Thereness

Video Game Mountains as Limits of Interactivity

Sascha Pöhlmann

Abstract

This article theorizes the abstract quality of "thereness," or a challenging presence that both invites and resists being engaged by humans, which is central to the ludic and symbolic function of a number of related video games in recent years. I will discuss games that deliberately resist the mimetic approach of an ever-increasing "realism" in this popular medium but rather explore the allegorical aspects of mountains, notably without turning them into "mere" metaphors but insisting on their own distinct existence as something beyond ourselves. As virtual mountains that are not really to be played with, they invite a philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic interpretation as human mediations of what resists both mediation and the human, as something always just beyond our full cognitive and epistemological grasp, a limit rather than an object of our consciousness. I will discuss how games such as *Celeste* (2018), *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017), and *Mountain* (2014) use their unique audiovisual, tactile, and ludic qualities to convey this elusive "thereness" of the mountain as something that both challenges and rejects human interaction. Instead of offering their players the fantasy of power and control that so often underlies contemporary video games, these games evoke the otherness of mountains to take their players to the limits of interactivity within a medium that is fundamentally defined by this very interactivity.

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My approach to the mediation of mountains in video games is based on two different conceptual reference points, one from the field of poetry, the other from mountaineering. The first is Basil Bunting's poem "On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's *Cantos*" (1949). In this poem, he draws on what by then had been firmly established for roughly two centuries as the Western cultural imaginary of associating mountains with the ineffable and the sublime. While he does so to predict what timeless cultural importance Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1917–70) will have in the future, he also neatly summarizes a few crucial characteristics of mountains themselves:

> There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?
> They don't make sense. Fatal glaciers, crags cranks climb,
> jumbled boulder and weed, pasture and boulder, scree,
> et l'on entend, maybe, le refrain joyeux et leger.
> Who knows what the ice will have scraped on the rock it is smoothing?
>
> There they are, you will have to go a long way round
> if you want to avoid them.
> It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps,
> fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble![1]

This ties in with the second reference I am using as the starting point for my theorization, perhaps the most widely known quip in mountaineering. It is George Mallory's response to the question "Why did you want to climb Mount Everest?" in 1923, after the first two unsuccessful attempts and before the third one that would kill him: "Because it's there."[2] This last word is precisely the one I am interested in and want to fill with meaning for the project at hand beyond both Bunting's and Mallory's intentions and contexts. Both use the term to describe a peculiar quality of mountains and/or a peculiar perception or thought by those who contemplate them: they are *there*. This thereness is not just presence but a *challenging* presence, something

whose existence cannot be met with indifference but is a provocation in one way or another, specifically the provocation to climb that mountain, but more generally also to cognitively grasp it. At the same time, this thereness also entails a challenge that cannot be met by default, a presence that cannot easily and fully be incorporated into epistemological and ontological systems, and a phenomenon that seems irreducibly inaccessible to humans while demanding their engagement nevertheless.

Michael Marder, in a phenomenological consideration of mountains, argues that this "distance from a mountain, even when we stand at its foot, is not only ontic, or empirically measurable, but above all, ontological. . . . Faced with the mountains, an uncanny sensation persists: one cannot help but feel 'out of place,' unable to rely on the familiar routines, lived interpretations, and practical orientations of our world."[3] The mountain is always *there* but never *here*. Its physical form "delimits our ideally unbound freedom of the gaze by imposing itself upon our senses that cannot avoid it in the manner of the eighteenth-century travelers in the Alps [who blindfolded themselves in fear of their visual effect],"[4] and it thereby imposes itself on our perception and cognition while at the same time exposing their limits and our inability to grasp it in any reasonable totality. Marder's phenomenological approach indicates that what "we call a mountain is … in fact a collaboration of the physical forms of the world with the imagination of humans—a mountain of the mind," as Robert Macfarlane has it in his rich cultural history *Mountains of the Mind* (2003).[5] It is these mental mountains that interest me as I discuss their particular virtual manifestations and what players do with them. I want to argue, in brief, that video games are uniquely suited to mediating mountains because their simulated thereness is as real as what it simulates, and because this thereness potentially subverts the very interactivity that makes this simulation possible.[6]

Macfarlane elaborates on the duality that forms the mountain of the mind, stating that mountains

> are simply there, and there they remain, their physical structures rearranged gradually over time by the forces of geology and weather, but continuing to exist over and beyond human perceptions of them. But they are also the products of human perception; they have been *imagined* into existence down the centuries.[7]

These words already indicate that the relation between these physical structures and their human imagination is not at all straightforward, and Macfarlane adds that a "disjunction between the imagined and the real is a characteristic of all human activities, but it finds one of its sharpest expressions in the mountains." This means that "the mountains one gazes at, reads about, dreams of and desires are not the mountains one climbs."[8] It also means that this disjunction continually haunts the

mediated mountains of the minds as a problem of representation. If mountains are, as Marder has it, "irreducible to straightforward objects of thought" and thus "concrete resistances to the routines of idealization," then they also resist the representational repertoire we have available as part of these routines.[9]

Thereness describes a cognitive and a representational challenge as much as a physical one, and it implies that constructing and mediating these mountains of the mind is an ongoing struggle against our limits of making sense. In *The Living Mountain* (1977), her excellent prose work on the Cairngorms in Scotland, Nan Shepherd accordingly insists that "one never quite knows the mountain, nor oneself in relation to it," and being made aware of this epistemological limit is no small part of thereness and its challenge.[10] What Shepherd calls the "total mountain" exceeds, as Macfarlane explains in his introduction to *The Living Mountain*, "the possibility of our capacity ever to know it entirely."[11] However, this is not a limit we can easily accept. Bunting's second stanza suggests that not engaging this dialectic between the ineffable sublime and a desire for representation is no real option: "There they are, you will have to go a long way round / if you want to avoid them." Thereness means that the Alps are unavoidable, like in Mount Everest's challenge to Mallory; it simply will not do to pretend they are *not* there, or one will have to go to great lengths to do so, demanding a considerable amount of self-delusion in the process. At the same time, thereness is never something to be at ease with: Bunting states with ironic modesty that "it takes some getting used to," while Shepherd insists with regard to her Cairngorms that "there is no getting accustomed to them."[12] The productive provocation of the mountains is constant and beyond resolution. Thereness can perhaps be managed but not controlled, and it *must* be engaged: if you sit and wait for thereness to go away, like a fool, you will crumble before the mountains do. Yet thereness can only be confronted in the knowledge that such engagement cannot be goal-oriented but is rather, at best, an end in itself. This distinguishes thereness from mere temptation: we may be provoked by bubble wrap or wet paint to act upon it, but giving in to such desires usually satisfies them. By contrast, thereness, like the sublime, involves a difference in scale that determines how we position ourselves toward the object in question. While mountains are not the only things that evoke thereness, there are certainly not too many others, either (deserts, oceans, perhaps skyscrapers…).

Thereness thus demands its own definition of success and failure, of hope and futility, of process and result. Mallory's explanation of his quip indicates as much after he dismissed a rational and scientific motivation for his endeavor as secondary: "Everest is the highest mountain in the world, and no man has reached its summit. Its existence is a challenge. The answer is instinctive, a part, I suppose, of man's desire to conquer the universe."[13] The author of the article rightly claims that "this is pure romance," and Mallory made the statement in full recognition of its irrational-

ity. Mallory's thereness fuses a material and an imaginary element in a challenge to human enterprise, which certainly bespeaks an ideology in which the existence of the mountain is a challenge to humans rather than, say, the mountain is a sacred place that *must not* be climbed by mere mortals. It also bespeaks the ideology of British imperialism and colonial desire for geographical, political, and symbolic control.[14] Yet his comment also seems to self-consciously address such aspirations as much as their limits. Mallory acknowledges "man's desire to conquer the universe" but does not presuppose their ability to do so. The grandiose scope of his words alludes to the ultimate futility of such hubris, and they thus include a sense of *doing it anyway*, meeting the challenge for its own sake rather than in a belief in its teleology. This is Mallory's philosophical shrug at thereness, needing no further motivation than "the inverted gravity of mountain-going—the attractive force that pulls you ever upwards," while also understanding that none of his actions will ever make it go away or truly overcome it.[15]

Being the first to reach the summit is only part of the challenge posed by Everest. This is a challenge Mallory could meet, a game at which he could win, since he would be playing it against other players. Yet this is not the genuine thereness of Everest itself, as it will *continually* provide a challenge even once the first person has climbed it. In Shepherd's terms, such thereness lies in pitting "oneself against the mountain," whereas "to pit oneself merely against other players, and make a race of it, is to reduce to the level of a game what is essentially an experience."[16] Especially in his contemporary imperialist setting, Mallory may have been aware that the language of victory and domination is entirely inappropriate in dealing with "the greatest of all mountains of the mind" and its thereness that is independent of other humans and their attempts to overcome it.[17] Humans do not "conquer" the mountain, and they never "win" against it: mountaineering is a game where only loss and failure are clearly and often tragically defined, but there is no such thing as a conclusive victory. The mountain is "not a crossword to be cracked," and "to aim for the highest point is not the only way to climb the mountain, nor is a narrative of siege and assault the only way to write about one."[18] Instead, the thereness of the mountain is utterly untouched by an ascent to its summit and a descent to tell the tale. "There are the Alps," and their thereness is characterized by an indifference toward human interaction with them (even though they certainly suffer from the human impact on the environment as a whole). If mountain climbing is a game of player versus environment, as video game terminology has it, then the environment is literally not playing along. The player encounters not an opponent but rather the utter indifference of something that is part of the game but remains unchanged by it in an ontological sense (though certainly not in an environmentalist sense). The real mountain, in this sense, is a limit of interactivity: while place "and a mind may interpenetrate till the

nature of both is altered," the mountain does not react to us climbing it.[19] "Determining and overwhelming our senses, they are not things of this world, if by 'world' we understand, in a phenomenological vein, the realm of habitual experience where everything is at our fingertips. Even to an experienced mountaineer, the mountain is not quite 'ready-to-hand,'"[20] and this quality of a distinct and palpable lack of Heideggerian *Zuhandenheit* is one crucial aspect of the thereness of mountains. They are there, but not for us, and not for us to use; if there is something we can do with them, then their being is not defined by our doing something with them. The mountain is "neither noumenal nor phenomenal,"[21] and its thereness is a reminder that not everything is about us or for us.

With this ludic terminology, the introductory discussion of thereness has taken us from the abstract to the concrete issue at hand, the mediation of mountains in video games, and my discussion in the following will occur in the framework just outlined. I will discuss games that deliberately resist the mimetic approach of an ever-increasing "realism" in this popular medium to instead explore the symbolic aspects of mountains in their thereness, notably without turning them into metaphors for some human concern but insisting on their own distinct existence as something beyond ourselves (while still acknowledging that humans construct their mountains). As virtual mountains that are not really to be played with, they invite a philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic interpretation as human mediations of what resists both mediation and the human, as something always just beyond our full cognitive and epistemological grasp, a limit rather than an object of our consciousness. I will discuss how the games *Celeste* (Maddy Thorson und Noel Berry, 2018), *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (Bennett Foddy, 2017), and *Mountain* (David OReilly, 2014) use their unique audiovisual, tactile, and ludic qualities to convey this elusive thereness of the mountain as something that both challenges and rejects human interaction. I will argue that instead of offering their players the fantasy of control that so often underlies contemporary video games, these games draw on the cultural imagination of the thereness of mountains to take their players to the limits of interactivity within a medium that is fundamentally defined by it.

Mountains and Games: Theory and a Bit of History

The mountains mediated in and by video games are undoubtedly part of the Western cultural history Macfarlane outlines in his book, and their representation is as much informed by this tradition as that in other media. At the same time, since the distinguishing feature of this particular medium is interactivity, mountains are mediated differently with regard to that aspect. This difference may also help answer the broader question of what video games may add to or how they change the imagination of mountains that has so far largely occurred in the non-interactive media of

text, image, film, etc. For example, video games force us to amend Macfarlane's point that "the mountains one gazes at, reads about, dreams of and desires are not the mountains one climbs,"[22] since these virtual mediated mountains are *precisely* those one climbs, and even if this act of virtual climbing is very different from the one that can really kill you if you are careless, it is still a *physical act* that adds the element of simulation to the imaginary engagement with the mountain in representational media.

Beyond this fundamental difference, there are surely numerous points of inter-section between video games and other media, but instead of tracing these affini-ties, I will rather begin with a theoretical connection that points toward a close affil-iation between mountains and video games in a philosophical sense. It is striking just how often mountains and games are linked in texts that try to understand either of them. Perhaps the most celebrated essay on climbing, Lito Tejada-Flores's "Games Climbers Play" (1967), does just that in order to develop an ethics of climbing based on discrete sets of rules in different frameworks.[23] And perhaps one of the most inge-nious texts on games in philosophy, Bernard Suits's *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (1978), uses mountain climbing as a crucial test of its definition of games.[24]

In chapter eight of this work, Skepticus challenges the Grasshopper's definition by suggesting that mountain climbing is a game without constitutive rules in which the player, in this case Sir Edmund Hillary setting out to climb Mount Everest, "employs *all* the most efficient means available to him." The Grasshopper counters this by imag-ining an escalator to the summit and a helicopter up the fictional Mount Invincible, arguing that such most efficient means of ascending are irrelevant to the prelusory goal, which is "to *climb* mountains rather than the prelusory goal of simply being at their summits, which would not have required him to climb mountains."[25] Notably, the mountain here does not offer a clear and fixed set of rules to the player but is nevertheless necessary to the game itself and how the player creates it. The moun-tain is not just a playing field but rather a constitutive environment for a specific game that, in this particular instance, could not be played anywhere else (unlike, say, football, which can be played in a stadium as much as with any old can in the streets). Tejada-Flores's essay shows that the rules of climbing are both determined by what is being climbed and by those who climb, so that there are ways of climbing that are not climbing, and the framework of what constitutes the "well-played game"—to use Bernard De Koven's influential term[26]—is negotiable and subject to a variety of parameters.[27]

Thereness, then, is a way of describing the ludic aspect of mountains, not as a property of the physical objects themselves that invite us to play, but as a way of engaging them playfully. Yet this is not something we entirely project onto the moun-

tain: we create thereness in our perception of the mountain, but this construction depends on what is perceived as much as on the perceiver. This is not to ascribe sentience or a particularly privileged form of existence to the mountain; on the contrary, thereness really depends on the absence of such mystical thinking and, perhaps, on the absolute indifference of the object toward the subject. The ludic quality of mountains described by their thereness is most evident in the aspect it shares with gameplay: "the utter uselessness of it all,"[28] or, to put it more positively, an "activity which is intrinsically valuable."[29] Mallory's thereness describes a challenge that the mountain is not actually posing to humans. Despite all the practical and symbolic consequences his efforts may have had, his quip emphasizes most of all that there is really no *need* to climb Everest, and that asking for a reason or justification is as misguided as asking why one plays a game. There is no point to it beyond the activity itself, and it speaks volumes of what Western society has come to recognize as useful that it apparently cannot accept the pleasure of an activity as reason enough to do it.[30] It comes as no surprise that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's psychological theory of "flow," "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter,"[31] also substantially draws on the experience of mountain climbing and has found widespread application in video game studies to describe a particular experience of immersion.

This ludic affinity is precisely why games, and more particularly video games,[32] are uniquely suited for a particular way of mediating mountains: because the video game can *simulate* thereness as a quality that cannot be *represented*. Like non-interactive media, the video game can show us mountains or tell us about them: it can have us listen to their soundscape and give us sequential or static impressions of their visual aspects, but it can also invite us to interact with them in a physical way, to engage them and see if they engage us back (or not); it can ask us to see what we can *do* with the mountain and what this doing then does to us. In this way, video games do precisely the opposite of what Nan Shepherd claimed about racing other players to the mountain summit: they do not "reduce to the level of a game what is essentially an experience" but in fact offer an experience through the game.[33] This experience is fundamentally different from the experience of other media in whose reception we may be very active but never *inter*active. Video games can simulate the thereness of mountains so well because they are, in Jesper Juul's memorable phrase, "*the art of failure*, the singular art form that sets us up for failure and allows us to experience and experiment with failure." They allow the player to truly fail instead of showing them someone else's failure or telling them about it: "when you fail in a game, it really means that *you* were in some way inadequate."[34] Thus, our engagement with the medium may be framed in terms of success or failure, winning or losing, playing well or badly, which are categorically different from when we attribute them to, say,

a good reader or a bad listener. Despite their obvious ontological differences, both a virtual mountain and a real one share a similar thereness, in that both posit a challenge to the subject and allow us to experience that challenge ourselves. In other words, the mountain is mediated in video games, but its thereness *is not*. The challenge of climbing the virtual mountain is as real as that of climbing a real mountain (even though the activities themselves clearly differ). Simulated thereness is as real as what it simulates.

Given this structural parallel, one would assume that video games and mountains are such a perfect match that the history of the medium is full of climbing games that make the most of the straightforward verticality of the premise, especially given the symbolic significance invested in attempts to engage the thereness of the mountain in Western cultures:

> Most recently, the mountain summit has become a secular symbol of effort and reward … Undoubtedly, the sense of accomplishment which comes from reaching a mountain-top has historically been a key element of the desire for height. This is unsurprising—what simpler allegory of success could there be than the ascent of a mountain? The summit provides the visible goal, the slopes leading up to it the challenge. When we walk or climb up a mountain we traverse not only the actual terrain of the hillside but also the metaphysical territories of struggle and achievement. To reach a summit is very palpably to have triumphed over adversity: to have conquered something, albeit something utterly useless.[35]

Such simple allegories seem ready-made for the narrative and symbolic simplicity of a medium that usually values its interactivity above all else: there is a mountain, you know what to do. Thereness needs no premise, it is the premise, and this should be perfect for a medium that still often quite happily settles for flimsy narrative pretexts to motivate gameplay. And yet, this is not the case at all, and there are not as many video game mountains as one might expect. Of course, there are various mountains in games that may or may not serve all kinds of narrative, symbolic, and ludic functions, from visual backdrops that delimit the game world and strategic obstacles that determine possible player actions to prominent, quasi-mystical places that demarcate a particular plot point.[36] Yet these various mountains have barely any thereness, and if they do, it is often quickly and conclusively exhausted, since it turns out that climbing the highest mountain in an open-world game such as *Just Cause 3* (Avalanche Studios, 2015) or *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) is not challenging at all. Thus, what seemed like thereness in these games turns out to be just presence.

These are not the games I am concerned with here, although a more complete history of video game mountains and their function would surely be desirable. The beginning of thereness in video games may be marked by a game that finds it not in a mountain but a skyscraper, perhaps the most fitting urban equivalent to the natural

object: *Crazy Climber* (Nichibutsu, 1980). Nintendo's *Ice Climber* (1984) explicitly frames its gameplay in terms of mountain climbing, and since then a number of other games have at least incorporated elements of climbing in their gameplay. The most popular recent example of such a game is probably the rebooted *Tomb Raider* trilogy (Crystal Dynamics and Eidos Montreal, 2013; Crystal Dynamics, 2015; Eidos Montreal, 2018), which includes numerous passages that range from scaling craggy walls to a particularly memorable ascent to a summit amongst an ever-worsening snowstorm in the endgame of the first part. While the series successfully conveys the suspense of moving vertically in dizzying heights and enabling a state of flow, it exemplifies the larger trend in representations of climbing as it does not simulate thereness. Even this particularly climactic climb, however dramatic in its audiovisual representation with quick time events and the like, is no more difficult for the player than the other movements of Lara Croft, so that the required skill is no different from, say, jumping from one ledge to another in a less vertical environment in the game. The series dramatizes climbing in a representational sense, but it has little interest in *simulating* for the player the drama of actually engaging thereness. In fact, *Tomb Raider* opens with a climb to the summit as a *tutorial* to the controls as a whole. Two VR games, *The Climb* (Crytek, 2016) and *Climbey* (Brian Lindenhof, 2016), take a comparable approach in a different mode of interaction, but like *Tomb Raider* they arguably offer a rather pure pleasure of control, to use Torben Grodal's phrase, instead of a challenge to control. Grodal argues that "games are constructed to make it possible for players to gain control over the elicited arousal by means of the learning processes" and that this control is often "not absolute, but relative to his skills," depending on the genre and the context of play (say, single-player versus multiplayer).[37] Yet precisely this element of skill has been reduced instead of heightened as an aspect of player control in video games in recent years, so that games are indeed fantasies of control rather than *tests* of it. Climbing in most video games is such a fantasy of control: the player delights in making Lara Croft ascend a summit with the superhuman strength she has. Their gratification does not derive from having mastered the skill necessary to get her there but from experiencing the audiovisual and narrative framing of the gameplay and the flow it creates, since the actual interaction is usually rather trivial. *The Climb VR* offers a similar fantasy without an avatar but from a first-person perspective, where the player sees their hands as they move them but are offered the control without the strain or the punishment.

This should not imply that such games would offer a less "authentic" climbing experience than others, simply because such a naïve understanding of "realism" misconstrues what an interactive simulation is and what aesthetic effects it may produce. I offer the distinction with regard to simulating thereness not as a value judgment but as a critical insight, as I believe this to be the distinguishing feature of a particu-

lar set of games that I will describe in the following. Though very different from each other, these games all use mountains of the mind to take the player to the *limit* of control and interactivity rather than use the mountain as the setting for a fantasy of control that allows the player to overcome it as an obstacle. Here, the mountain is not just a learning curve, but the learning curve is the mountain, and this is what makes them thereness simulators. They are all representative of the unique way in which video games mediate mountains, and yet each is unique in its own right.

Celeste

The first game I want to analyze in more detail is *Celeste*. It is relevant to my discussion not only for how it consistently invests a simulation of thereness with a particular allegorical meaning, but also for how variable it is in terms of player control on the metalevel of gameplay. At first glance, *Celeste* draws on the Western imagination of mountains of the mind and their thereness, as it initially dramatizes the mountain as a challenging, mysterious, inevitable object that must be overcome or mastered by the player. The title screen depicts a stylized snow-capped mountain that introduces the cartoonish aesthetics of the game, accompanied by sounds of strong winds that are mixed with a sparse piano melody. The player starts the game by selecting the option "CLIMB" underneath an icon of said mountain (Illustration 1), which demonstrates how effective the cultural trope of mountain thereness is as a simple premise for the gameplay to come.

The scene is set through sound—a car stops, the motor is turned off—and text, telling players: "This is it, Madeline. Just breathe. Why are you so nervous?" Switching to the pixelated graphics of the interactive sections, the first screen has Madeline on the bottom left and invites players to traverse the screen to the right, according to the genre conventions of jump-and-run platform games. The snow blowing from right to left indicates that Madeline may face some resistance when trying to progress. At the foot of the mountain, lampposts, electrical wires, and weathered signs indicate that this mountain is not only a natural object but likewise a cultural one, a first impression that will be reaffirmed much more intensely by other such elements in the game that leave no doubt that this is a mountain of the mind—a magic mountain at that. These elements, together with the pixelated graphics, clearly forego any aspirations to "realism," instead setting the stage for the mountain as an allegory (Illustration 2). Its thereness, however, is retained in this anti-realist framing, and it is, in fact, central to the symbolism of the mountain in the game. Learning the few controls in the game allows the player to traverse the first brief stage, taking them to an old lady in front of a cabin who warns Madeline about the challenge ahead: "If my 'driveway' almost did you in, the Mountain might be a bit much for you." In this way, the mountain—the word capitalized and in color like the names of characters
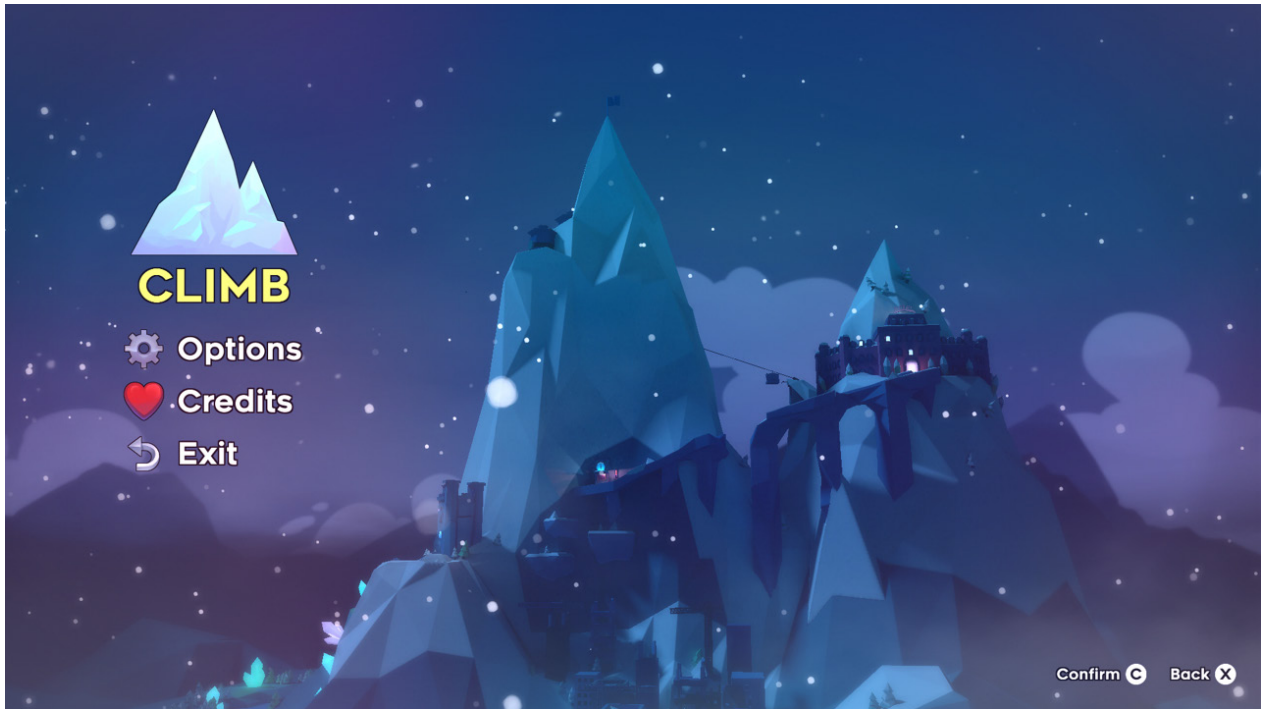
Illustration 1: The title screen of *Celeste* (2018).

Screenshot from *Celeste,* developed by Maddy Thorson and Noel Berry, published by Matt Makes Games, Windows version. *Celeste* © Matt Makes Games, 2018. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

in the game—is continually constructed as a sentient entity that is both dangerous and challenging. "Celeste Mountain is a strange place," the old lady continues. "You might see things. Things you ain't ready to see." Madeline enters this mystical place by crossing a bridge that collapses underneath her, marking the point of no return. Madeline only makes it to the other side because time is stopped in yet another anti-realist, metaludic instance, and a bird tells her about the dash move she can perform just in time to save her. "You can do this," a line of text tells the player, and this concludes the prologue.[38]

All this is constructing thereness for the player: the mountain is set up from the start as something to be climbed without any justification other than its being there; it is a "strange place" that eludes and challenges our cognitive and epistemological repertoire of sense-making; it can only be traversed by non-trivial effort; and it poses a challenge that may be too much for those who seek to rise to it, so that failure is clearly a very real option. At the same time, the game keeps cheering the player on, and the thereness of the mountain is consistently complemented by supportive symbolic gestures in various forms. Notably, these never make the challenge any lesser,[39] but they support the player in meeting it. Even more than the textual examples mentioned above, the game's thoroughly uplifting music urges players on, especially in its faster movements which are designed to generate an immersive rather than impeding it.
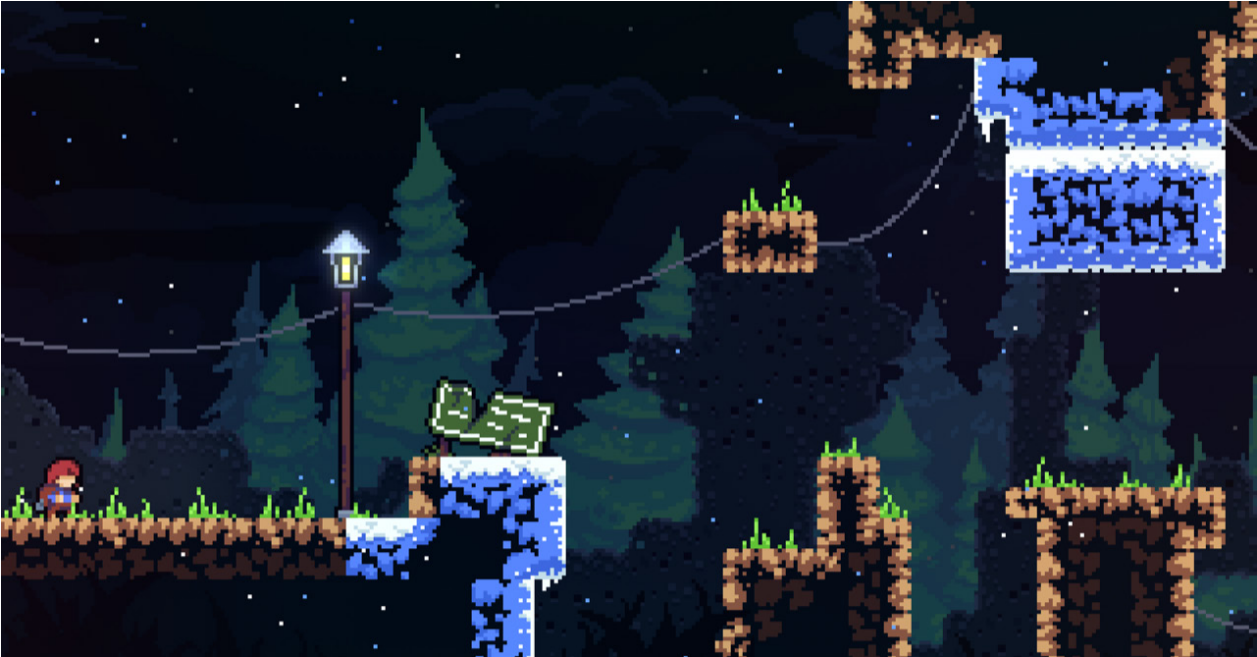
Illustration 2: The beginning of *Celeste* (2018).
Screenshot from *Celeste*, developed by Maddy Thorson and Noel Berry, published by Matt Makes Games, Windows version. *Celeste* © Matt Makes Games, 2018. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

This dichotomy between thereness and the encouragement to tackle it is crucial for the allegorical meaning invested in Celeste Mountain: climbing is associated with dealing with depression and anxiety,[40] and the challenge of getting on top of the mountain parallels that of getting on top of one's "inner demons," as the game's description puts it.[41] Notably, though, it is not Celeste Mountain itself that becomes a symbol of depression and anxiety. While it is mostly a dangerous, creepy, and challenging place, it is also not the problem to be solved. Rather, its thereness becomes the catalyst through which Madeline may deal with herself and her own troubles, "a place of healing," after all (in the words of the Old Lady). Madeline's real antagonist is "Part of Me," a manifestation of her dark side that questions her ability to climb the mountain and even actively tries to dissuade her from it:

> "I know it sounds crazy, but I need to climb this Mountain."
> "You are many things, darling, but you are not a mountain climber."
> "Who says I can't be?"
> "I know it's not your strong suit, but be reasonable for once. You have no idea what you're getting into. You can't handle this."
> "That is exactly why I need to do this."[42]

This exchange frames climbing Celeste Mountain in terms of personal improvement, of testing and pushing one's limits, but it also indicates that there is more at stake, and that the symbolism is not as straightforward as the initial premise of the game may have suggested. In fact, it turns out that the mountain allegory is com-

mendably subtle: the challenging presence of Celeste Mountain does not imply that this is a "mountain of depression" that Madeline must climb to overcome it once and for all, which would problematically and erroneously suggest that depression is something that can be tackled by sheer force of individual will, resulting in a conclusive moment of healing (one might call this the "pull yourself together" approach). Such a simple allegorical reading is prohibited precisely by the game's simulation of thereness: the mountain always remains there along with its challenge to our skill and persistence, and climbing it only changes the climber, not the mountain itself. As Theo, a fellow climber Madeline meets early in the game, puts it: "I'm freezing my toes off, but I can't imagine a better place to be for some quiet reflection." This mountain does not make sense in itself but allows players to make sense of themselves in relation to it. The mountain is not the symbolic key to unlocking the mystery of depression but rather the allegorical place to understand it better. Thereness allows Celeste to frame anxiety in ludic terms, not as something to defeat once and for all, but as an opponent in a serious game that one can learn to play well against—a game one can at least learn not to lose.

Failure is an integral part of the gameplay experience, and the game is exceptionally well-balanced in terms of its learning curve and the control it both grants to and demands of the player. Since it is a puzzle platformer, players will not be able to get through different levels on either skill or wits alone, and finding the right combination of both will take practice.[43] Practice means dying often, but the game represents this is not so much as genuine failure but more of a temporary setback: Madeline dissolves in a ring of glowing spheres and after a fast wipe almost instantly respawns in the initial position on the screen, so that the penalty for dying is minimal. One of the many ways of encouraging the player is a postcard sent to Madeline between levels: "Be proud of your Death Count! The more you die, the more you're learning. Keep going!" Dying accordingly does not interrupt the ludic flow but becomes an integral part of it, and this revalues failure as progress both symbolically and in terms of gameplay. The visual representation of Celeste Mountain supports this further: the game map that marks the players' progress includes objects that clearly indicate that this mountain has been climbed before, and that it has, in fact, been so thoroughly cultivated that climbing it can only be understood as a *personal* achievement but not as a victory over other players. An abandoned city, a castle, a hotel, a funicular, and a temple suggest that Madeline is not the first to climb the mountain, and that she may find encouragement in others having made it before her. This frames the challenge as manageable rather than impossible (although there is also a monument "to those who perished on the climb").[44]

All this encouragement is meaningful only because *Celeste* is fiendishly difficult, and this is what makes it a thereness simulator rather than just a climbing game: it

is easy to learn and hard to master, posing a significant challenge to the player that cannot be met by trivial effort. While one can easily make Lara Croft climb just by playing, one has to play *well* to make Madeline do the same. Celeste Mountain is not just a playground but an indifferent antagonist, a challenge that remains challenging even if a player has mastered the game (which has a built-in speedrun timer to allow for such different ways of playing, as well as even more difficult optional goals that are framed in such a way that missing them does not put the player at fault).

Above all, the game is *fair*. The mountain does not cheat: it is an adversary only in its indifference but not in an antagonistic way that would be impossible to engage or frustrate any attempt by default. Furthermore, the mountain cannot be cheated: you have to adapt to it and its rule set, not vice versa. Its thereness means that its challenge can be met only on its own terms, and in a genuine relation to those who perceive it as a challenge. The game does not maintain its challenge by making the player's effort seem insignificant, and it does not create the challenge in the first place by disconnecting player effort from its result. The controls in *Celeste* are as precise as they get, but this does not result in a fantasy of control, which corresponds to the framework of mountain thereness. Instead, the game provides an experience of control that could be described as "learning what you can do," not because the player gains new abilities that make earlier challenges seem trivial, but rather because they get better at using the abilities they have. (Though they *are* granted new abilities, notably by reintegrating Part of Me into Madeline rather than by defeating or rejecting her.) *Celeste*'s puzzles are designed to provide players with a sense of success at overcoming obstacles that seem impossible to overcome initially. Many screens or stages will have players move from "this one cannot be solved" to "I actually did it," and this sense of accomplishment is only possible because of the genuine challenge posed in the first place. Thereness means you have to earn it, but it also means you have truly earned it when you do.

This semantics of achievement and skill leads us on a slippery slope, though, one that leads toward a normative, exclusive privileging of ability over other ways of playing. Video games and video gamer culture valorize skill, just like sports and sports culture tend to valorize excellence.[45] The downside to this valorization is that a particular way of playing becomes the standard of playing *well*, which is tied to certain normative assumptions about ability that often go without saying. Video game studies has come to address such ideological assumptions about ability in recent years, drawing on the field of disability studies to the mutual benefit of both discourses. *Celeste* is doubly relevant in this regard because its ludic approach to depression draws on an allegory of mountain thereness, and it thus contains two symbolic discourses in which the notion of dis/ability is crucial and contested. Thereness may be construed to suggest a challenge to human endeavor that presupposes a particular level of

skill that needs to be acquired, whether it is to understand Pound's *Cantos* or climb Mount Everest, and this also presupposes a certain normative framework of ability whose rules determine who can and who cannot achieve success by these standards. In parallel, a difficult puzzle platformer such as *Celeste* may not be played by anyone because even its basic controls presuppose a level of control and skill that will exclude some would-be players from the start. Both these normative frameworks apply to *Celeste*, and both could potentially counteract its ludic/symbolic approach to depression as something that can be engaged. This would mean that the game claims to be about inclusivity but is actually exclusive in itself; in this case, the gamer meme of "git gud" as a piece of very useful advice on how to play a difficult game better would parallel the equally useful advice to a depressed person to "cheer up."[47] *Celeste*, however, deliberately eschews this normativity by including an "assist mode," which offers "both assists and control over gameplay variables, with an unpatronisingly worded introductory screen."[48] This assist mode allows the player

> to modify the game's rules to fit your specific needs. This includes options such as slowing the game speed, granting yourself invincibility or infinite stamina, and skipping chapters entirely. *Celeste* is intended to be a challenging and rewarding experience. If the default game proves inaccessible to you, we hope that you can still find that experience with Assist Mode.[49]

This assist mode is noteworthy for many reasons, and it is also relevant to *Celeste*'s simulation of thereness since one must consider the argument that such a set of options turns the game into a fantasy of control, after all, and eradicates thereness in mediating the mountain. However, the game's expansion of interactivity in the sense of enabling the widest possible group of people to play the game still finds its concrete and symbolic limit in the mountain itself, as the mountain remains the one element that ensures that the game always remains a game and does not turn into sufficiently less rule-bound play. Assist Mode or not, or in any combination of the different ways of changing the gameplay on a metalevel, *Celeste* only lets you master climbing but not the mountain. I claimed above that the mountain cannot be cheated and that you have to adapt to it and its rule set, and this still holds true even in the Assist Mode that seems to contradict this assertion, as the ground rules set by the mountain remain unaffected by even the most extreme changes to the gameplay. If anything, Assist Mode proves that the mountain remains there beyond our actions, a limit to interactivity in that it enables player agency and provides the friction it needs to exist but at the same time does not *react* and is also not only *acted upon*. The mountain is no active antagonist, but it never becomes merely a passive playground either, since it provides our interaction with a set of rules that is neither entirely fixed nor entirely flexible. This duality makes for a peculiar kind of interaction regardless of how the player exerts control over the game. If "to aim for the highest

point is not the only way to climb the mountain,"[50] then why should *Celeste* without Assist Mode be the only way to climb Celeste Mountain, and what does it say about our assumptions about thereness that we consider our engagement with it primarily in a singular way? Regardless of how players approach it, Celeste Mountain is always *there*, and the game never takes it out of the equation even as it allows for a massive variability in terms of how they interact with it.

Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy

If *Celeste* is metaphorically holding your hand for moral support while you make the difficult climb, *Getting Over It* is giving you the finger almost all the way. Both games are quite similar in their simulation of mountain thereness, but they frame it very differently for players, and the fitting tagline for *Getting Over It* is: "A game I made / For a certain kind of person / To hurt them."[51] Like *Celeste*, *Getting Over It* is an extremely hard game, but instead of encouragement it offers only the cold honesty of telling you to just get over it, mixing ridicule and self-reflexive cultural critique. The game uses a simple control scheme that only requires the movement of the mouse and not a single button or key. This simplicity is part of how the game simulates thereness: all you can and need to do is swing a hammer to climb the mountain in front of you and rise to its challenging presence, though it quickly turns out that this is akin to saying you only need to put one foot in front of the other to walk up the Matterhorn. This is truly a *Fallstudie*: a case study of falling, again and again.

Getting Over It draws on the trope of mountains as a symbol of challenge and reward before the game even starts, misleading potential buyers into believing that the game offers a mountain that can actually be conquered in a naïve sense of the term. The description advertises it as "a punishing climbing game" but claims that "great mysteries and a wonderful reward await the master hikers who reach the top of the mountain." The text announces "between 2 and ∞ hours of agonizing gameplay, depending," and promises that, as a player, you will "lose all your progress, over and over" and "feel new types of frustration you didn't know you were capable of."[52] This challenge of climbing is expanded further when the game is loaded: the menu screen comes up with a piece of rock in its left half as a hammer slams into its surface, showing the player that this is what they are supposed to do. Upon starting a new game, they see a black metal cauldron on the rocky ground next to a tree, an oversized Yosemite hammer leaning against it. In the background, a slope rising to the right suggests the direction the player's movement will take. From the cauldron, the avatar Diogenes, whose name players only learn toward the end of their ascent, emerges. He clasps the hammer, which is the only tool at his disposal, although he does not use it to nail his route but rather to swing, pull himself up, or jump (Illustration 3). The challenge for the player is evident as soon as they circle the hammer and

Illustration 3: The beginning of *Getting Over It* (2017).
Screenshot from *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy,* developed by Bennett Foddy. *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* © Bennett Foddy, 2017. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

move the avatar to the right, first over a tree and then up a rocky slope littered with seaside debris.[53]

This is where the game starts simulating thereness in earnest. The player encounters the mountain at its base, at sea level, and they have no sense of it as a whole. Instead of diminishing the provocation of thereness, though, this rather increases it, as the mountain is presented continuously but never completely. It eludes our cognitive grasp, as it is not divided into distinct screens that split up its challenge into more manageable chunks but rather is rendered in a smoothly scrolling camera movement centered on Diogenes. This is especially effective on the first playthrough as the player gets to know the mountain, but it is at least somewhat retained in repeated climbs, as the deliberate withholding of visual information at times makes the ascent harder than it would be from a better perspective. The mountain, then, is mysterious, as the player perceives in fragments what is clearly a whole, only that this totality is never available to them as such. At the same time, they mostly get a sense of its wholeness when they fall down, the continuity of the mountain evident only in the painfully quick descent, knowing that there are neither save nor safe points to avoid this continuity in failure. *Celeste* lets the player forget about the last challenge as soon as they engage the next, but *Getting Over It* maintains the possibility of having to start at the foot of the mountain again at all times, only giving the player temporary respite before taking them to very risky places again. One of

the most profoundly sublime moments of delightful horror in the game is when the player realizes that this mysterious mountain is *curved*, and that the route up bends back to the left so that when Diogenes falls at a certain point, he will not just lose some but potentially all progress.

This risk is the most crucial aspect of how this mountain presents itself to the player, and it increasingly takes center stage as the mountain changes in appearance. The "realistic" aesthetics of the rocks at its foot are disturbed early on by oddly placed objects, most notably a paper coffee cup that seems to provocatively indicate that someone has casually strolled up here. At the latest, the stairs and door next to the Devil's Chimney ensure that the player understands they are climbing an allegorical mountain of the mind that has been *designed* for their particular experience but is still not secondary to it. This mountain is still not just a tool to be used, not an object for humans, and certainly no place to make oneself at home beyond an occasional breather. Instead, it is a risky place throughout, as is highlighted again after the first clues as to the mountain's curved topography, for example when the player encounters the maddeningly difficult Orange Hell section or, shortly before the end, the terrifying threat of "the snake" that will send them all the way down.

The way in which the player interacts with this object is straightforward and both extremely limited and open at the same time: they can only move Diogenes using the hammer, and yet this movement allows for such variability that climbing the mountain in this way becomes utterly challenging. Similar to *Celeste*, the controls are as precise as they can be, and this makes every failure in the face of thereness all the more immediate, as the player really only have themselves to blame for their own inadequacies. *Getting Over It* uses the mountain to take the player to the limit of interactivity not because of how it limits their means of interaction but, rather, in its emphasis on how there really is no genuine interaction taking place. The mountain is just there, designed to provide a challenge but never antagonizing the player in response to their input (a well-placed jump scare and a hat that is not as fixed as it seems to be are the only exceptions). In other words, the game creates an awareness of the limits of interactivity by making the only way act in the game both effective and ineffective at the same time: the hammer is all you have, and climbing with it is possible but hard, so that the way to the top is both clearly laid out and utterly uncertain. The game forces the player to reflect on their interaction with it through sheer difficulty and design instead of making the controls more unreliable. It openly eschews a fantasy of control for what one could describe as a realism of control: it allows you to do exactly what it allows you to do, nothing more and nothing less, and it throws the player back entirely on their skill by depriving them of alternative ways of playing.

The mountain is central to the construction of this brutal simplicity, and its thereness is the perfect semantic catalyst to intensify the effect of the challenge for the player. In contrast, this is a symbolic element that is absent from the game that inspired *Getting Over It*, *Sexy Hiking* (Jazzuo, 2002), so that it lacks the conceptual focus necessary to make it meaningful beyond its difficulty. *Getting Over It*, however, draws on the cultural meanings ascribed to mountains and thus uses the trope of thereness as a premise for the game and, just as importantly, for its philosophical undercurrent. Form and content only become one because thereness fuses them for the player, and without it the game would be either merely didactic or no different from any other game in being only "intrinsically valuable."[54] With this symbolic underpinning, however, the climb opens itself up to further meaning-making. While the mountain does not make sense for the player, they are invited to make sense of their ascent and their struggles, failures, and successes in attempting it. The game includes Bennett Foddy's commentary on player progress as well as a set of reactions to their failures; the former is a basically a linear text that players are presented with as they clear certain milestones while the latter is randomly generated whenever they lose their progress.[55] The comments on the player's failures oscillate between comfort and taunting, between deep philosophical insight and the tragicomic emptiness of motivational posters (Illustration 4). Irrespective of how each player receives these comments, they will at least provide them with an opportunity for some quiet introspection, even though these do not make any difference in a strictly systemic gameplay sense. Ranging from Emily Dickinson and Friedrich Nietzsche to Jennifer Aniston and Ice-T as well as songs such as "Going Down the Road Feelin' Bad," these snippets all reflect on challenges, success, failure, pain, and pleasure in various ways. What they have in common is that they do not make the mountain's thereness go away but rather provide ways of considering and engaging it philosophically (just when the player's physical engagement has failed). All this is part of how the mountain of the mind is constructed both in its material and imaginary qualities, but this aspect only comes into play *during play*, only when the player engages the mountain.

This philosophy of failure is connected to the mountain but not elementary to it; the game reflects on all this, but not the mountain itself, and it is never reduced to a purely didactic or metaphorical object. Instead, it retains its thereness as something *other* than the player. The mountain becomes an object of their thought but resists being reduced to such objectivity in the service of human subjectivity. It offers an irreducible provocation that elicits responses but is not predicated on serving such a purpose.

Foddy's commentary builds on and enhances this thereness and uses it to place the player's experience in a variety of other contexts, suggesting ways of making

Illustration 4: *Getting Over It* "encourages" players in a variety of ways.
Screenshot from *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy,* developed by Bennett Foddy. *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* © Bennett Foddy, 2017. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

sense of climbing the mountain that do not make sense to us. One way to do so is to once more connect playing a game and climbing on a conceptual level. While introducing the player to the game as a homage to *Sexy Hiking,* Foddy states that "the act of climbing, in the digital world or in real life, has certain essential properties that give the game its flavor. No amount of forward progress is guaranteed. Some cliffs are too sheer or too slippery, and the player is constantly, unremittingly in danger of falling and losing everything." This reference to "essential properties" resonates with my earlier claim that simulated thereness is as real as what it simulates, as it suggests that challenge and risk are common to any climbing experience regardless of its mediated status. To create "a sense of truth in that lack of compromise," though, climbing must be a genuine challenge, and most video games no longer offer such a challenge: "Most obstacles in videogame worlds 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," whereas "frustration is . . . essential to the act of climbing and it's authentic to the process of building a game about climbing."[56] This distinguishes a climbing game from a game about climbing, control from a fantasy of control. It also differentiates a genuine digital mountain of the mind from a mere representation of a mountain since only genuine risk will add the real element to the imaginary one to complete the duality: "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."[57]

Yet Foddy does not leave it at that reflection on how to simulate mountains of the mind through thereness, instead proceeding to use it as a form of cultural critique. Somewhat reminiscent of modernist rejections of mass culture, Foddy states that most contemporary video games are

> trash in the way that food becomes trash as soon as you put it in the sink. Things are made to be consumed in a certain context, and once the moment is gone they transform into garbage. In the context of technology those moments pass by in seconds. 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.... Maybe this is what this digital culture is. A monstrous mountain of trash, the ash-heap of creativity's fountain.[58]

Yet this is not only cultural pessimism, and Foddy's own description of this dire situation indicates that the critique itself can become an aesthetic countermodel, as his words now move from the diagnostic to the poetic and become more formalized themselves, aestheticized by rhythm and rhyme and worth quoting at length:

> Everything's fresh for about six seconds
> Until some newer thing beckons
> And we hit refresh
> And there's years of persevering
> Disappearing into the pile
> Out of style
> 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?
> When games were new, they wanted a lot from you.
> Daunting you, taunting you, resetting and delaying you.
> Players played stoically. Now everyone's turned off by that.
> They want to burn through it quickly, a quick fix for the fickle
> Some tricks for the clicks of the feckless.
> But that's not you, you're an acrobat
> You could swallow a baseball bat.
> 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.[59]

This elaborate rejection of consumability as an aesthetic norm of the digital age finds its objective correlative—to playfully draw on a key modernist concept—in the mountain and its thereness, the ultimate symbol in Western culture of something that cannot easily be obtained; it is an unfriendly object whose challenge cannot be overcome once and for all even by overcoming the mountain once or twice. This mountain requires the stoicism referenced above, and it must be engaged directly and personally since the simulation of its thereness requires it. Its permanence relates to the ambiguity of the title: the game is not so much about getting over the mountain but about getting over failure, over challenge, over the game—and also over oneself as subjected to thereness. The Steam achievements indicate as much on the level of the metagame: "Got over it" is awarded for reaching the top of the mountain, "Got Over It, For Real This Time" for reaching it twice, and "So over it" for reaching it fifty times, a progress also marked by a gradual transformation of the black pot into a golden one. There is no magical reward for hikers who reach the top (except for maybe wisdom), as the game description claims, since such conclusive success would put an end to thereness. Instead of such closure, climbers find community, as the game takes them to a chat room where "only those who have climbed are welcome," and then the player exits through the "souvenir shop" and may start again. The game is thus truly a thereness simulator rather than a mere climbing game, as the challenge of the mountain does not go away after having climbed it, and the mountain is never overcome or conquered. The mountain remains there, waiting for the second and the fiftieth ascent without even waiting. If these climbs become easier, then it is only because the climber has changed, not the mountain.

Mountain

If there is a progression in how *Celeste* and *Getting Over It* deploy mountain thereness to take users from fantasies of control to the limits of interactivity, then this process finds its culmination in David OReilly's *Mountain*. Upon starting the game in version 2.0, the player is first presented with three subsequent white squares, each headed by a word such as "love" or "forgiveness." Once they have drawn something in each square, they may proceed to the next screen. Next, they are shown a screen with a spinning, glowing sphere in front of a galactic backdrop. Zooming in on the sphere, they see a mountain evidently undergoing a rapid geological formation process that builds various layers until the finished mountain is covered in green grass and trees. Four lines of text follow: "WELCOME TO MOUNTAIN. YOU ARE MOUNTAIN. YOU ARE GOD. PLEASE ENJOY YOUR TIME HERE" (Illustration 5). The next line of text appears
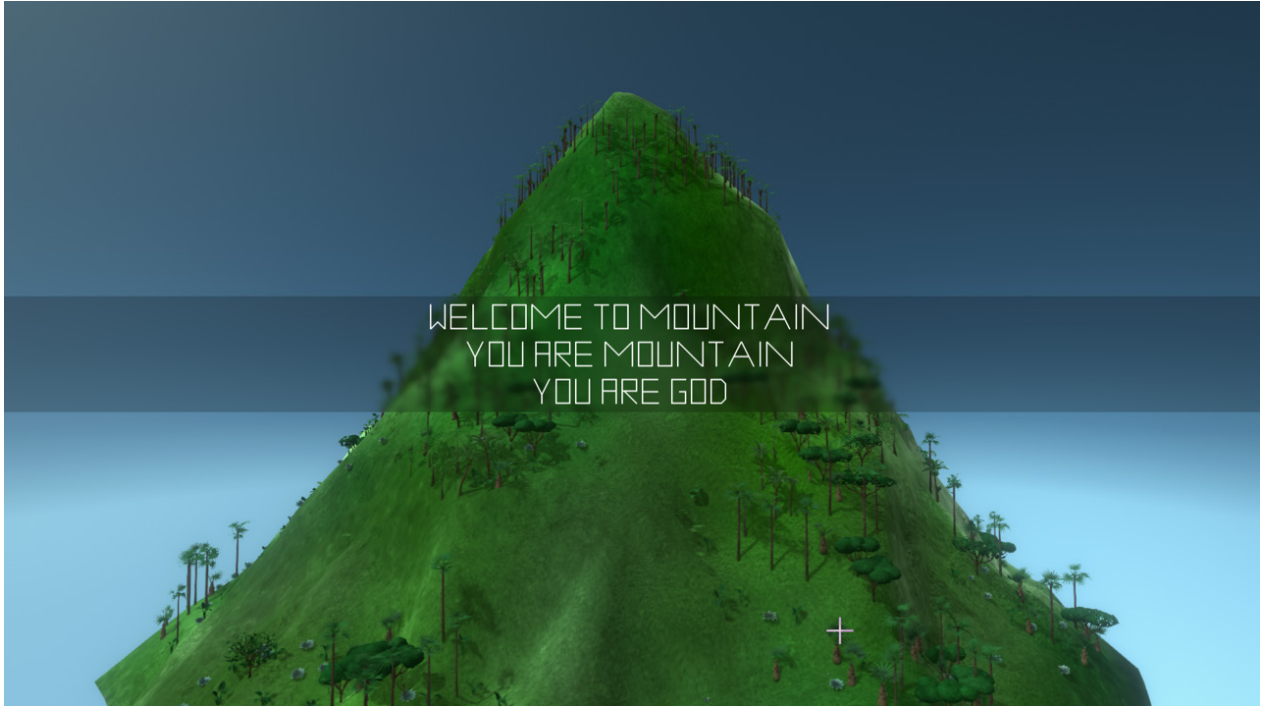
Illustration 5: The beginning of *Mountain* (2014).
Screenshot from *Mountain*, developed by David OReilly, published by Double Fine Productions. *Mountain* © Double Fine Productions, 2014. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

on top of the screen, "I AM ALIVE," which is the first of the mountain's thoughts the player reads.[60] The mountain remains firmly in the center of the screen, while the user can turn it and zoom in or out to see the mountain in its bubble or take a better look at its near-symmetrical underside, but there is little else they can do. As time passes, the user watches the weather change, sees trees grow on or vanish from the mountain, and reads the mountain's random thoughts. At some point, the first random object will come flying at the mountain from outer space, hit it, and get stuck in its side, which is also the moment where the user will once again realize that this is an allegorical, fantastic mountain of the mind rather than a "nature simulator" with any aspirations to "realism." The mountain is peppered with stuff, ranging from cars to arrows and plastic ducks. The player may click on these objects to trigger an appropriate noise or a small animation and to grab and rearrange them on the mountain. Finally, the player can press keys and play music, upon which the mountain will spin faster as time speeds up, or they can evoke a new thought by pressing a particular key (none of which is really explained but left to the user to figure out).

This is all the "gameplay" afforded to players, though, and user interaction is so minimal that the status of *Mountain* as a game has been questioned by many commentators.[61] This challenge to what makes a game a game is part of *Mountain*'s appeal and integral to its mediation of mountains through thereness. *Mountain* comes to us *as* a game, and its context and aesthetics lead us to expect it to be a game: it has

graphics, sound, music, it is available in online game stores such as Steam and Humble, and it is reviewed and discussed mostly in publications that focus on gaming. At the same time, the game playfully prides itself on not being interactive: the website lists the game features as "no controls / time moves forward / things grow and things die / nature expresses itself / [about] 50 hours of gameplay."[62] Version 1.0 of the game even spelled out "Controls: none" in an option menu in which players would usually expect to customize their input method.

This dichotomy makes *Mountain* a unique example of mediating mountains and their thereness: it aesthetically raises the expectation of interactivity while practically frustrating it on a very fundamental level. This is not the frustration integral to the experience of *Getting Over It,* but it is even more basic, since it is not the frustration of failure but that of not being able to interact in the first place. If *Celeste* and *Getting Over It* simulate thereness by creating for players the experience of a challenging presence of an object that invites but frustrates interaction, then *Mountain* takes this simulation to its logical conclusion by undermining even that aspect of simulation. *Mountain* simulates thereness by excluding the subject from the object even more radically and not granting players a performative way of making sense of a thing that does not make sense in and of itself. Notably, this lack of interactivity in a medium defined by its interactive qualities does not reduce *Mountain* to mere representation, or if it does, it is a *return* to representation *through* simulation: the aesthetics of *Mountain* enforce a ludic perspective on it that lends it just enough of a simulational quality to be more than a representation. At the same time, its representational nature that eschews simulation is an integral part of how it conveys thereness. In simpler terms, thereness in *Mountain* is first created through the *expectation* of simulation and then maintained through the refusal to simulate and involve the player *as* a player. This results in a different relation between player and game than a purely representational logic would allow. Without the promise of interactivity, *Mountain* would be just a screensaver; without the subversion of interactivity, it would be just a Tamagotchi.

Mountain thus challenges its users to engage the mountain at all. It plays with interactivity itself as it lets the user find out how to play, or rather if they can play. The first invitation to draw, for example, seems like a setup process that may determine the parameters for the mountain whose construction users will witness afterwards, but there is no evident causal relation between the drawings and the shape of the mountain. Instead, these three steps may well be the first introduction to how interactivity is subverted rather than instituted in *Mountain.* Every player action may then be understood as a way of interacting with the game but not with the mountain, even more than in *Celeste* and *Getting Over It.* Tim Barker and Conor McKeown offer a convincing reading of player control on the level of code in *Mountain,* noting
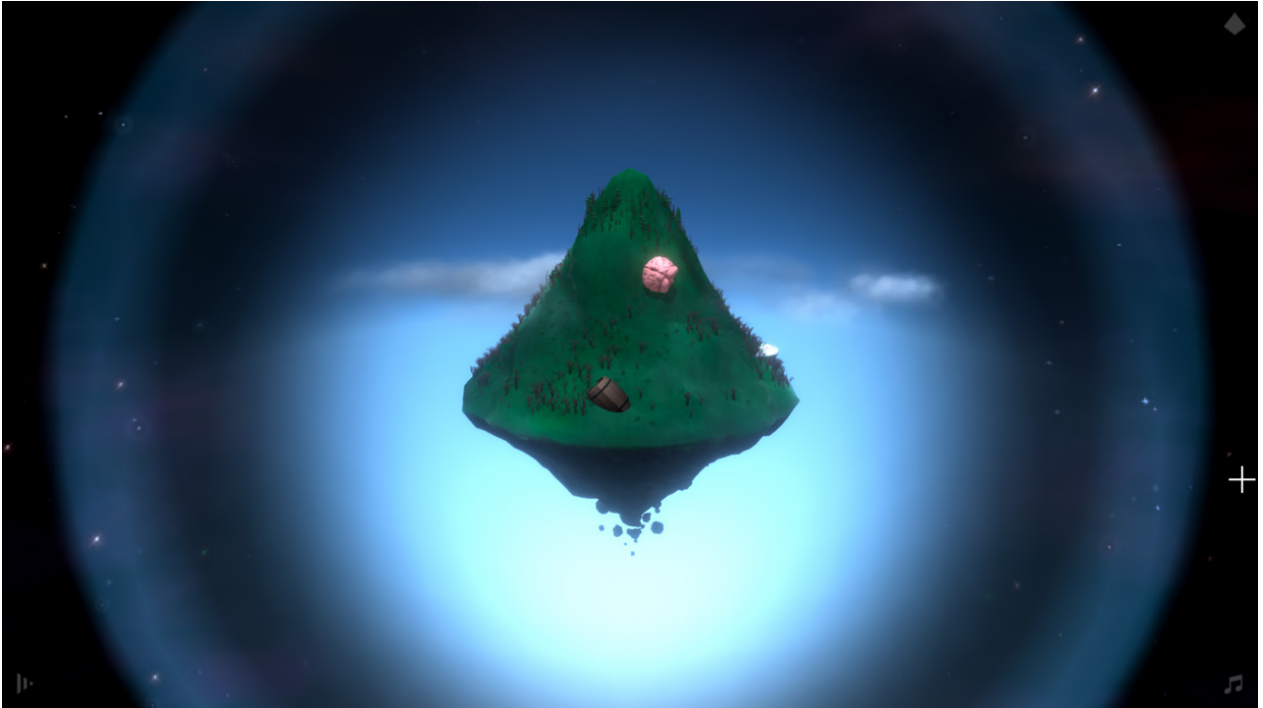
Illustration 6: The total mountain in its sphere.

Screenshot from *Mountain*, developed by David OReilly, published by Double Fine Productions. *Mountain* © Double Fine Productions, 2014. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

how apparent surface effects such as rotating the camera indicate how "human input is not a matter of 'controlling' or 'using' the game. Rather, human input is a small contribution to the vast code ecosystem."[63] Users may look at the mountain from every angle, but looking is all they do, and the game does not evoke a constructivist or quasi-Berkeleyan position that would make the mountain exist just by watching it. This is one implication of the only textual communication that directly addresses players, the initial words that tell them "YOU ARE MOUNTAIN. YOU ARE GOD."[64] The game teases users by promising them infinite power and instead turns them at best into a non-interventionist higher being removed from the reality that they observe. The user's gaze is shown to be inconsequential to the mountain, and this sense is heightened by the literal centrality of the mountain, for it is always placed at the center of the sphere on and in which the camera may move. We cannot look away, we cannot look elsewhere; this game is not about us, it is about the mountain at its center, and we are incidental to its existence. The mountain's thereness is conveyed through its central presence to which we have no access and whose totality nec-essarily escapes us in our particular perspective (Illustration 6). We can only look closer but are left entirely to partial observation rather than true interaction. This is Nan Shepherd's "total mountain," but we are not part of it.[65] Clicking on a tree will stir up a flock of birds, and clicking on an object will make it wobble or play a sound, but these minor responses to our actions rather prove our lack of agency, as they are evidently superficial and leave the mountain itself unaffected. The closest we get

to interaction is playing music, and we may be forgiven for thinking that the moun- tain responds by dancing. However, these tones only speed up time, as a result of which the mountain rotates faster, too. Similar to the drawings in the beginning, our actions do not receive the necessary feedback to give us a sense of *inter*activity as opposed to a sense of acting without palpable consequence. To put it bluntly, we can play music to this virtual mountain as much as we can play music to any real moun- tain, but we would hardly call either interacting with the mountain. What the music can do is introduce particular effects to the game: certain melodies will cause a rain of frogs, fish, or blood, but again these affect the environment of the mountain but leave the mountain itself utterly unchanged.[66]

Even the mountain's thoughts are not responses to anything users do; they can trigger a thought to be displayed, but the text is not in response to their action. Just like there is no interaction, there is also no communication, or at best the one- sided communication of the monologue or message in a bottle without a particular addressee. The mountain is thinking, but this is not "thinking like a mountain" in Aldo Leopold's sense, which refers to environmental connectedness rather than nonhu- man cognition.[67] Instead, these thoughts highlight that whatever the mountain is thinking, it is surely not thinking about *us*, and it operates independently of our sub- jectivity. These are thoughts, not messages, and users are not needed as receivers but only granted access to them, which is as close as they get to that object. Ian Bogost highlights this duality as the core aspect of the game as he discusses it in terms of his object-oriented "alien phenomenology":

> *Mountain* breaks the mold of video games not by subverting its conventions through inactivity, but by offering an entirely different kind of roleplay action as its subject. It presents neither the role of the mountain, nor the role of you the player-as-master, nor the absence of either role. In their place, *Mountain* invites you to experience the chasm between your own subjectivity and the unfath- omable experience of something else, something whose "experience" is so unfa- miliar as to be unimaginable.[68]

Bogost's notion resonates with the thereness of the mountain as something that is "irreducible to straightforward objects of thought."[69] Marder's phenomenological take on mountains is as indebted to Heidegger as Bogost's, and both their approaches as well as the game's find in the mountain and its thereness the appropriate con- ceptual thing for their interrogations of subjectivity and objectivity. The task of the player in *Mountain*, then, is not to observe, control, or receive, but rather to *con- template*. This task is unlike those video game mechanics typically demand—to the point where it is not even set as a task. The virtual mountain is just *there*, it makes no sense, but the way it is presented to us challenges us to make sense of the mountain, the game, and our part in it, without a clear teleological process that will lead play-

ers anywhere in their contemplation. The thereness of the mountain ensures that players will not think they think like a mountain but come to understand that they *cannot do that*. The initial claim that "YOU ARE MOUNTAIN. YOU ARE GOD" suggests an identity between the playing subject and the central object of the game, and yet there is not even identification, much less identity. The thereness of the mountain, its irreducible, provocative otherness, its presence that neither depends on us nor makes sense for us, prohibits any banal resolution that would dissolve the boundary between self and non-self too easily.

One final aspect of quasi-interactivity is crucial in this regard: the only way to truly do something with the mountain in the game is to destroy it. The player may trigger the apocalypse by playing the famous five musical notes from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), a reference that suggests communication across epistemological, cultural, and even ontological barriers. As the player overcomes this boundary and finally at least does something to the mountain and interacts with the game (if not the mountain itself), their action results in the annihilation of the mountain and, surprisingly, themselves. The apocalypse comes in the form of an object whose approach is staged differently—cinematically—from the other objects that hit the mountain before, with suspenseful music and a camera perspective that finally decenters the mountain to show the constellation of the two things about to collide. Upon impact, the screen flashes red and turns completely white, and the game informs the player via text that, for example, "YOU HAVE BEEN GRANTED DEATH BY THE SUN OF INFINITE DARKNESS"—*you*, not the mountain, as if the identity between player and mountain would only be possible in this moment of annihilation but never in the game itself. The final button, "RETRY," once again is a mockery of interactivity rather than its manifestation, as there has been nothing to try in the first place. The player may save the mountain from annihilation by playing music and thus building up a protective shield that will destroy the incoming object, and yet such preservation is not "the goal" of the game either. Most importantly, even the player's destructive action is no final proof of their control over the game after all, simply because the apocalypse will happen anyway even if they do not play the *Close Encounters* melody. In other words, *Mountain* is a game that can play itself as much as any human player can (a concept that OReilly takes one step further in the "sequel" to *Mountain*, his 2017 game *Everything*, which includes an autoplay mode that kicks in whenever a player has stopped playing for a few seconds[70]). If players still needed to be convinced of their irrelevance to the game despite how their interactivity has been undermined or revealed to be illusory from the start, it is surely this automatic gameplay.

In conclusion, this is the point all three games discussed here have in common, although to different degrees and to different ends: *Celeste*, *Getting Over It*, and *Mountain* all stage the absence of *Zuhandenheit* by confronting users with an object

that cannot be understood in relation to how we might use it, so that they are not users at all. The mountain in *Celeste* can neither be used as a remedy for depression nor a metaphor for it, and it retains an otherness that cannot be reduced to a function it has for the characters or the players. The mountain in *Getting Over It* can be climbed but not overcome: the progressive form of the verb in the title suggests that the process of getting over it will never end. The mountain's challenge remains even as players walk away from the game, a provocative object beyond purpose whose existence in code is as independent of humans as the existence of an actual mountain. Finally, the mountain in *Mountain* takes the aforementioned approaches to their extreme conclusion, as it turns players into "players" by giving them a mountain that is not to be played with, try as they might. They may just as well sit down and wait for it to crumble.

Notes

1   Basil Bunting, "On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos," in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Richard Caddel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 114.

2   "Climbing Mount Everest is Work for Supermen," *New York Times*, March 18, 1923, X11.

3   Michael Marder, "On the Mountains, or the Aristocracies of Space," *Environment, Space, Place* 4, no. 2 (2012): 65, DOI: 10.7761/esp.4.2.63.

4   Marder, "On the Mountains," 68.

5   Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta, 2003), 19.

6   In this essay, I use the term "simulation" not in the mimetic sense but in Gonzalo Frasca's sense that highlights interactivity and not "realism": "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system." Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London: Routledge, 2003), 223.

7   Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 19.

8   Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 19.

9   Marder, "On the Mountains," 70, 68.

10   Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (1977; Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), 1.

11   Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 105; Robert Macfarlane, introduction to *The Living Mountain*, by Nan Shepherd (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), xxiv.

12   Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 1.

13   "Climbing Mount Everest."

14   In a commendable Deleuzian essay, Ian Buchanan explores the shifting symbolic values attributed to Mallory's endeavor, arguing that "Everest wasn't, and of course still isn't, a self-evident symbol of anything," so that its "meaning had to be manufactured." Ian Buchanan, "Becoming Mountain," *Revista de Filosofia Aurora* 29, no. 46 (2017): 222–23, DOI: 10.7213/1980-5934.29.046.DS12. Robert Macfarlane also addresses these issues in

chapter 8 of *Mountains of the Mind*.

15   Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 167.

16   Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 4.

17   Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 225.

18   Macfarlane, introduction, xiv, xxiv.

19   Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 8.

20   Marder, "On the Mountains," 69.

21   Marder, "On the Mountains," 73.

22   Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 19.

23   Lito Tejada-Flores, "Games Climbers Play," *Ascent* 1, no.1 (1967): 23–25.

24   Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978; Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014), DOI: 10.3138/9781487574338. *The Grasshopper* is formally unique, combining dramatic dialogue, fable, prose narrative, and various other styles to answer Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous challenge in *Philosophical Investigations* to define what a game is. Instead of accepting Wittgenstein's proposal that games cannot be defined but only be described by a shifting set of family resemblances, Suits playfully arrives at the serious conclusion that to "play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only the means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such an activity [lusory attitude]." Or, the shortest version of this: "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." Suits, *Grasshopper*, 43. While this proposition is useful in itself as a debatable (and debated) foundation for video game analyses that seek a clear grasp of their object of study, it is not as important to the project at hand as its reference to mountain climbing. Like Tejada-Flores's "Games Climbers Play," this helps explore further the *ludic* implications of mountain thereness and its manifold challenges to humans.

25   Suits, *Grasshopper*, 90, 92. Jonathan Simon describes this difference by distinguishing "summiteers" from "mountaineers." Jonathan Sim, "Taking Risks: Extreme Sports and the Embrace of Risk in Advanced Liberal Societies," in *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility,* ed. Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 177–208, DOI: 10.7208/chicago/9780226035178.003.0008. Pam R. Sailors usefully expands on this distinction to dismiss the self-affirmative rhetoric of victory over the mountain in climbing in favor of a self-transcendent perspective. Pam R. Sailors, "More than Meets the I: Values of Dangerous Sport," in *Climbing. Philosophy for Everyone: Because It's There*, ed. Stephen E. Schmid (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 81–92, DOI: 10.1002/9781444327717.ch6.

26   Bernard De Koven, *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1978; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/9722.001.0001.

27   Just consider Reinhold Messner's dictum, voiced in his manifesto in 1968, that the use of technology in climbing results in the "murder of the impossible" and thus the central node that keeps the game of mountaineering from falling apart *as* a game. Reinhold Messner, "Direttissima—oder Mord am Unmöglichen," *Alpinismus*, no. 8 (August 1968): 17–18.

28 Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 6.

29 Suits, *Grasshopper*, 176.

30 This is why the Grasshopper claims that "game playing is what makes Utopia intelligible." Suits, *Grasshopper*, 188.

31 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 4.

32 Some board games draw on mountain thereness in their own way, most notably *Mountaineers*, which includes a massive three-dimensional game board whose verticality provides a material corollary to the imaginary component of the gameplay. See "*Mountaineers*: A 3D Board Game," *Massif Games*, accessed November 17, 2020, http://www.massifgames.com/mountaineers/.

33 Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 4.

34 Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 30, 7.

35 Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 142.

36 Mitchell F. Wolfe's "Mountains in Gaming" (2018) offers a selective and rather rough catalogue of video game mountains and their various functions, though he acknowledges that the choice of theme is "mostly arbitrary" and not based on a coherent theoretical foundation. Mitchell F. Wolfe, "Mountains in Gaming," *Medium*, February 5, 2018, https://medium.com/super-jump/mountains-in-gaming-2cb888786b0c.

37 Torben Grodal, "Video Games and the Pleasures of Control," in *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of its Appeal*, ed. Dolf Zillmann and Peter Vorderer (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2000), 209, 203. A child of its time, Grodal's essay is far too focused on psychology, violence, and film from today's perspective, and yet the text remains continually relevant for having systematically addressed the pleasures of interactivity and control in the first place, and for raising questions that require a different set of answers as the medium develops, as for instance provided by Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure*.

38 *Celeste*, dev. Maddy Thorson and Noel Berry (Vancouver, BC: Matt Makes Games, 2018), multi-platform.

39 Other games take a different approach and offer more than symbolic encouragement: for example, losing too many lives in *New Super Mario Bros. Wii* (Nintendo, 2009) triggers the optional Super Guide mode that restarts the level in an autopilot mode the player can stop any time.

40 While most reviews pick up on this aspect of the game, especially two texts usefully explore *Celeste*'s ludic take on depression further: Nathan Grayson, "*Celeste* Taught Fans and Its Own Creator to Take Better Care of Themselves," *Kotaku*, April 16, 2018, https://kotaku.com/celeste-taught-fans-and-its-own-creator-to-take-better-1825305692/; Wyatt Donigan, "That Time *Celeste* Made Me Realize I Had Depression," *Medium*, June 29, 2018, https://medium.com/@wyattdonigan/how-celeste-made-me-realize-i-had-depression-66570faa9067/.

41 "Celeste," *Steam*, accessed November 17, 2020, https://store.steampowered.com/app/504230/Celeste/.

42 *Celeste*.

43 In a notable video review of the game, Brian David Gilbert argues that the skills required to advance in the game parallel actual rock climbing in combining beta and crux, or a conceptual understanding of the best possible route and the ability to actually take it beyond a point of particular difficulty after a relatively easy introduction. Brian David Gilbert, "*Celeste* Will Make You Better at Every Video Game," *Polygon*, December 16, 2018, video review, https://youtu.be/e07FaVLET3k.

44 *Celeste*.

45 On this particular point, see Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

46 For example, the following texts explore this intersection very productively, as do an increasing number of scholarly contributions to what is undoubtedly a crucial issue: Diane Carr, "Ability, Disability and *Dead Space*," *Game Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014), http://game-studies.org/1402/articles/carr/; Joyram Chakraborty, "How Does Inaccessible Gaming Lead to Social Exclusion?" in *Disability, Human Rights, and Information Technology*, ed. Jonathan Lazar and Michael Ashley Stein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 212–24, https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812294095-015; Sarah Gibbons, "Disability, Neurological Diversity, and Inclusive Play: An Examination of the Social and Political Aspects of the Relationship between Disability and Games," *Loading …: Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9, no. 14 (2015): 25–39, http://journals.sfu.ca/load-ing/index.php/loading/article/view/150; Kara Stone, "Time and Reparative Game Design: Queerness, Disability, and Affect," *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/stone/; David Wästerfors and Kristofer Hansson, "Taking Ownership of Gaming and Disability," *Journal of Youth Studies* 20, no. 9 (2017): 1143–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1313969.

47 Many games espouse such normative positions on ability by framing their difficulty levels accordingly, so that, for example, the easiest mode of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (Machine Games, 2014)—"Can I play, Daddy?"—is illustrated by dressing up the otherwise badass protagonist with a bonnet and a pacifier, "for the spineless gamer." Even though players do have a choice, then, they may either be shamed or patronized for making what seems like a wrong choice based on the value system of the game, or they may be told more neutrally (but no less normatively) that one of these options is how the game "is meant to be played." *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, dev. Machine Games (Bethesda, MD: Bethesda Softworks, 2014), multi-platform.

48 "*Celeste* Assist Mode," *Game Accessibility Guidelines*, accessed November 19, 2020, http://gameaccessibilityguidelines.com/celeste-assist-mode/. This website is an excellent resource for inclusive game design, including abstract criteria as well as best-practice examples.

49 The wording of this introduction to Assist Mode has changed during the development process. These changes attest to how semantics and ideology intertwine with regard to how ability, skill, difficulty, and other aspects are represented and taken for granted by a particular game and in gamer culture as a whole. See the following article for a discussion of some of these changes (though not the most recent ones in version 1.3.1.2, which I consider here): Patrick Klepek, "The Small But Important Change *Celeste* Made to Its Celebrated Assist Mode," *Vice*, September 16, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/43kadm/celeste-assist-mode-change-and-accessibility.

Sascha Pöhlmann

50 Macfarlane, introduction, xxiv.

51 "Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy," *Steam*, accessed on November 19, 2020, https://store.steampowered.com/app/240720/Getting_Over_It_with_Bennett_Foddy/.

52 "Getting Over It."

53 *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, dev. Bennett Foddy (self-published, 2018), multi-platform.

54 Suits, *Grasshopper*, 176.

55 Ekfir, reply to "Quotes," *Steam Forum*, December 14, 2017, https://steamcommunity.com/app/240720/discussions/0/2425614539593135151. In this post, Steam user Erkfir has usefully transcribed this commentary. The thread contains most of the in-game quotations as well.

56 *Getting Over It*. Bennett Foddy gives examples to distinguish "Eleven Flavors of Frustration" on his website, arguing that a "[a] game that is completely devoid of frustration is likely to be a game without friction, without disobedience. Games that are perfectly obedient are mere software." Bennett Foddy, "Eleven Flavors of Frustration," *Foddy.net*, January 15, 2017. http://www.foddy.net/2017/01/eleven-flavors-of-frustration/.

57 *Getting Over It*.

58 *Getting Over It*.

59 *Getting Over It*.

60 *Mountain*, dev. David OReilly (San Francisco, CA: Double Fine Productions, 2014), multi-platform.

61 Braydon Beaulieu has deftly overviewed critical responses to Mountain and offered an original analysis of the game in relation to "the Conceptual movement in art and writing" in his essay "Conceptualizing Mountain," *First Person Scholar*, March 2, 2016, http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/conceptualizing-mountain/.

62 David OReilly, "Mountain," *Mountain Game*, last updated in December 2018, http://mountain-game.com/.

63 Tim Barker and Conor McKeown, "Unearthing Techno-Ecology: On the Possibility of a Technical Media Philosophy of Ecology," *Digital Culture & Society* 1, no. 1 (2015): 34, https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/636.

64 *Mountain*.

65 Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 105.

66 Steam user Gargoonka has compiled a short list of the ways of interacting with the game, including all musical codes: Gargoonka, "Notes, Unlocks & Tips," *Steam Forum*, August 19, 2020, https://steamcommunity.com/app/313340/discussions/0/35221031847185499/.

67 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 129–33.

68 Ian Bogost, "You Are Mountain," *The Atlantic*, July 17, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/07/you-are-mountain/374543/.

69 Marder, "On the Mountains," 70.

70 I discuss the autoplay mode in *Everything* in relation to its larger philosophical deconstruction of the distinctions between self and non-self and between player and game in my essay "Whitman and Everything." Sascha Pöhlmann, "Whitman and Everything: Playing with the Poetics of Scale," in *Revisiting Walt Whitman: On the Occasion of his*

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200th Birthday, ed. Winfried Herget (Bern: Peter Lang, 2019), 55–80.

Acknowledgments

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