* (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 71.

refers to as the “opaque body,” an uncomfortable magnet for attention, rather than unassuming vessel of intention.<sup>36</sup>

To what extent do fumblecore games address the fact that the mode of bodily transparency they defamiliarize is a form of relative privilege? The genre’s track record is somewhat spotty in this regard. *Ampu-tea* (SparklingGames, 2013), the most overtly melancholic entry in the genre—and, subsequently, the game sporting the blackest comedic palette—provides one of the few forthright acknowledgements of this subtext, in its attempt to construct a game out of the process of acclimating oneself to a prosthesis, negotiating an artificial limb’s status as, as Vivian Sobchack has vividly put it, a “hermeneutic object” in need of interpretation.<sup>37</sup> If the subject arises at all in other games, it is usually obliquely. The promotional copy on the webpage of *QWOP* describes it as “a game where you do not have superpowers, and do not get to live out your fantasy,” but instead one in which “you need to regain something many of us take for granted: the ability to walk.”<sup>38</sup> Clearly, there is a gesture of acknowledgement here toward the lived experience of those who do not take the ability to walk for granted—but there is no specific attempt to build awareness of cerebellar ataxia or neural deafferentation, two neurological conditions with symptoms similar to the game’s mechanics.

The medium of videogames is certainly in need of play experiences that depart from the dominant fantasies of corporeal power, that offer players a chance to step into the shoes of those with different, and potentially more restricted, modes of relating to the world around them. Fumblecore games creep toward this direction—though there is, of course, something potentially

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<sup>36</sup> Dorothee Legrand, “Pre-Reflective Self-Consciousness: On Being Bodily in the World,” *Janus Head* 9, no. 2 (2007): 500.

<sup>37</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality,” in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 215.

<sup>38</sup> Bennett Foddy, “*QWOP*,” 2010, <<http://www.foddy.net/2010/10/qwop/>>.



discomforting about the fact this must-needed task is only being met in service of comedy. Are fumblecore games just “punching down”? Or do they point to a possibility, however meagerly realized, of games being used in service of empathetic identification?

Indie game developer Ashton Raze, whose spinal condition forced him to re-learn how to walk in his twenties, makes an impassioned case for the latter possibility. Even in the absence of explicit developer intent, Raze argues, *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*—which, unlike *Surgeon Simulator*, *QWOP*, or *Probably Archery*, opens its world up beyond the bounds of one body, tightly integrating the persistent gaze of others into its mechanics—acts as a powerful analogy for the pressures society places on the disabled and ill to pass as able-bodied and well.<sup>39</sup> Despite—or, perhaps, *because of*—its comedic packaging, Raze proposes that *Dadliest Catch*, in its translation of the anxieties and performative labor of passing into stealth game mechanics, could act as a gateway to public discussion among gamers about the conundrums visibility disabled people often face.<sup>40</sup> Fumblecore games, it seems, have the potential to marshal mechanics in service of empathy, to use humor in service of broadening the types of lives represented by the medium.

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<sup>39</sup> Ashton Raze, “How *Octodad* Works as an Analogy for Invisible Illnesses,” *The Telegraph*, January 31, 2014, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/10610001/How-Octodad-works-as-an-analogy-for-invisible-illnesses.html>>.

<sup>40</sup> In their frank acknowledgement of the intersubjective dimensions that emerge when the lived experience of one’s own body enters into a larger shared social world, the games of the *Octodad* franchise—despite their absurd premise—arguably go further than any of the other games examined in this article in acknowledging the emotional realities of disability. After all, as Linda Fisher points out, describing her own experience living with ALS, it is important to remember that “experience as internally lived” is always “interwoven and codetermined by the experience as externally perceived” (something conspicuously lacking in other fumblecore games, even *Ampu-tea*)—Linda Fisher, “The Illness Experience: A Feminist Phenomenological Perspective,” in *Feminist Phenomenology and Medicine*, ed. Kristin Zeiler and Lisa Folkmarson Käll (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), 39.

Has this potential been met? Not nearly enough at this time. Perhaps, in the future, disabled independent game developers will embrace the fumblecore genre with the same gusto that feminist, queer, and trans game developers have embraced the Twine platform, harnessing the possibilities of its form as a necessary corrective to a mainstream game industry that refuses to acknowledge their lived experiences. What we have now, though, is at least a start. While games such as *QWOP*, *Probably Archery*, and *Surgeon Simulator 2013* shy away from directly addressing the masquerade those with limited mobility must constantly engage in while keeping up appearances, they do slyly engage in a complementary move: They reveal able-bodiedness as itself a performance. When we act as if we are the masters of our own actions, these games insist, we claim a competence which is not our own. Employing a carnivalesque logic, fumblecore games demonstrate that, when stripped of the nonconscious corporeal scaffolding propping us up, each of us is nothing but a fool, suffering our well-deserved pratfalls.

Nothing emphasizes this point quite so much as the wave of imposter syndrome that can accompany the successful completion of a challenge in fumblecore games. Successfully guiding Nigel to perform a brain transplant in *Surgeon Simulator 2013* certainly prompts a feeling of relief, but it never feels quite like a victory. Despite my careful toiling over the task in front of me, the progress now attributed to me does not feel earned. “Nigel, we’ve been watching your performance,” reads the text on Nigel’s computer screen when he returns to his office from the ambulance, with a promise of a “special mission” that opens up the game’s next set of levels. Nigel certainly does not deserve such recognition. (He has killed at least a dozen patients in the last hour!) And *I*, as the player, certainly do not deserve this either. Surely, this success was not the result of talent on my part, but instead merely the result of my performance partner, the game’s controls, temporarily deigning to cooperate, our dehiscence briefly mended. Surely this is a matter of fate smiling upon me. But after hours of engaging in my antagonistic dance with this machine, using my hands in strange and uncomfortable ways, reaching deeply into motor acts that normally play out

below the threshold of conscious awareness, forced to confront my own ignorance of the subtleties of gesture, I find that I am no longer sure exactly who “I” am.