Book Review

Why failing in games is a positive aspect of play: A review of Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure*

Pascaline Lorentz

Jesper Juul is a well-known and established game scholar recognized as one of the pioneers in game studies. His doctoral dissertation, which was turned into the book, *Half-Real* (Juul, 2005), opened the entire reflection about virtual life and its role in our society. His second book, *Casual Revolution* (Juul, 2010), explained the on-going evolutions in video gaming by fading the border between casual and hard core gamers. *The Art of Failure* is his third book and again the Danish scholar widens the scope of scholarship about video gaming today.

This work scrutinizes the paradox between the pain felt when failing and the wish to relive the experience. In reality, this gaming experience can both encapsulate positive and negative emotions. The truth is that "To play a game is to make emotional gamble: we invest time and self-esteem in the hope that it will pay off" (Juul, 2013, p. 14). However, positive emotions are more enjoyable, making the playing experience meaningful.

"Failure" is defined in this work as a manifestation of the gamer's limitations. Unlike stories and movies, the video gamer is in charge of the operation of in-game actions. Failing at the end of the game is synonymous with shortcomings in the gamer's skills. By sharing similarities with the paradox of tragedy saying that feeling a negative emotion can be turned into an enjoyable experience, game studies intersect with drama studies. The paradox of

---

Author Biography

Pascaline Lorentz (PhD, University of Strasbourg, France) is a postdoctoral fellow working on gaming at the Institute for Research on Children, Youth and Family at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. To learn more about her work and publications, please visit: https://muni.academia.edu/PascalineLORENTZ or https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Pascaline_Lorentz/?ev=hdr_xprf

failure might include negative emotional experiences to a certain limit. Indeed, the absence of failure coincides with the collapse of the enjoyment expected to be felt upon the completion of the game. This result may not include compulsory failing in a final action, as the player would feel deeply disappointed. Therefore they would experience negative emotions that would hold them back from enjoying the gaming experience. The author mentioned the game *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games 2010) wherein the main character had to die at the end in order to save his family (Juul, 2013, p. 28). Although successful gamers incorporate negative emotions into the overall experience, they are less likely to perform any suffering or pain as they are aware of being in charge of the creation of the story and its outcomes.

If there is a gap between the gamer's expectations and the real objective of the game, deception surfaces. Yet, if the pain of failing is too high, the gamer still benefits from the possibility of stopping to play. Nonetheless, facing these emotions is the only solution toward completion. As Juul said, "Games give us nowhere to hide" (Juul, 2013, p. 114). One way to enrich the gaming experience is to transform a negative experience into a positive one.

In order to lessen the pain, learning experience should be at the heart of the play. In this vein, failure reveals many functions. One of them paves the path of enlightening the player. Therefore, a potential elimination of negative emotional gaming experience would not solve this paradox. Indeed, this is the core of the paradox as an opportunity for growth is offered to the gamer. A recall of the concept of "The Slow Death of the Game Over", which says that making games easier generates disappointment among the gamer community, illustrates this situation. Today, players can achieve success through chance, skill and labor. Gamers make choices along their run to success, using some of their skills and personal qualities.

To put it in a nutshell, the first feed-back gamers receive when failing in a game is that they were not good enough to succeed. In order to achieve completion of the game, players must accept responsibility for their acts and then look for improving their skills. Transforming the frustration from failing into energy for learning is the key to success, that is to say, *The Art of Failure*.

Articulated like a documentary or a personal testimonial, this book is, as a result, not quite objective. Arguments lack relatedness to fields, which supposedly may address this notion of failure, such as sport studies and management studies or even self-development. Elements are extracted from the author's personal experience. Consequently, he tries to make his opinion the rule. For instance, Juul deals with the "sore loser" profile without questioning other types of losers. The impression is often given that the author looked for information confirming his statement rather than for divergent points or counterarguments. Later, he stressed that losing is humiliating (Juul, 2013, pp. 3-4), but this is not true for every player. In reality, "good" players accept defeat when they fought well and, therefore, do not feel any humiliation at all. Moreover, Juul adds later that for someone who does not invest emotionally into the game, by caring about winning, they would be a spoilsport (Juul, 2013, p. 9).

Yet, players can rather care about their way of expressing their qualities than the outcome of their use. In effect, the concept of the sore loser should be equally balanced by the good loser in order to deepen the reflection. Behind this opposition of views underlies the dormant question of what makes us either a sore or a good loser. In addition, the book also argues that playing for the sake of the game is slightly related to sportsmanship. This discourse conveys a lack of perspective by only covering the author's point of view. The book seems to be written in a self-referential sphere. In spite of this perspective, this is an important book as this work brought innovative view to game studies as its author stands as an avant-gardist. Unfortunately, the argumentation produced lacks of depth and subtlety. The impression is that Juul pioneers new ways to study and research games by slightly touching on the topic dissected. The author takes credit for bringing the topic of failure into our too performance-oriented society without giving it enough depth and weight to concretely advance the field. Indeed, game scholars might be disappointed as they all, at some point, thought about failure in both their gaming activity and in their career and could wish to glean more from the topic of this book. Maybe Juul's fear of failure takes him away from depth and murky waters of reflection about life.

Once again, Juul confirmed his game-studies pioneering position, and this book will be used as a springboard for readers to think over failure. Three years after his *Casual Revolution*, he distinguished himself with the same intention and efficiency in his latest work. Looking at failure and its role in gaming experience refreshes the debate around video games. Although others' work concentrates either on the social aspects of video games or on achievement and success, Juul marked a turning point by emphasizing the pain of failing in video gaming as a necessity. Using his own experience as a starting point, the Danish researcher astutely takes us on a journey through his thoughts and his questions, touching on emotions he felt during the gaming experience.

The book matches the expectations of the collection in which it was published. The audience targeted is not video games experts or game scholars, but rather people who know about games in general and want to increase the scope of their reflection. There is no need for previous knowledge, either about games or scholarship on games. Everything is done perfectly for making the experience of reading this book enjoyable for this specific audience. The numerous pictures from games illustrate the book extensively.

Juul's devotion to failure helps readers to question their own relationship to defeat. He genuinely stresses that failure marks the path for growth and personal enhancement and, therefore, allows gamers to accept failure.

Juul wrote this book in such a fashion that it can be read in one sitting. The articulation of ideas presented is very soft and perfectly oiled, making the reading experience highly agreeable. The author's use a back and forth with drama studies, and especially the example of the

paradox of tragedy, gives to the reader a feeling of watching a documentary instead of reading a book.

This work clearly demonstrates the current need for overlaps when studying games. Bridging game studies and drama research opened the scope for further crisscross work. In effect, this is no longer the time when games were a particular topic in itself as there has been a casual revolution linking video games to so many others topics, making them fully real.

Acknowledgements

References

Juul, J. (2005). *Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Juul, J. (2010). *A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Juul, J. (2013). *The art of failure: an essay on the pain of playing video games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.