Rethinking failure: Applying Gordon Calleja's Model of Player Involvement to *NieR: Automata*

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ABSTRACT

In my presentation I want to propose a new theoretical approach to categorizing failure in video games. The topic is relatively scarcely researched by game studies scholars. The most popular academic approaches concentrate on the flow theory (Csíkszentmihályi 1990), describing how to keep the player engaged and motivated during the gameplay, or conceptualizing failure as a learning experience both inside and outside of the game (Bogost 2007, Juul 2009, 2013, Lee 2003, McGonigal 2011, Sterczewski 2013). This gap in research was also noticed by Eoin Roche who proposed the term "valid failure" describing games which "continue in spite of a player's failures, and their ability to respond, react and ultimately respect those failures as being as important an aspect of play as their successes" (Roche 2018, 2). With a few exceptions, like the last example, failure is hardly conceptualized as a more complex phenomenon, and therefore the connection of its mechanics with game genres is overlooked, as is its potential to affect gamers' communities, or its usage as a narrative device. I propose not only a new approach to failure but also a reading of failure through Halberstam's queer theory, which rewrites this experience as an alternative way of succeeding, gaining knowledge, living and, in the case of my study, playing (Halberstam 2011).

I will identify various types of failure using the Model of Player Involvement described by Gordon Calleja (Calleja 2011). The author lists six dimensions of involvement that construct the gameplay: 1) Kinesthetic Involvement ("relates to all modes of avatar or game piece control in virtual environments, ranging from learning controls to the fluency of internalized movement"), 2) Spatial Involvement ("concerns players' engagement with the spatial qualities of a virtual environment in terms of spatial control, navigation, and exploration"), 3) Shared Involvement ("deals with the engagement derived from players' awareness of and interaction with other agents in a game environment"), 4) Narrative Involvement ("refers to engagement with story elements that have been written into a game as well as those that emerge from players' interaction with the game"), 5) Affective Involvement ("encompasses various forms of emotional engagement"), 6) Ludic Involvement ("expresses players' engagement with the choices made in the game and the repercussions of those choices") (Calleja 2011, 43-44). By using Calleja's model I want to analyze how failure emerges in each of

those six dimensions, therefore showing that it can be functionalized in many different ways and serve multiple purposes.

I will conduct a case study of *NieR: Automata* (*N:A*; PlatinumGames 2017) to explore different modes of failing. I chose this game for two reasons. Firstly, it uses the theme of failure to tell a complex story about self-aware androids fighting a lost battle for humanity while searching for the meaning of life. Secondly, *N:A* consciously adapts elements of games' mechanics for narrative purposes (Gerrish 2018), using the player's interface to show the damage to the android's body, changing the traditional structure of the ending (Backe 2018), or deleting players' saves in exchange for helping other players (Gallagher 2018). Because of how the game is constructed, we can observe Kinesthetic Failure not only on the ludic level when the player learns how to control the avatar at the beginning of the game, but also see how it is used for narrative purposes when they are struggling to move the avatar while a virus is downloaded into the android's body. *N:A* also allows the player to use failure as an opportunity. Spatial Failure refers to the player who is lost in the game world – trying and failing to find another mission or looking for a specific resource without success. During this search, they can encounter new pieces of the story hidden in various objects, such as reports from the old world or lost messages from other characters. Moreover, turning on the network feature in *N:A* makes it possible to connect with other players through the experience of Shared Failure: for example they can find the dead bodies of the avatars lying around in the game world, serving as a warning of potentially dangerous locations and an evidence of others' failures. In a similar way I will follow all six dimensions to identify the types of failure in *N:A* and indicate their significance for the story.

The aim of my presentation is to highlight those moments of failure which appear during the gameplay and to define their functions in and purposes for constructing the story, therefore showing that their role is not limited to learning and motivating the player to complete the game. *N:A* indicates that both the player and the avatar are sometimes required to fail in order to move on with the plot. Moreover, in many cases the failure can lead to positive outcomes, such as finding hidden objects, building connections with other players or revealing additional features of the game. By applying Calleja's model I want to demonstrate that we can read *N:A* as a title constructed around the theme of failure on both narrative and ludic levels.

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