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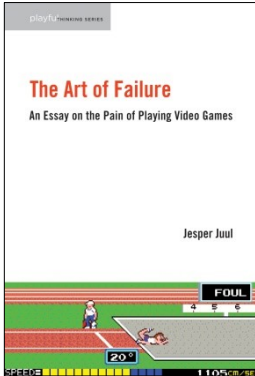
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# Video Games: A Paradoxically Painful Art Form?

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Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013, 176 pp. ISBN 978-0262019057

**W**hy do we keep on playing the games that we play when we are only doomed to fail? Why do we choose the games that we choose when they only aim to suspend our successful way towards the end? How do we cope with the feelings of inadequacy that failure in games induces when the only thing we truly want to do is win? *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* by Jesper Juul provides a fresh look at the paradoxical issues that pertain to people's need for games, be those video games, sports or games designed for the classroom and the working environment.

*The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* appears in the *Playful Thinking* series, where the books practice what they preach by endorsing a playful way of thinking about games. Juul's contribution to the series is timely as it relates to all types of games, single-/multi-player, digital or not. It seems more relevant than ever before at a time when a "*casual revolution*" (6, italics in original) of new videogame forms seems to be taking place. Juul explains that games are reaching people from all directions through mobile phones, in browsers, and on all types of social networking sites; they can also be employed for educational purposes or in the working environment.

The main syllogism of the book reads as a response in the aftermath of the long-standing controversy between Narratologists, the scholars who

examine narrative possibilities of the videogame genre, and Ludologists,<sup>1</sup> the scholars who investigate games' formal qualities.<sup>2</sup> The writer's argument is fully laid out in the introductory chapter and expresses his philosophical, psychological, game designing, and narrative concerns; the subsequent chapters analyze each domain separately. Juul's argument is built upon his *paradox of failure*, which he explains as follows:

1. We generally avoid failure.
2. We experience failure when playing games.
3. We seek out games, although we will experience something that we normally avoid. (2)

In trying to work out the equation, Juul explores people's desire for drama and their tendency towards failure despite their innate need for recognition and self-esteem through hard-earned feats of gamesmanship. He, interestingly and daringly, parallels the *paradox of failure* with the paradox of *tragedy*; he compares people's tendency towards experiences of failure in games with people's experiences of unpleasant emotions in ancient Greek tragedies, in novels, and in films. What Juul accomplishes though, is a fragile connection with Aristotle's idea of *catharsis*, a state of mind that is achieved through the tragic feelings that viewers experience. Juul adds a new dimension to the notion of *catharsis*; he bravely suggests that games are a superior art form because not only do they purge us of unpleasant feelings and excessive passions, like tragedies, novels, and films do, but they can actually produce them.

He places both paradoxes of failure and tragedy within the larger complex of the *paradox of painful art* (36). Despite the philosophical underpinning in his arguments, Juul provides a more practical explanation for people's paradoxical behaviors in gaming and regards them as contradictory desires while playing at different time frames.

In chapter three, Juul investigates the psychological cost when playing video games and the emotional mechanisms players develop in order to cope with the feelings of inadequacy that stem from failure in games. Juul proposes that games are seen as a separate enclave, a space where special rules apply and failure is tolerable. Accepting responsibility over the game adds depth to the experience; it helps gamers gain positive feedback from the experiences of failure and allows them to grow. As in educational environments, the bigger the investment of the participant, the greater the losses and the re-

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<sup>1</sup> Ludology is the discipline that deals with the critical study of games, especially video games; it explores game design, player interaction, organization of actions and events but not story or discourse. The ludologist Espen J. Aarseth recognizes the feature of "description" in games but not of "narration." (94). Cf. Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Within this controversial context, Juul has been on the Ludologist front, arguing for the study of games as a separate art form.

wards. He regards self-defeating strategies as another possible paradoxical response to failure.

In chapter four, Juul's argument takes an interesting turn towards the videogame market. From the standpoint of the game designer, he explains how the failure experience is renegotiated in order to produce games that are becoming increasingly easier. As it seems, game designers have been gradually setting smaller and easier goals, while at the same time offering gamers far more opportunities for success so as to help them reconsider their strategies. Juul contends that smaller punishments make it easier to fail as players tend to reflect on their failures and make them a personal matter.

In the light of the claim that when accepting responsibility for their futures, gamers admittedly grow, in chapter five, Juul returns to the issue of the possibility of tragedy in video games. In his effort to answer the question of whether the enjoyment of players over their accomplishments can contradict with the plight of the protagonist in a tragic fiction, he draws on scholars Janet H. Murray and Marie-Laure Ryan, who acknowledge the narrative potential of electronic experiences. Contradicting Murray's claims,<sup>3</sup> he suggests that the tragic quality of games depends upon the gamer's decision to play against the interests of the protagonist: "The question of tragedy in games is therefore not whether we automatically endorse the actions of the protagonist (we don't), but whether we are willing to work for a goal that contradicts the interests of the protagonist" (94). Building on Ryan's model,<sup>4</sup> which argues against the possibility of tragedy in video games, Juul lets the question unanswered and open for further investigation.

Juul's discussion also revolves around suicide games<sup>5</sup> and his collaboration with Albert Dang and Kan Yang Li for the creation of *The Suicide Game* (2006). In order to explain the possibility of a tragic ending in suicide games, Juul argues that particular tasks and, more specifically, committing suicide, are more important than the actual theme of suicide. During the game, set up, representation, and gameplay influence the gamers' experience of a tragic ending. For instance, in the case of the *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), where the protagonist is sacrificed so that the game can end, no emotional depth is

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<sup>3</sup> For Janet H. Murray, the properties of interactive dramas facilitate gamers' full immersion into "a fictional world". As a result, the potential of the gamers to fully immerse themselves into the reality of the interactive fiction implies the possibility of a tragic ending. Cf. Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan argues that, "Interactors would have to be out of their mind—literally and metaphorically—to want to submit themselves to the fate of a heroine who commits suicide as the result of a love affair turned bad, like Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina." Cf. Marie-Laure Ryan, "Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media." *Game Studies* 1.1 (2001). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>.

<sup>5</sup> According to Juul, in suicide games:

1. The protagonist undergoes many painful experiences.
2. The player is aware that the goal of the game is to commit suicide.
3. The player exerts efforts in order to commit suicide." (96)

sought for. By contrast, in the *Train* (2009), the possibility of the player's complicity in a hateful outcome seems to generate novel feelings in the player and protagonist. Although in stories we can never feel responsible for the outcome, in games, this is a possibility due to the interactivity potential granted to the players.

Rounding up, Juul correctly proposes that games be viewed positively as motivators. Their task-based nature helps players tackle feelings of inadequacy and makes them undertake challenges. Through experiences of failure, gamers improve their strategies, performance, and skills. By recognizing the fictionality of game environments, we also accept that games can become an outlet for the gamers' aggressive outbreaks. They are safe as they pose no tangible punishments, but they are meaningful experiences that help players reposition themselves. Yet, Juul's brave suggestions that games are "more candid and direct" and "the strongest art form yet for the exploration of tragedy and responsibility" (114), are left open for discussion. For sure, games seem to be offering to gamers more than gameplay and should be studied as such.

Despite its playfulness, the matters that Juul tackles in this book are very serious. Undoubtedly, digitality has allowed the boundaries between high brow and low brow art to blur. The convergence of technologies, media, and art has sent philosophical and literary discussions to new directions. In his older article, "What Computer Games Can and Can't Do," Juul was much more careful to stick to the formal differences between games and narratives.<sup>6</sup> In the present work, he attempts to build bridges with the literary tradition. Comparisons with other forms of art and expression can potentially lead to the videogame genre's development. The idea of playfulness contrasts with the theoretical undertone of the essay; still, it suggests the possible convergence of different theories, schools, and genres. Despite the extremely interesting and varied issues raised, the study loses out in depth and the book's pocket size is not analogous to the seriousness of the issues. Apparently, the book's goal is to voice out new insights rather than provide set answers, a practice which is met more or less with success. As readers enjoy the confessions of a researcher, practitioner, designer, and player, the strength of the book lies in the vibrant way of writing and the writer's true interest in current gaming concerns.

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<sup>6</sup> In this article, Juul suggests that "games belong to the formal/algorithmic domain, whereas stories belong in the interpretative domain." Cf. Jesper Juul, "What Computer Games Can and Can't Do." Paper presented at the *Digital Arts and Culture* conference, Bergen, Norway, August 2000. <https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/wcgacad.html>.