

**The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing
Video Games**

Jesper Juul

Playful Thinking

Jesper Juul, Geoffrey Long, and William Uricchio, editors

The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games, Jesper
Juul, 2013

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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This book was set in Stone Sans and Stone Serif by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited, Hong Kong. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Juul, Jesper, 1970-

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The art of failure : an essay on the pain of playing video games / Jesper Juul.

p. m.—(Playful thinking)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01905-7 (hardcover : alk.paper)

1. Video games—Psychological aspects. 2. Video games—Philosophy.

3. Failure (Psychology) I. Title.

GV1469.3.J87 2013

794.8—dc23

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To Otto, for teaching me how to play.

1 Introduction: The Paradox of Failure

I was playing *Patapon*¹ shown in figure 1.1. Things were going well, but when I came to the desert, my tactics began to fail. I repeated the trusted $\Delta-\Delta-\square-\circ$ sequence of button pushes, but my warriors continued to burn to death in the sun; I failed the level; I tried again. I could not glean from the game if my timing was off, if I was using the wrong sequence, or if something completely different was wrong. I put the game away; I returned to it; I put it away again. I did not feel too good about myself. I dislike failing, sometimes to the extent that I will refuse to play, but mostly I will return, submitting myself to series of unhappy failures, once again seeking out a feeling that I deeply dread.

It is with some trepidation that I admit to my failures in *Patapon*, but I can fortunately share a story that puts my skills in a better light. I had been looking forward to *Meteos*² (figure 1.2) for a long time, so I unwrapped it quickly and selected the main game mode.³ In a feat of gamesmanship (I believe), I played the game to completion on my very first attempt without failing even once. Naturally, this made me very angry. I put the game away, not touching it again for more than a year. (I have not been able to repeat this first performance.)

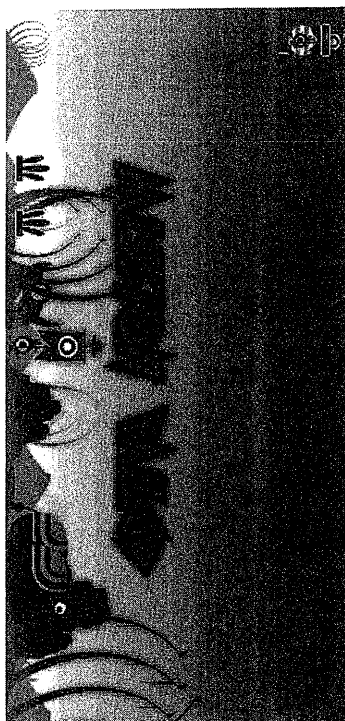


Figure 1.1
Patapon (Japan Studios 2008)

I dislike failing in games, but I dislike *not* failing even more. There are numerous ways to explain this contradiction, and I will discuss many of them in this book. But let us first consider the strangeness of the situation: every day, hundreds of millions of people around the world play video games, and most of them will experience failure while playing. It is safe to say that humans have a fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent,⁴ but game players have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent, at least some of the time. In fact, we know that players prefer games in which they fail. This is the *paradox of failure* in games. It can be stated like this:

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.

This paradox of failure is parallel to the paradox of why we consume tragic theater, novels, or cinema even though they

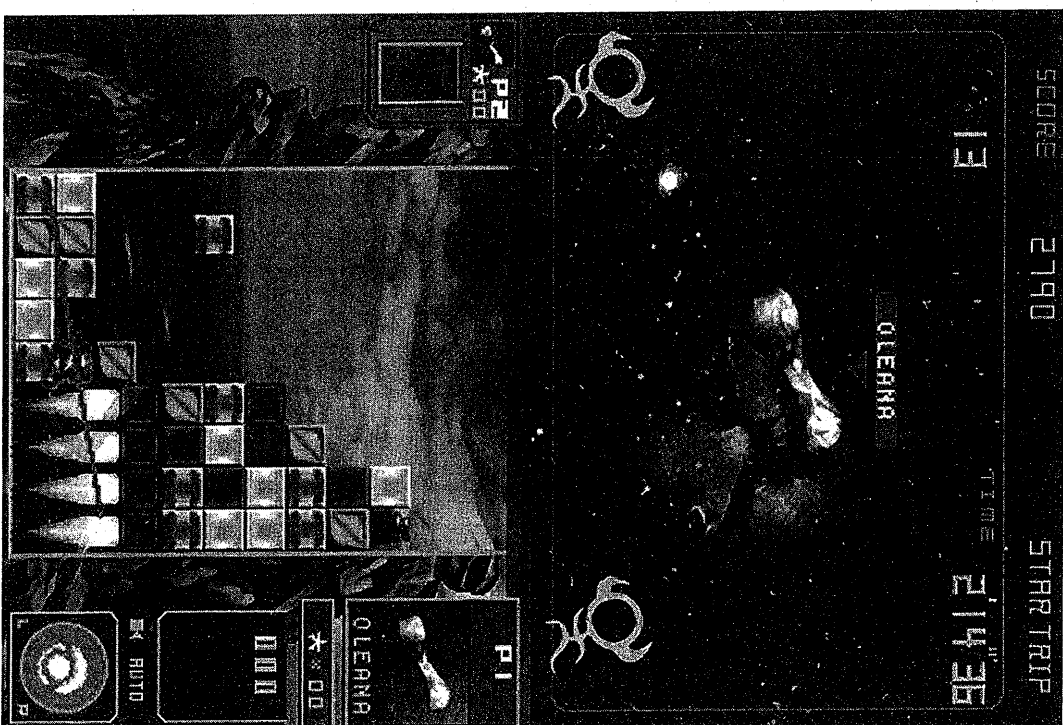


Figure 1.2
Meteos (Q Entertainment 2005)

make us feel sadness, fear, or even disgust. If these at first do not sound like actual paradoxes, it is simply because we are so used to their existence that we sometimes forget that they are paradoxes at all. The shared conundrum is that we generally try to avoid the unpleasant emotions that we get from hearing about a sad event, or from failing at a task. Yet we actively seek out these emotions in stories, art, and games.

The paradox of *tragedy* is commonly explained with reference to Aristotle's term *catharsis*, arguing that we in our general lives experience unpleasant emotions, but that by experiencing pity and fear in a fictional tragedy, these emotions are eventually purged from us.⁵ However, this does not ring true for games—when we experience a humiliating defeat, we really are filled with emotions of humiliation and inadequacy. Games do not purge these emotions from us—they produce the emotions in the first place.

The paradox is not simply that games or tragedies contain something unpleasant in them, but that we appear to *want* this unpleasantness to be there, even if we also seem to dislike it (unlike queues in theme parks, for example, which we would prefer didn't exist). Another explanation could be that while we dislike failing in our regular endeavors, games are an entirely different thing, a safe space in which failure is okay, neither painful nor the least unpleasant. The phrase "It's just a game" suggests that this would be the case. And we *do* often take what happens in a game to have a different meaning from what is outside a game. To prevent other people from achieving their goals is usually hostile behavior that may end friendships, but we regularly prevent other players from achieving their goals when playing friendly games. Games, in this view, are something different from the regular world, a frame in which failure is not the least distressing. Yet this is clearly not the whole truth:

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we are often upset when we fail, we put in considerable effort to avoid failure while playing a game, and we will even show anger toward those who foiled our clever in-game plans. In other words, we often argue that in-game failure is something harmless and neutral, but we repeatedly fail to act accordingly.

The reader has probably already thought of other solutions to the paradox of failure. I will discuss many possible explanations, and while I will propose an answer to the problem, the journey itself is meant to offer a new explanation of what it is that games *do*.

Players tend to prefer games that are somewhat challenging, and for a moment it can sound as if this explains the paradox—players like to fail, but not too much. Game developers similarly talk about *balancing*, saying that a game should be "neither too easy nor too hard," and it is often said that such a balance will put players in the attractive psychological state of *flow*⁶ in which they become agreeably absorbed by a game.⁷ Unfortunately, these observations do not actually explain the paradox of failure—they simply demonstrate that players and developers alike are aware of its existence. I will be discussing the paradox mostly in relation to video games (on consoles, computers, handheld devices, and so on), but it applies to all game types, digital or analog. I will also be looking at single-player games (failure against the challenge of the game), as well as competitive multiplayer games (failure against other players).

During the last few years, failure has become a contested discussion point in video game culture. Since roughly 2006, we have seen an explosion of new video game forms, with video games now being distributed not only in boxes sold in stores, but also on mobile phones, as downloads, in browsers, and on social networks, as well as being targeted at almost the entire population, and designed for all kinds of contexts for which

video games used to not be made. This *casual revolution*⁸ in video games is forcing us to rethink the role of failure in games: should all games be intense personal struggles that bombard the player with constant failures and frequent setbacks, or can games be more relaxed experiences, like a walk in the park? The somewhat anticipated response from part of the traditional video gaming community has been to denounce new casual and social games as too easy, pandering, simplistic, and so on. Yet, what has become clear is that both (a) many of the apparently simple games played by a broad audience are in actuality very challenging and (b) some traditional video game genres, especially role-playing games, all but guarantee players that they will eventually prevail. So failure is in need of a more detailed account, and we must begin by asking the simple question: what *does* failure do?

Consider what happens when we are stuck in the puzzle game *Portal 2*⁹ shown in figure 1.3: we understand that we are

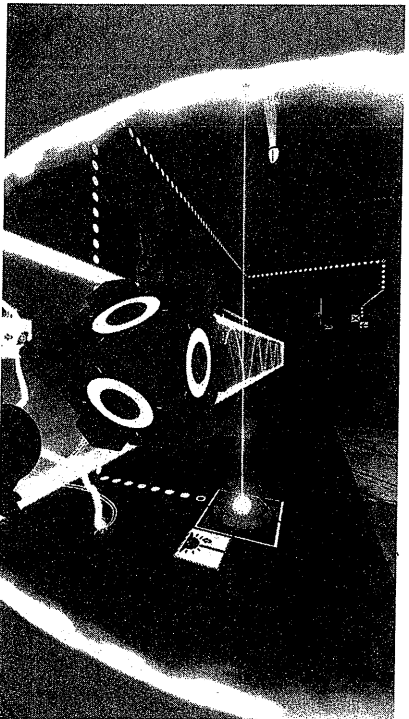


Figure 1.3
Portal 2 (Valve 2011)

lacking and inadequate (and more lacking and inadequate the longer we are stuck), but the game implicitly promises us that we can remedy the problem if we keep playing. Before playing a game in the *Portal* series, we probably did not consider the possibility that we would have problems solving the warp-based spatial puzzles that the game is based on—we had never seen such puzzles before! This is what games do: they promise us that we can repair a personal inadequacy—an inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place.

My argument is that the paradox of failure is unique in that when you fail in a game, it really means that *you* were in some way inadequate. Such a feeling of inadequacy is unpleasant for us, and it is odd that we choose to subject ourselves to it. However, while games uniquely induce such feelings of being inadequate, they also motivate us to play *more* in order to escape the same inadequacy, and the feeling of escaping failure (often by improving our skills) is central to the enjoyment of games. Games promise us a fair chance of redeeming ourselves. This distinguishes game failure from failure in our regular lives: (good) games are designed such that they give us a fair chance, whereas the regular world makes no such promises.

Games are also special in that the conventions around game playing are by themselves philosophies of the meaning of failure. The ideals of sportsmanship¹⁰ specifically tell us to take success and failure seriously but to keep our emotions in check for the benefit of greater causes. Sports philosopher Peter Arnold has identified three types of sportsmanship: (1) sportsmanship as a form of social union (the noble behavior in the game extending outside the game), (2) sportsmanship as a means in the promotion of pleasure (controlling our behavior to make this and future games possible), and (3) sportsmanship as altruism (players

forfeiting a chance to win in order to protect another participant, for example).¹¹

This type of emotional control can be challenging for children (and others), and a good deal of material exists for explaining it. The book *Liam Wins the Game, Sometimes*¹² teaches children how to deal with winning and losing in games. The author tells the child that it is acceptable to feel disappointed when losing, but unacceptable to throw a tantrum as shown in figure 1.4. "It is being a poor loser and it spoils the whole game. Others do not

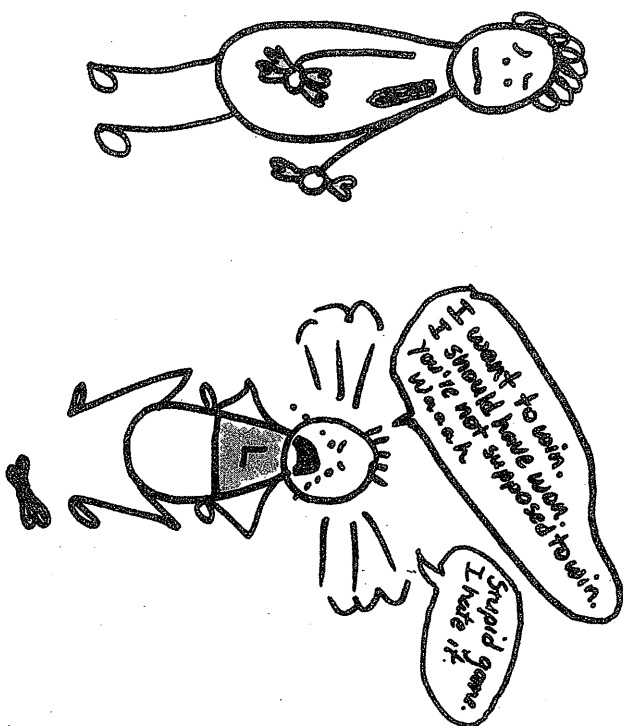


Figure 1.4

Teaching children how not to deal with failure. Illustration from Whelen Banks, *Liam Wins the Game, Sometimes: A Story about Losing with Grace* (*Liam Says*) (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009). Reproduced with permission of Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

like playing with poor losers."¹³ To be a sore loser is to make a concrete philosophical claim: that failure in games is straightforwardly painful, without anything to compensate for it. However, it is important to realize that poor losers are not chastised for showing anger and frustration, but for showing anger and frustration in the *wrong way*. Games, depending on how we play them, give us a license to display anger and frustration on a level that we would not otherwise dare express, but some displays will still be out of bounds, rude, or socially awkward. Contrary to the poor loser, the spoilsport who plays a game without caring for either winning or losing is making the statement that game failure is not painful at all.

The Uses of Failure: Learning and Saving the World

Though we may dislike failure as such, failure is an integral element of the overall experience of playing a game, a motivator, something that helps us reconsider our strategies and see the strategic depth in a game, a clear proof that we have improved when we finally overcome it. Failure brings about something positive, but it is always potentially painful or at least unpleasant. This is the double nature of games, their quality as "pleasure spiked with pain."

This is why the question of failure is so important: it not only goes to the heart of why we enjoy games in the first place, it also tells us what games can be used for. Given that games have an undisputable ability to motivate players to meet challenges and learn in order to overcome failure, wouldn't it be smart to use games to motivate players toward other more "serious" undertakings?¹⁴ It is commonly argued that the principles of game design can be applied to a number of situations in the regular world in order to motivate us: examples include designing

educational games, giving employees points for their performance, giving shoppers points for checking in at specific location, awarding Internet users with badges for commenting on Web site posts, and so on. This is a long-standing idea, which at the time of writing has resurfaced under the name of *gamification*.¹⁵ We therefore need to think more closely about why games work so well: at the very least, good games tend to offer well-defined goals and clear feedback. This gives us an objective measure of our performance, and allows us to optimize our strategies. If applying this to nongame situations sounds tempting, consider how the 2008 financial crisis was caused in part by large banks and financial institutions making their organizations too gamelike by giving employees the clear goal of approving as many loans as possible and punishing naysayers with termination. This was a case where the design that works so well inside games can be disastrous outside games, even if we think only of the well-being of the companies involved. Games, apparently, are not a pixie dust of motivation to be sprinkled on any subject. The underlying questions are therefore: When and how do games motivate us to overcome failure and improve ourselves? When is a game structure useful, and when is it detrimental? And most important: Is there a difference between failing inside and failing outside a game?

Inside and Outside the Game

Imagine that you are dining with some people you have just met. You reach for the saltshaker, but suddenly one of the other guests, let's call him Joe, looks at you sullenly, then snatches the salt away and puts it out of your reach. Later, when you are leaving the restaurant, Joe dashes ahead of you and blocks the

exit door from the outside. Joe is being rude—when you understand what another person is trying to do, it is offensive, or at least confrontational, to prevent that person from doing it.

However, if you were meeting the same people to play the board game *Settlers*,¹⁶ it would be completely acceptable for the same Joe to prevent you from winning the game. In the restaurant as well as in the game, Joe is aware of your intention, and Joe prevents you from doing what you are trying to do. At the restaurant, this is rude. In the game, this is expected and acceptable behavior. Apparently, games give us a license to engage in conflicts, to prevent others from achieving their goals. When playing a game, a number of actions that would regularly be awkward and rude are recast as pleasant and sociable (as long as we are not poor losers, of course).

Similarly, consider how the designer of a car, computer program, or household appliance is obliged to make sure that users find the design easy to use. At the very least, the designer is expected to help the driver avoid oncoming traffic, prevent the user from deleting important files, and not trick the user into selecting the wrong temperature for a wash.¹⁷ A fictional example shows what can happen if designers do not live up to his obligation: in Monty Python's "Dirty Hungarian Phrasebook" sketch, a malicious author creates a fake Hungarian language phrasebook in which (among other things) a request for the way to the train station is translated into English as sexual innuendo.¹⁸ Chaos ensues. We expect neither phrasebook authors nor designers to act this way.

However, if you pick up a single-player video game, you expect the designer to have spent considerable effort preventing you from easily reaching your goal, all but guaranteeing that you will at least temporarily fail. (Designers are also expected

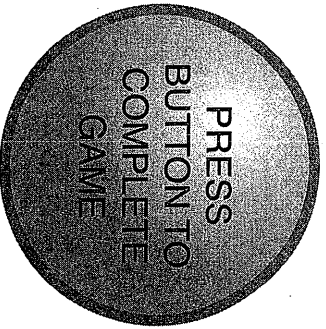


Figure 1.5
One-button game

to make *some* parts of a game easy to use.¹⁹ It would be much easier for the designer to create the game shown in figure 1.5, where the user only has to press a button once to complete the game. But for something to be a good game, and a game at all, we expect resistance and the possibility of failure. Single- and multiplayer games share this inversion of regular courtesy, giving players license to work against each other where it would otherwise be rude, and allowing the designer to make life difficult for the player.

If we return to Joe, the rude dinner companion who denied you access to the salt and blocked the door, we could also imagine him performing the very same actions with a glimmer in his eye, smiling, and perhaps tilting his head slightly to the side. In this case, Joe is not trying to be rude, but *playful*, and you may or may not be willing to play along. By performing simple actions such as saying "Let's play a game" or tilting our heads and smiling, we can change the expectations for what is to come. Gregory Bateson calls this *meta-communication*: humans

and other animals (especially mammals) perform playful actions where, for example, what looks like a bite is understood to not be an actual bite.²⁰ Such meta-communication is found in all types of play, but games are a unique type of structured play that allows us to perform seemingly aggressive actions within a frame where they are understood as not quite aggressive.

In the field of game studies, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have described game playing as entering a *magic circle* in which special rules apply.²¹ This idea of a separate space of game playing has been criticized on the grounds that there is no perfect separation between what happens inside a game, and what happens outside a game.²² That is obviously true but misses the point: the circumstances of your game playing, personality, mood, and time investment will influence how you feel about failure, but we nevertheless treat games differently from non-games, and we have ways of initiating play. We expect certain behaviors and experiences within games, but there are no guarantees that players, ourselves included, will live up to expectations.

The Gamble of Failure

It's easy to tell what games my husband enjoys the most. If he screams "I hate it. I hate it. I hate it," then I know he will finish it and buy version two. If he doesn't say this, he'll put it down in an hour.²³

In quoting the spouse of a video game player, game emotion theorist Nicole Lazzaro shows how we can be angry and frustrated while playing a game, but that this frustration and anger binds us to the game. We are motivated to play when something is at stake. It seems that the more time we invest into overcoming a challenge (be it completing a game, or simply overcoming a

small subtask), the bigger the sense of loss we experience when failing, and the bigger the sense of triumph we feel when succeeding. Even then, our feeling of triumph can quickly evaporate if we learn that other players overcame the challenge faster than we did. To play a game is to make an emotional gamble: we invest time and self-esteem in the hope that it will pay off. Players are not willing to run the same amount of risk—some even prefer not to run a risk at all, not to play.

I am taking a broad view of failure here. Examples of failures include the GAME OVER screen of a traditional arcade game such as *Pac-Man*²⁴ (figure 1.6), the failure of a player to complete a level within sixty seconds, the failure to survive an onslaught of opponents, the failure to complete a mission in *Red Dead Redemption*,²⁵ the failure to protect the player character in *Limbo*,²⁶ the failure to win a tic-tac-toe match against a sibling, and the failure to win Wimbledon or the Tour de France. It can also be something as ordinary as the failure to jump to the next ledge in a platform game like *Super Mario Bros.*,²⁷ even when it has no consequences beyond having to try the jump again (figure 1.7). Though on different scales, each of these examples involves the player working toward a goal, either communicated by the game or invented by the player, and the player failing to attain that goal. Depending on the goal of a given game, failures can result in either a permanent loss (such as when losing a match in multiplayer game) or a loss of time invested toward completing or progressing in a game.

Certainly, the experience of failing in a game is quite different from the experience of witnessing a protagonist failing in a story. When reading a detective story, we follow the thoughts and discoveries of the detective, and when all is revealed, nothing prevents us from believing that we had it figured out

all along. Through fiction, we can feel that we are smart and successful, and stories politely refrain from challenging that belief. Games call our bluff and let us know that we failed. Where novels and movies concern the personal limitations and self-doubt of others, games have to do with *our* actual limitation and self-doubts. However much we would like to hide it, our failures are plain to see for any onlooker, and any frustration that we indicate is easily understood by anyone who watches us.

This Game Is Stupid Anyway

"This Sport Is Stupid Anyway," a New York Post headline proclaimed following the US soccer team's exit from the 2010 World Cup.²⁸ Fortunately, we have ways of denying that we care about failure. We can dismiss a game as poorly made or even "stupid," and we understand this type of defense to be so childish that we will use it only half-jokingly as in the New York Post headline. This is an opportunistic "theory" about the paradox of failure: that failure in a specific game is unimportant, because it requires only irrelevant skills (if any).

Having failed in *Patapon*, I searched for "Patapon desert" and learned that I needed a "juju," a rain miracle which I did not recall having ever heard of. To my great relief, the search yielded more than 150,000 hits—I was not the only player to suffer from this problem, and I could safely conclude that the problem lay with the game, certainly not with me. Our experience of failure strongly depends on how we assign the blame for failing. In psychology, *attribution theory* explains that we try to attribute events to certain causes. Harold K. Kelley distinguishes among three types of attributions that we can make in an event involving a person and an entity.²⁹

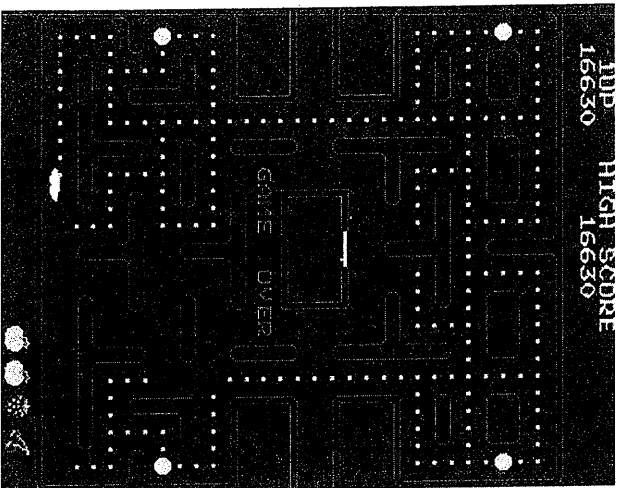
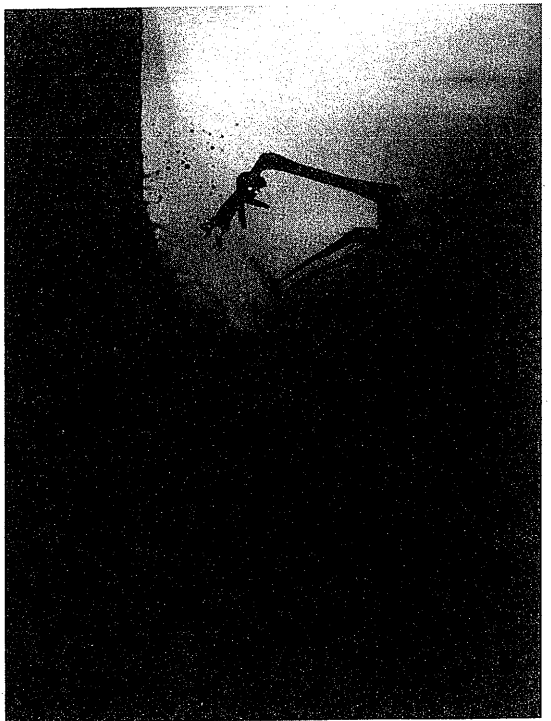


Figure 1.6

Failures: *Limbo* failed puzzle (Playdead Studios, 2010); *Pac-Man Game Over* (Namco 1980); *Super Monkey Ball Deluxe* fallout (Sega 2005)



Figure 1.6
(continued)

- *Person*: The event was caused by personal traits, such as skill and disposition.
- *Entity*: The event was caused by characteristics of the entity.
- *Circumstances*: The event was due to transient causes such as luck, chance, or an extraordinary effort from the person.

If we receive a low grade on a school test, we can decide that this was due to (1) person—personal disposition such as lack of skill, (2) entity—an unfair test, or (3) circumstance—having slept badly, having not studied enough. This maps well to common explanations for failure in video gaming: a player who loses a

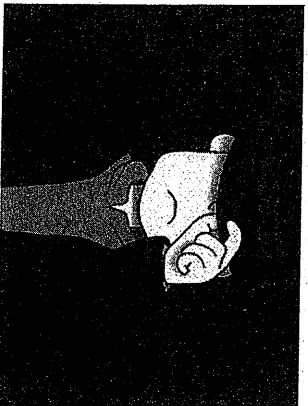
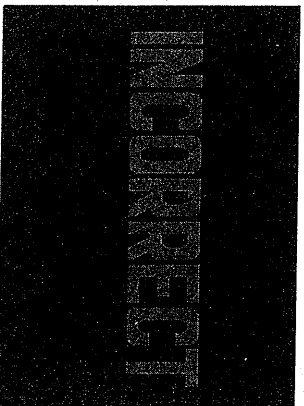
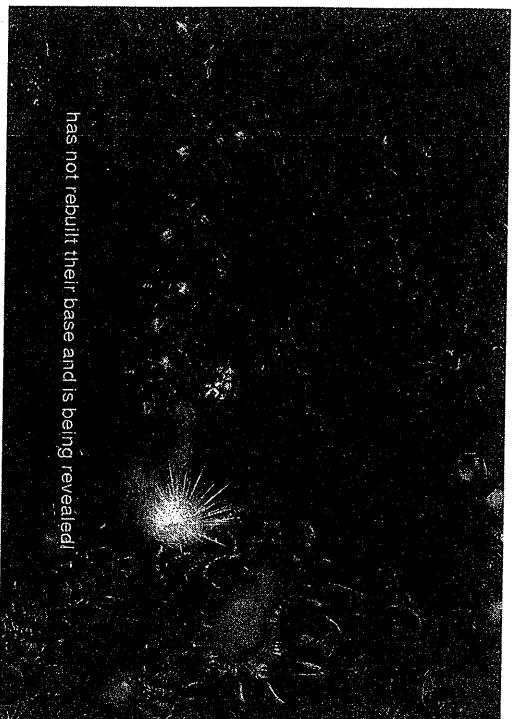
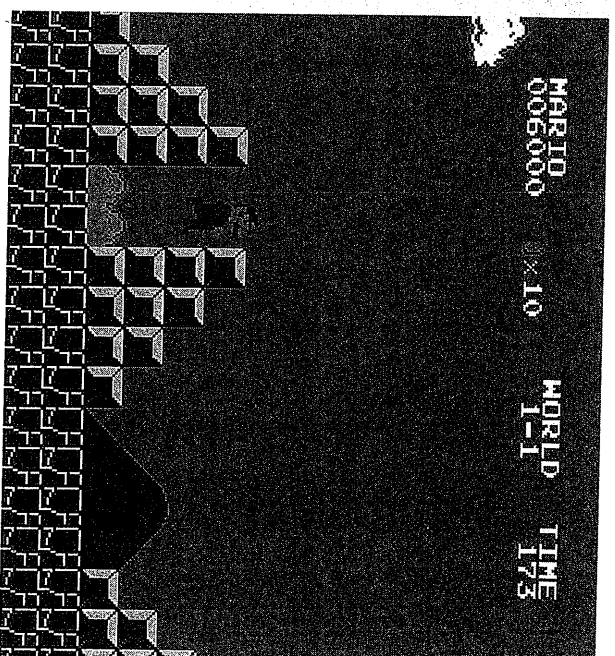


Figure 1.7

Lost StarCraft II match (Blizzard Entertainment 2010); *Professor Layton failed puzzle* (Level-5 2008); *Super Mario Bros. failed jump* (Nintendo 1985)

Figure 1.7
(continued)

game can claim to be bad at this specific game or at video games in general, claim that the game is unfair, or dismiss failure as a temporary state soon to be remedied through better luck or preparation.

I blamed *Patapon*: I searched for a solution, and I used the fact that many players had experienced the same problem as an argument for attributing my failure to a flaw in the game design, rather than a flaw with my skills. As it happens, we are a self-serving species, more likely to deny responsibility when we fail than when we succeed. A technical term for this is *motivational bias*, but it is also captured in the observation that “success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan.” After numerous attempts

at this section of *Patapon*, I was relieved to be allowed to be furious *at the game*, which I could now declare to be so poorly designed that it was not worth my time. I put the game back in its box, only returning to it months later. While we dislike feeling responsible for failure, we dislike even more strongly games in which we do not feel responsible for failure (a variation on the fact that we do not want to fail in a game, but we also do not want not to fail). The times I denied responsibility for failure in *Patapon* and stopped playing, I precluded the possibility that I would eventually cross the desert and complete the game. By refusing the emotional gamble of the game, I was acting in a *self-defeating* way: by refusing to exert effort in order to progress in the game, I was shielding myself from possible future failures. According to one theory, our fear of failure leads to procrastination: we perform worse than we should in order to feel better about our poor performance.

Still, should we accept responsibility for failure, the question becomes this: does my in-game performance reflect skills or traits that I generally value? Benjamin Franklin notably declared chess to be a game that contains important lessons: "The game of Chess is not merely an idle amusement. Several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired or strengthened by it, so as to become habits, ready on all occasions . . . we learn by Chess the habit of not being discouraged by present appearances in the state of our affairs, the habit of hoping for a favourable change, and that of persevering in the search of resources."³⁰ If we praise a game for teaching important skills, as Franklin does here, we must accept that failing in it will imply a personal lack of the same important skills. That is a question to ask about every game: does this game expose our important underlying inadequacies, or does

it merely create artificial and irrelevant ones? If a game exposes existing inadequacies, then we must fear how it reveals our hidden flaws. If, rather, a game creates new, artificial "art" inadequacies, it is easier to shrug off.

Every failure we experience in a game is torn between these two arguments pulling in opposite directions: we can think of game failure as *normal*: as a type of failure that genuinely reflects our general abilities and therefore is as important as any out-of-game failure. However, we can also think of it as *deflated*: that the importance of any failure is automatically deflated when it occurs inside a game, since games are artificial constructs with no bearing on the regular world. My point is not that these two arguments are true or false, as much as games work by making these contradictory views available to us: failure really does matter to us, as can be witnessed in the way we try to avoid failure while playing and in the way we sometimes react when we do fail. At the same time, we use deflationary arguments to protect our self-esteem when we fail, and this gives games a kind of lightness and freedom that allows us to perform to the best of ability, because we have the option of denying that game failure matters.

The Meaning of the Art Form

Even if we often dismiss the importance of games, we also discuss them, especially the games that we call sports, as something above, something more pure than, everyday life. In professional sports, games are often framed as something noble, something that truly reveals the best side of humans, something larger than life—think only of movies like *Chariots of Fire*,³¹ or the cultural obsession with athletes. In soccer, the Real Madrid–Barcelona

rivalry continues to be played out with a layer of meaning that goes back to the Franco era. In baseball, the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox have competed for over a century, and every match between the two teams is seen through that lens and adds to that history. This extends beyond games involving physical effort. For example, the legendary 1972 World Chess Championship match in Reykjavik between US player Bobby Fischer and Soviet Boris Spassky was understood as an extension of the Cold War. These examples demonstrate that we routinely understand games as more important, more glorious, and more tragic than everyday life.

Outside the realm of sports, late eighteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Schiller went so far as to declare *play* central to being human: "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*."³² In the 1930s, Dutch play theorist Johan Huizinga noted this duality between our framing of games as either important or frivolous, by describing play as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly."³³ We can talk about games as either carved-off experiences with no bearing on the rest of the world or as revealing something deeper, something truly human, something otherwise invisible.

This type of discussion, of whether game failures, and games by extension, are significant, has been applied to every art form. All humans consume artistic expressions from music through storytelling to the visual arts. We may share the intuition that the arts are fruitful, inspirational, and important, yet it is hard to demonstrate or measure such positive effects. In *The Republic*, Plato famously denied the poet access to his ideal

society "because he wakens and encourages and strengthens the lower elements in the mind to the detriment of reason."³⁴ Compare this with the continued idealization of art as a privileged way of understanding the world.³⁵ Games share this predicament with other art forms: we may sense that they are important, that they give access to something 'profound'; it is just that we have no easy way to prove that. Games are activities that have no *necessary* tangible consequences (though we can negotiate to play for concrete consequences—money, doing the dishes, etc.).³⁶ This lack of necessary tangible consequences (productive, negative, or positive) defines games, but it can also make them seem frivolous.³⁷ Yet it is precisely because games are not obviously necessary for our daily lives that we can declare them to be above the banality of our simpler, more mundane needs.

Video games have by now celebrated their fiftieth anniversary, while games in general have been around for at least five thousand years. The first decade of this century saw the appearance of the new field of video game studies, including conferences, journals, and university programs. The defense of video games (as of most things) tends to grow from personal fascination. *I* enjoy video games; *I* feel that they give me important experiences; *I* associate them with wide-ranging thoughts about life, the universe, and so on. This is valuable to *me*, and *I* want to understand and share it. From that starting point, video game fans have so far focused on two different arguments for the value of video games:

1. *Video games can do what established art forms do.* In this strategy, the fan claims that video games can produce the same type of experiences as (typically) cinema or literature produce. Are video games not engaging like *War and Peace* or *The Seventh Seal*? The downside to this strategy is that it makes video games

sound derivative: if we only argue that video games live up to criteria set by literature or cinema, why bother with games at all?

2. *Video games transcend established categories.* In this strategy, the fan can argue that since we already have film, why should video games aspire to be film? It follows that we need to identify and appraise the *unique* qualities of video games. In its most austere form, this can become an argument for identifying a "pure" game that should be purged of influences from other art forms, typically by banishing straightforward narrative from game design. The softer version of this argument (which happens to be my personal position) states that video games should try to explore their own unique qualities, while borrowing liberally from other art forms as needed.

Again, these are theories that we use to explain our experiences. When I play video games, I do experience something important, profound. Video games are for me a space of reflection, a constant measuring of my abilities, a mirror in which I can see my everyday behavior reflected, amplified, distorted, and revealed, a place where I deal with failure and learn how to rise to a challenge. Which is to say that video games give me unique and valuable experiences, regardless of how I would like to argue for their worth as an art form, as a form of expression, and so on. With this book, I hope to bring the experience and the arguments closer to each other.

Two Types of Failure (and Tragedy)

In my earlier book *Half-Real*,³⁸ I argued that nonabstract video games are two quite different things at the same time: they are real rule systems that we interact with, and they are fictional

worlds that the game cues us into imagining. For example, to win or lose a video game is an actual, real event determined by the game rules, but if we succeed by slaying a night elf, that adversary is clearly imaginary. As players, we switch between these two perspectives, understanding that some game events are part of the fictional world of the game (Mario's girlfriend has been kidnapped), while other game events belong to the rules of the game (Mario comes back from the dead after being hit by a barrel). This also means that there are two types of failure in games: *real failure* occurs when a player invests time into playing a game and fails; *fictional failure* is what befalls the character(s) in the fictional game world.

Real Failure

Like tragedy in theater, cinema, and literature, failure makes us experience emotions that we generally find unpleasant. The difference is that games can be tragic in a literal sense: consider the case of French bicycle racer Raymond Poulidor, who between 1962 and 1976 achieved no less than three second places and five third places in the Tour de France, but in his career never managed to win the race. Tragic.

On the other hand, if I fail to complete one level of a small puzzle game on my mobile phone because I have to get off at the right subway stop, we probably would not describe this as tragic. Not because there is any structural difference between the two situations—Poulidor and I both tried to win a game, and we both failed. We had both invested some time in playing, we had both made an emotional gamble in the hope that we would end up happy, and we both experienced a sense of loss when failing. Yet it is safe to say that Poulidor made a larger time investment and a larger emotional gamble than I did.

Playwright Oscar Mandel's traditional but often-cited definition of tragedy explains the difference between Poulidor and me: "A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: a protagonist who commands our earnest goodwill is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or *undertakes some action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude*; and by that very purpose or action, subject to the same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with great spiritual or physical suffering" (my emphasis).³⁹ We reserve the idea of tragedy for events of some magnitude: my failing at a simple puzzle game does not qualify as tragic, but Poulidor's failed lifetime project of winning the Tour de France does.

Games are meaningful not simply by representing tragedies, but on occasion by creating actual, personal tragedies. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche discusses the notion that tragedy adds a layer of meaning to human suffering, that art "did not simply imitate the reality of nature but rather supplied a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, and was set alongside the latter as a way of overcoming it."⁴⁰ Though I am of a more optimistic temperament than Nietzsche was, I believe that there is a fundamental truth to this idea. Not in the naïve romantic sense that tragic themes are required for art to be valuable, but in the sense that painful emotions in art (such as games) gives us a space for contemplating the very same emotions. To some it may be surprising to hear that video games provide a space for contemplation at all, but it is probably more obvious when we consider that video games are part of an at least five-thousand-year history of games. Games, in turn, are often ritualistic, repeatable, and laden with symbolic meaning. Think only of Chess, or Go, or the Olympics. Or, casting an even wider net, play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith has proposed that play is funda-

mentally a "parody of emotional vulnerability": that through play we experience precarious emotions such as anger, fear, shock, disgust, and loneliness in transformed, masked, or hidden form.⁴¹

Fictional Failure

That was the real, first-person aspect of failure. We are real-life people who try to master a game, but most video games represent a mirror of our performance in their fictional worlds—they ask us to make things right in the game world by saving someone or fighting for self-preservation. For example, the game *Mass Effect 2*⁴² lets the player steer Commander Shepard through a series of missions, protecting Shepard from harm and attempting to save the galaxy. The goals of the player are thus aligned with the goals of the protagonist; when the player succeeds, the protagonist succeeds. In games with no single protagonist, the player is typically asked to guard the interests of a group of people, a city, or a world.

The question is, can we imagine video games where this is inverted, such that when the player is successful, the protagonist fails? In the early 2000s, this seemed obviously impossible. As fiction theorist Marie-Laure Ryan put it, who would want to play *Anna Karenina*, the video game? Who would want to spend hours playing in order to successfully throw the protagonist under a train?⁴³ At the time, I also believed that such a game was inconceivable.⁴⁴ But only a few years later, there were games in which players had to do exactly that—kill themselves. Some of these were parodic games that openly subverted player expectations. Others were tragic in a traditional sense (SPOILER ALERT): *Red Dead Redemption*,⁴⁵ shown in figure 1.8, at first seems to let the player be a common video game hero, but the game can in



Figure 1.8
Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar Games 2010)

fact be completed only by sacrificing the protagonist in order to save his family.

Director Steven Spielberg has argued that video games will only become a proper *storytelling* art form “when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17.”⁴⁶ This is surely too simple: any checklist for what makes a work of art *good* will necessarily miss its mark, and works created to tick off the boxes in such a list are rarely worthy of our attention. Ironically, the fact is that players often do cry over video games, but mostly over losing important matches in multiplayer games, being expelled from their guild in *World of Warcraft*,⁴⁷ and so forth. Players report crying over some single-player games such as *Final Fantasy VII*.⁴⁸ Note that tragic endings in games are not interesting because they magically transform video games into a respected art form, but because they show that games can deal with types of content that we thought could not be represented in this form. Tragic

game endings appear distressing due to the tension between the success of the player and the failure of a game protagonist, but this distress can give us a sense of responsibility and complicity, creating an entirely new type of tragedy.

Paths to Success

Games are not just about failure, of course. The general contract of game playing is that we promise we will be unhappy if we fail, and happy if we succeed in a game (even if we are playing a game that cannot be completed). We generally ask that games be *fair* in our quest for success, but, as it turns out, our idea of fairness has changed dramatically in the history of video games: whereas early arcade games could not actually be completed, home computer and console games gradually gained reachable endings during the 1980s and 1990s. By now, commercial single-player video games tend to come with the promise that almost all players will be able to complete them, though for different reasons in different games. As I write this, there is a common perception that video games are becoming *too* easy. Part of the issue is the rise of a type of game design that rewards mere time investment rather than skill. This type of design is most commonly criticized in social network games such as *FarmVille*,⁴⁹ but the truth is that the principle of directly rewarding the player for time invested is also common in role-playing games, digital or analog. A vocal group of players and developers are revolting against this, describing it as a watering down of video games, demanding that games should be “fair” by rewarding skill development, not time investment. In short, these dissenters think that games should make us fail more, but that success and failure should exclusively be a function of player skills.