

In *The Art of Failure* (2013), Jesper Juul argues, “It is safe to say that humans have a fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent, but game players have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent”(2). Critically explore how video games subject the player to experiences of failure, and consider how they balance elements of frustration and reward. You should refer to at least two case studies in your answer, and use appropriate scholarship.

Introduction

In the book ‘Failure’ by Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander (2021), failure is presented not as a quality of technology but as a “product of judgement which sustains cultural fantasies and regimes of expectations.” Where Jesper Juul sees failure as an inability to overcome a mechanic, leading to personal disappointment in ‘*The Art Of Failure*’ (2013), this alternative approach will define failure as the contrasting outcome to expectations put upon a user to succeed: defined by a higher power that naturalises the concept of failure through solutionism.

Solutionism, defined by Evgeny Morozov in ‘*To Save Everything, Click Here*’ (2013), is the belief that technological innovation is the defining remedy for modern and globalised socio-economic-environmental problems. This approach, despite being widespread, is inadequately equipped to solve all issues, as depicted by Morozov “It’s not that solutions proposed are unlikely to work but that, in solving the ‘problem’, solutionists twist it in such an ugly and unfamiliar way that, by the time it is ‘solved’, the problem becomes something else entirely.” This concept is predominant in product design and computing industries, however, it also exists within the modern video game industry.

Solutionism within video games takes the form of failure, as developers and publishers aspire to motivate and generate capital from users by setting them against a system guaranteed to beat them. Failure in video games is naturalised, whereas, in real life, failure has much greater connotations and does not commonly offer the chance of retribution. This strategy, defined by Appadurai and Alexander as the ‘regime of failure’, is motivated by contemporary capitalism to “create the pervasive sense that all successes are the result of technology and its virtues, and that all failure is the fault of the citizen, the investor, the user, the consumer.” In the video game context, the user is at fault, the user is the one who loses and the user is the consumer of digital goods.

In this way, we can view forms of failure in video games as a tool to generate capital and repeated play, however, that is not to say that failure is not motivated by further factors such as self-improvement and social pressure. Failure in video games is encapsulated differently than in the real world, defined as a ‘magic circle’ in which different rules apply and consequences are enacted (Huizinga, 1938). Despite magic circles being an external layer of reality, users are seduced by failure as a pervasively negative and personal term, Juul illustrates this feeling: “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 a series of unhappy failures.” This contrast in mentality is outlined as the ‘paradox of failure’ in which humans have a fundamental desire to succeed, but have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are certain to fail and feel incompetent.

This paradox of failure exists because of failure being leveraged against the user, which questions: If the paradox of failure is used in conjunction with the regime of failure in video games to motivate profit, can we say this failure is the fault of the user? Or is this failure naturalised as a mechanic of the system, subjecting the user to expectations they can not sustain? In this essay, we will closely inspect how failure is represented in video games, including what historical and economic causes there might be, how game companies balance failure and reward as well as how these business models profit from using failure as a tool. To illustrate these points, three case studies will be used: Genshin Impact to evaluate self-directed failure within Gacha systems, League of Legends to evaluate social-directed failure within MOBA systems and The Sims to evaluate the absence of failure within Sandbox systems. In these case studies, the key concepts outlined in this introduction will be used to draw comparisons between ideas and evaluate how the video game industry subjects users to experiences of failure.

Video Games Historically Using Failure As A Revenue Tool

To gain a contextual understanding of how failure has come to be a tool to generate revenue in the video game industry, we must look at historical examples to depict its possible origin and motivations. Failure has canonically been a part of video game culture throughout iterations, seen in early forms of video games such as Tennis For Two (Higinbotham, 1958) and Colossal Cave Adventure (Crowther, 1976) which format two different forms of failure: failure against a human opponent, which stimulates the paradox of failure, and failure against a system, which promotes the regime of failure. While both forms of failure have been carried through to modern gaming, failure against systems has been utilised by economic ventures, seen most significantly in the late 1970s within Arcades.

The origin of arcades is rooted in gambling, socialisation and entrepreneurship, beginning as early as the 19th century as coin slot machines, penny arcades and fairground amusements (Newman, 2017). As a natural digression, arcade video games were inspired to make the user play repetitively, with profit gain in mind. While most early videogames have fail states similar to sports and board games, the single-player nature of popular arcade games such as Frogger (Konami, 1981), Donkey Kong (Nintendo, 1981) and Tron (Midway Games, 1982) posed an incredibly profitable business model: by 1982, a latter year in the 'golden age of arcade video games' (1978-1986), the arcade market was valued at \$8 billion, double the size of the pop music industry at the time (Rodgers & Larsen, 1984). From this, we can conclude that the business model for Arcades contributes to the regime of failure, in that, the user's repetitive play generates no stateful winning outcome and instead promotes repetitive reactions from failure, the user losing while the system gains constant value.

The dominance of arcades revolutionised the video game industry by establishing a successful format for the next generations to follow, this is seen in modern mobile games such as 'Flappy Bird' (Nguyen, 2013) and 'Temple Run' (Imangi Studios, 2011). Arcades additionally impacted pop culture significantly: The rise of 8 and 16-bit culture is a hallmark of the 70s and 80s, referenced through renowned songs and cinema such as 'Space Invader' (The Pretenders, 1979), 'The Karate Kid' in 1984, 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off' in 1986, all the way to 'Tron: Legacy' in 2010 and 'Wreck-It Ralph' in 2012. This situates how the capitalistic nature of the video game industry, taking arcades as a distinguished example,

may be motivated by financial gain but can ultimately bring global attention to video games as a cultural artefact.

Since the golden age of arcade video games, video games and pop culture have been heavily intertwined: In the 21st century, games are mass-shared using the internet's high social accessibility, for example, titles such as 'Getting Over It With Benet Foddy' (Foddy, 2017) and 'Five Nights At Freddy's' (Cawthon, 2014) are popularised for their thought-provoking gameplay and active fandom interaction, with creativity being globally shared. Prominently, triple-A games are popularised for their high quality, innovative mechanics, multi-platform releases and interactive fandoms (Yen, 2024), however, can we say these triple-A games contain the same capitalistic motivations as arcade games?

We have situated how the video game industry has used the regime of failure to generate capital, however, what are the consequences of this capitalistic motivation, and how do modern game companies balance failure and reward? Three terms were created: self-directed failure, social-directed failure and absence of failure, to categorise and evaluate these questions using prominent triple-A video game examples to illustrate.

Self-Directed Failure And Gacha Systems: Genshin Impact

Genshin Impact, developed by Chinese company miHoYo and published in September 2020, is an open-world action role-playing game (RPG) set in the fictional realm of 'Teyvat'. This realm, split into seven regions of which five have been released, is traversed as an immersive single-player campaign with the main character travelling from another world, embarking on a journey to reunite with their long-lost sibling (COGNOSPHERE, 2024). As Genshin Impact is action-based, despite having a heavy and immersive narrative, the main mechanic for a user to fail would be to lose a battle or die while exploring the map. Since the user is playing against the system, this failure is self-directed, depicting, through solutionism, that all failure within the game is the user's fault singularly.

While Genshin Impact has multiplayer functionality, the game's progression and main objectives are the user's sole responsibility. This play style demonstrates the paradox of failure, in which the user can decide to play Genshin Impact, knowing that they will lose battles and often die to progress through the game, subjecting themselves to frustration. Failure within Genshin Impact is naturalised in consequence and disproportionately reflects how failure is presented in real life. To evaluate whether Genshin Impact utilises the regime of failure to gain capital, we must first analyse its financial success and motivations.

Since its release, Genshin Impact has had global success, making over \$5 billion in revenue in 40 months from its IOS and Android app releases alone (Nelson, 2024). This revenue includes in-game spending, primarily in the form of its Gacha system, defined as a strategy which allows game providers to sell stochastic products in games: players pay in-game virtual currencies to obtain a random product (Wu & Singh, 2023). Within Genshin Impact, this system is named the 'wishing system' where the user can turn 'primogems' earned by completing quests and daily commissions, into 'intertwined fate' used as Gacha currency. This wishing system operates in rotating 'event banners' that increase the odds of certain characters and items over a specified period. Since Genshin Impact gameplay advancement relies heavily on the character team the user builds, manifesting mechanically with five slots

for characters with individual statistical advantages and cross-reactions, the wishing system inadvertently becomes a crucial gameplay function. Following this functionality, the user can fail while using the wishing system without interacting with the game's primary play state, presenting an interesting sub-level of gaming within the main framework. The user may wish on an event banner and gain items insignificant to their in-game goals, exemplifying the paradox of failure through repeated use despite knowing the disparity of outcomes.

As the wishing system's primary function is to generate capital, the developers of Genshin Impact utilise the regime of failure in a statistical format, which makes them impartial to the user's failure: The wishing system is separate from the main gameplay, yet crucial to the user's development and experience, as a result, the user is subjected to a statistically disadvantageous model to increase their enjoyment and fulfil their personal in-game goals while the developer continuously gains capital. This system naturalises failure and exploits user mentality, being emulsified through financial accessibility to buy wishes with real currency, encouraging those who fail with their in-game currency to spend money to succeed within the magic circle.

Similarly to the arcade industry, Gacha systems are inherently inspired by gambling structures. This structure, particularly in Genshin Impact, has caused controversy surrounding Whaling: the act of spending large amounts of money on digital games. While Whaling can be attributed to the collection of rare, or all items, within a game, Genshin Impact's wishing system, assuming that you lose every wish where the chances of getting a character are less than 100%, costs around \$444 to guarantee a particular character (Jiang, 2022). This poses an incredibly expensive user experience, propelled by the paradox of failure and capitalised upon using the regime of failure to ensure repetitive loss as a means to a successful win in which the user ensues financial loss for emotional gain. As this self-directed failure is fuelled by personal pressure and internal disappointment, what can be said about the opposite? How does external pressure within social play contribute to a regime of failure and profit in a multiplayer game?

Social-Directed Failure And MOBA Structures: League of Legends

League Of Legends (LoL), developed by Riot Games and published in October 2009, is a highly popular multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game where two teams of five players battle to destroy each other's base using different character roles: top-lane, jungle, mid-lane, bot lane and support. The game offers over 140 characters to choose from, attained through using in-game currency, earned from winning games and participating in events (Riot Games, 2024). Since LoL is team-based, players communicate through audio or chatbox to strategise: a defining feature of gameplay provided in-game which supports its collaborative nature. The user fails through losing the match against the opponent team, compared to Genshin Impact in which failure is the singular fault of the user, failing in LoL falls on the whole team effort. Losing a match in LoL is highly disadvantageous for user gameplay, as winning is the overriding factor which contributes to success, player growth and enjoyment.

Furthermore, the multiplayer nature of LoL induces social pressure which increases the effect of failure on personal mindset, as Juul exemplifies: "We are a self-serving species, more likely to deny responsibility when we fail than when we succeed." It is this mindset that LoL is notorious for producing, with users experiencing aggression, harassment and bullying

within the game because of their failure. This definitive loss mechanic joined with social pressure to perform is what we define as social-directed failure, in which the user enters a multiplayer state while conducive to the paradox of failure. To analyse how social-directed failure can be motivated by the regime of failure, and how the developer Riot Games balances this toxicity, we must first understand the intensity of this social-directed failure and its consequences.

In a study by Sengün et al. in 2019 titled 'Exploring the Relationship Between Game Content and Culture-based Toxicity' 2 million lines of in-game chats from 30,000 sessions were analysed to evaluate how game design can induce hate speech and toxicity. It was found that within LoL, character design greatly influenced hate speech between cultures and, in this context, competitiveness became toxic upon failure. While this aggressive nature was self-moderated in servers of cultural unification, the overriding toxicity of the game is generated from the competitive game environment itself. This competitiveness is exaggerated by the tiers of player level present within the game, known as the 'ranked system'. As the user progresses in skill level, known as 'mastery' of a character, and their victory count increases, the prestige level of the user's account changes.

These levels are categorised from low to high into iron, bronze, silver, gold, platinum, emerald, diamond, master, grand master and challenger, giving ten tiers to the LoL hierarchy (Stewart, 2024). This hierarchy cultivates social structures similar to particularism, defined as the idea that particular moral standards apply to different people in a discriminatory manner (Spicker, 1994). This particularist social structure, based on the ranked nature of LoL, accentuates social-directed failure in which the user is blamed for their lack of performance by peers, intensifying the personal and emotional effect of failure, and encouraging action to improve their performance and mindset. In this way, as the social-directed failure of LoL increases so does the profit potential, as users feel pressured to buy items and skins to make their gaming experience more enjoyable and successful.

Juul outlines how sportsmanship is a significant factor that affects player mentality when failure is present, explaining how magic circles "give us a license to display anger and frustration on a level that we would not otherwise dare express" and that "poor losers are not chastised for showing anger and frustration, but for showing anger and frustration in the wrong way." This can not be applied to LoL, as the particularist social structure allows for discrimination and harassment, which in reality, would not be tolerated or acceptable. Riot Games, the developers of LoL attempt to balance the game according to character battle statistics to decrease the levels of harassment and bullying experienced by targeted users. As a result of these balance attempts, published in LoL's 'patch notes' which are logged changes to the game (League Of Legends Wiki, 2024), some combinations of characters are more effective than others, with character play level difficulty and in-game item builds affecting these statistics further. From this, users argue that the characters are unbalanced and blame the developer for their in-game failure, further exemplifying the un-sportsmanship nature of LoL.

While Riot Games' attempts to balance the game aren't as effective as the user base would like, a significant effort is made to build a positive community within LoL surrounding eSports, game events and animations such as 'Arcane' on Netflix (2021). Despite this effort, the social structure within LoL promotes a negative aspect of sportsmanship within the

magic circle, utilising social-directed failure to drive monetary means of securing a feeling of success and enjoyment when presented with failure. Both LoL and Genshin Impact utilise failure as a tool to generate revenue, however, how do games that do not inherently use failure as a mechanic generate the same financial success?

The Absence Of Failure And Profitisation: The Sims

The Sims, a highly popular sandbox game series developed by Electronic Arts & Maxis in 2000, presents a contrasting example of how video games profit despite having an absence of failure present in gameplay. The limitless action the user can take within this sandbox environment means there is no finite mechanic of how the user can fail. Possible failures can include the user's sim dying or an adverse consequence to the user's expectation, however, the cyclic nature of the game encourages life cycles and many social challenges feature adverse situations. In this way, we will not count these examples as built-in failures since they are subjective to the user.

Despite the absence of failure, The Sims remains one of the most profitable game series ever created, earning \$7.426 billion in the 2023 fiscal year alone (Canfield & Rheaume, 2023). This profit is attributed to the variety of expansion pack releases, retailing for an average of \$20 each, available for the user to buy. The Sims 4 base game, while being sufficient in content amount, loses its enterprise after the user has exhausted its capabilities. This over-familiarity with the game's content can drive the user to purchase more to explore new environments, action options and items. This contrasts with the paradox of failure, as play is driven by exploration, creativity and community, resolving the regime of failure as obsolete in which the user has agency to sustain their in-game fantasies without system restraint.

Furthermore, the creativity nurtured by The Sims community is reflected through the prevalence of influencing content on social media, as seen on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. This online community enables access to free content such as modding which, despite being a form of resistance to marketisation, is overlooked by the developers Electronic Arts and even encouraged for collaborative means. This situates how failure is not necessarily needed as a tool to generate significant capital from video games, and that the regime of failure is not the only motivation for successful business models within the video game industry. Additionally, The Sims' social structure contrasts that of LoL's and provides an opposite insight into how video game communities can foster positive user mindsets and relations when failure is not present.

Evaluation

These three examples demonstrate varying levels of failure within the video game industry: self-directed failure in which the fault is perpetually with the user, monetised in Genshin Impact by the Gacha system, social-directed failure in MOBA environments which propel toxicity, monetised utilising the paradox of failure within a freemium framework, and absence of failure in which the user has no fault but monetisation is motivated by lack of continuous content.

These three representations of failure explore how and if the regime of failure is used as motivation to create capital, as well as how some video game structures promote

solutionism: Genshin Impact exemplifies how stochastic systems give impartiality to developers when it comes to user spending, and how failure is naturalised in gameplay, however, despite its financial success, games such as The Sims generate an equal capital without using failure as a tool.

Despite the contradictions in using failure as a tool to generate revenue, all three game examples exploit the user in some negative dimension: LoL with particularistic environments, generating social pressure and harassment, Genshin Impact with impartiality, subjecting the user to Gacha frameworks and The Sims with motivating the user to pay for more content when they have exhausted the base game's activity. By contextualising this exploitation, we can compare these examples to the earlier definition of failure by Appadurai and Alexander: the contrasting outcome to expectations put upon a user to succeed, defined by a higher power that naturalises the concept of failure through solutionism.

Genshin Impact can be applied to this definition, as a higher power defines the contrasting outcomes, gaining or losing as generated by the wishing system, and failure is naturalised, solutionising the wishing system as the user's only method to achieve their in-game goals despite its disproportionate odds to success. LoL can also be applied to this definition, as a higher power balances the character battle statistics and failure is naturalised as a finite state within play, with social pressure increasing the user's motivation to buy premium content to simulate feelings of success and enjoyment. While The Sims does not conform to this definition of failure, users are still expected to buy expansion packs to be deemed a 'successful player', in that through not buying the content, they do not gain a full experience of the game. The inaction to buy the full game experience can be counted as the user's contrasting outcome to expectations put upon them by the developer, despite this failure not being naturalised by solutionism.

Holistically, we can conclude that failure is used as a tool to generate revenue within modern triple-A industries, depending on the genre of the game, as seen in the examples of Genshin Impact and League Of Legends. Failure is represented as a negative state, in which the user is singularly at fault, promoted by Appadurai & Alexander's 'regime of failure' where capitalist industries naturalise failure to promote solutionist ideals and generate significant capital. The paradox of failure signifies how user action is perpetuated by this naturalisation, in which failure is deemed necessary to progress as the rules of the magic circle suggest, however, users may not be able to distinguish between these forms of failure, causing emotional distress as depicted by Juul. Self-directed failure and social-directed failure provide different sets of motivations and consequences, but it is apparent that frustration and reward are simulated through using failure to promote the consumerism of premium content.

Juul argues, "It is safe to say that humans have a fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent, but game players have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent." While we can agree with the first comment, the research conducted in this essay may alternatively suggest that users do not choose to engage with failure in video games, but are instead subjected to these experiences by game companies who ultimately decide what content and mechanics to utilise to make a successful and profitable video game.

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