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Failed Failures: The Critique of the *Game of Thrones* Video Game

Abstract. In this research paper the *Game of Thrones* video game is juxtaposed with the original book and TV series in order to investigate the differences in failures experienced by the characters, primarily in the context of its fairness. J. Juul's book from 2013 serves as a main source of theoretical framework. It is argued that by misinforming the player about their influence on the plot, the game causes the player to develop learned helplessness, which, in turn, causes a lack of interest and lowered enjoyment.

Key words: Game of Thrones, failure, learnt helplessness, attribution theory, coping mechanisms.

Introduction

In the famous sentence Cersei Lannister – a wife and, later, a mother of Westerosi kings – says that "When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die" (Episode 7, Season 1), which has been frequently quoted as a sign of ruthlessness in the *Game of Thrones*' world. The characters plot, deceive, make and break alliances, and are not afraid to kill their opponents to gain the advantage. The fantasy world created by George R. R. Martin is predominantly a story of "abuse and consequences of power" (Schröter 2015, 72) as it interweaves diplomacy and politics with magical elements. This world is famously harsh and ruthless, and it is not uncommon for the important characters to lose their lives, to the immense surprise of readers.

The aim of the article is to analyse the portrayed failure in the Telltale Games' video game adaptation of *Game of Thrones* from 2014 in order to show the different character of the failure types – where in the books' and television they serve as a narrative

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and world-building device the purpose of which is to signal fairness of the otherwise cruel world, in the video game the failure becomes disruptive to the player's experience and involvement. The first part of the article will offer a summary of the *Game of Thrones* universe, attempting to understand the role of the failure in it. Then, failure will be analysed in video game medium, where it will be discussed from three separate angles. The book by Jesper Juul will serve as a primary source of analysis of the paradox of failure in video games, with emphasis on types of failure and their mechanisms, as well as the means in which a failure influences players. Secondly, the psychological theories, namely Seligman's learned helplessness and the theory of attribution, will be used in order to describe negative consequences of failure and frustration. The last part will place itself in opposition to the other two, suggesting a possibility of a more positive reading of the meaning of the failure, deriving from Halberstam's description of failure as immensely queer and, therefore, empowering.

The worlds of *Game of Thrones*

The acclaimed and vastly popular American TV series *Game of Thrones* is an HBO adaptation of the epic fantasy saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin. Although at first planned as a trilogy, the series of novels currently includes five out of seven planned volumes, with the first one published in 1996. Until the sixth season, by which the show's plot has surpassed the events described in the novels, the adaptation has followed the events of the novels quite faithfully. Set in the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos, *Game of Thrones* is a story of epic proportions with multitude of characters and storylines which can be divided in the three main story arcs. The first one centers on the civil war caused by the constant power struggle between the forces trying to establish the rule over the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms. Many characters are related to the noble houses, with the three most important being the conflicted Lannisters and Starks. The second arc takes place in the continent of Essos and follows Daenerys Targaryen – the last descendant of the previous regal dynasty. Finally, the last arc concentrates on the Wall and the far North regions behind it, where the world's magic resides; there lie the secrets of this world's magic, monsters, and the threat of what the winter might bring.

With its success *Game of Thrones* became another prominent example of a transmedia universe next to those of *Lost*, *The Walking Dead* or *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (Spanò 2016, 627). Apart from the novels and the TV series, this franchise produced several video games. The game discussed in this article was released in 2014–2015 by Telltale Games company, which is currently the more famous for their episodic, adventure, story-driven games based on licensed movies (*Guardians of the Galaxy: The Telltale Series*, 2017), comics (*Wolf Among Us*, 2013–2014) and other video games titles (*Tales from the Borderlands*, 2014–2015). Their *Game of Thrones* game includes 6 episodes released bi-monthly between 2014 and 2015; the game is available on multiple

platforms including Windows, two generations of Playstation and Xbox consoles, and mobile devices. For this paper, the Playstation 4 version has been played for analysis.

The game takes place after the end of the third season of the TV series and just prior to the start of the fifth one. Important characters from the series make brief appearances, namely Daenerys Targaryen, the Queen, Cersei Lannister, and her brother, Tyrion, Margaery Tyrell who is engaged to the young king and Cersei's son, and Ramsay Bolton, a cruel and sadistic bastard son of a new Warden of the North, but they are not the main protagonists of the series. These would be members of the House Forrester, a family which has been only mentioned by name in *A Dance with Dragons* but whose characters have not appeared in either the book or the series. The family is shown as being loyal to the Starks and therefore find themselves struggling for survival after the former falls. Now in the unfavourable position, the Forresters have to challenge the attempts to take over their land and the Ironwood forests, which are both their pride and livelihood. Their main enemy through the game is the long-term rival, House Whitehill, under the protection of the Ramsay Bolton.

By analogy with the original series, the game is clearly divided into three plotlines: the arc, which has started in Essos, at the end, merges with Westeros.. The last one takes place at the Wall and behind it, touching on the mystical and magical realm of the cold North. Another familiar aspect of the story is the number of characters: despite the fact that most of narrative video games have one or maybe two protagonists, here the player is allowed the control of five: four of the Forrester siblings and the young squire of the house.

Long before the game, the *Game of Thrones* franchise has been well known and beloved for its cruel and ruthless world and the author's lack of hesitation in killing off important characters. What made the show so popular is the fact that where the audiences got used to the metaphorical war between good and evil in which the former always wins and the latter is being punished, the realm of Westeros does not favor anyone. However, it remains fair, equally punishing mistakes and stupidity rather than arbitrary moral affiliation or the author's personal fondness for their heroes. Being good is not enough to survive, let alone succeed – Queen Cersei commits every crime, abuses her power and uses family and foes alike, but yet, survives those with far less guilty consciences.

It could be argued that *Game of Thrones* is a tale filled with failure and about failure, for there are hardly any characters who have not experienced some kind of it – and when they do, they fail spectacularly. Tyrion Lannister, maybe the most adored character, who by no means would be considered a "good" person, but is definitely cunning and just like his sister Cersei always seems to think several steps ahead, has also not escaped quite a spectacular failure which had him fall from the position of power as the Hand of the King to being imprisoned and sentenced to death. His wit and resourcefulness were still awarded when he managed to escape and survive.

This is an interesting approach to the topic of failure, one that at the first glance might seem contrary to intuition. In the common definition and consciousness, failure

is something bad, something to be avoided at all costs, especially in the success-obsessed western world. However, in the *Game of Thrones* world, for those whose failure did not end in death, it is often the start of something new and something great, even those who fail greatly learn from it and use it to do even greater things. Those who fail to learn from it die.

The art of failure in video games

One of the panels opening Queerness and Games Conference in October 2013 (Ruberg 2017, 201) was titled *The Arts of Failure* and placed professor Jack Halberstam, known for his work on female masculinity and transgender identities, with the theorist in the field of video game studies and a game designer, professor Jesper Juul. The organisers invited them in order to explore the crossover between their respective work on failure. Both of them, by this point, had published books which, while focusing on different aspects of it – queerness and games respectively – shared not only the title but also a conviction that there is more to failure. That, in fact, it is an art. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* was published in 2011 while *The Art of Failure: And Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* by Juul was published in 2013. Despite their books' similarities in titles, the two authors have a completely different approach to failure – where Juul detests it, seeing it almost as a necessary evil that must be endured in order to succeed, Halberstam finds it a goal in itself rather than means to one.

While Halberstam argues that failure is not only queer but, in fact, also defines a queer experience, Juul investigates what he calls the paradox of failure in games and its psychological complexity. He explains the paradox through three points: "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" (Juul, 2013). In his analysis, he reaches to Aaron Smuts' *The Paradox of Painful Art* (2007), where he describes the conundrum on the basis of the more broadly understood arts: literature, film, television, and theatre. He goes even a little further and decides to "include all art whose primary purpose is to arouse negative emotions" (Smuts 2007, 60) such as horror and tragedy.

There, he offers an exhaustive description of the whole family of theories which explain the reasons for seeking and enjoying the "painful art." The first big group of those comes from a hedonistic perspective, putting pleasure in the centre of the human interests; according to them, we enjoy art that brings us seemingly negative emotions because in the end, it is enjoyable. The reasons for it vary: some deny that there is any significant pain (which seems contrary to the common experience) either because it is converted to pleasure, because it is diminished due to the sense of control experienced by the audience member of the medium (i.e. the ability to leave the theatre or turn off the TV) or finally because it is compensated by some other kind of a pleasurable response (i.e. intellectual pleasure derived from aesthetics or the sole experience of art).

The obvious difference between the video games and other media is the level of the involvement of their users. The player's particular level of engagement and their agency allows for an active influence on the outcome of the game, meaning that the player is far more involved in the story than in any other medium. Therefore, this agency also broadens the meaning and types of "failure" which they can experience.

It is crucial to notice an important aspect of video games, namely the cutscenes[1]. Cutscenes are non-interactive sequences which show the crucial events of the plot, including the important dialogue between the characters which often are incorporated into the story's narrative prologue and epilogue. Thus, in the story-driven games, they play a crucial part. However, in many ways, their presence raises problems concerning the immersion and a player's agency since they are often the only passive moments amidst the gameplay, resembling rather the cinematic codes or representation than gameplay experience (Cheng 2007, 15).

When we talk about video games, the pain and failures may have two different aspects: they can mean either the failure of the characters, their loss and pain or even death, but also it can relate to the failure of the player and their skill. The former aspect seems to be permanent in the sense that when it happens, it is done and no action on a player's part can change it (excluding cheating and leaving the game to use the earlier save point to redo a certain part of the game), while with the latter it is not only possible to redo the mistake, but it is also required. When presented with a "game over" screen, it is impossible to progress without playing this part again and succeeding.

When it comes to the first of the two kinds of game failure, they are mostly conveyed in "cut scenes" which are the animated scenes, often in much higher resolution and detail than the gameplay, which are triggered by a player's success in scripted moments. Since they often follow cinematic codes of representation, they present a non-interactive and passive type of experience, which can influence the player's immersion and flow (Cheng 2007, 15).

Considering the above aspects, there are two types of failure that can be seen in the video game medium. The first one would be pre-scripted, narrative events characteristic of cutscenes and the other – of the gameplay and the players' performance. When it comes to the former, there are also two types. The first would be an event in the linear narration, which happens the same way for every player, regardless of their skill level or choices – for example, Princess Peach will always be kidnapped at the end of Mario games, no matter how skillful the player who controls Mario.. The other version of a story-driven tragedy or a failure (for they often go hand- in- hand) is one that is a result of a player's choices, but which the player will not be able to re-do. Certain choices or performances trigger cutscenes that could convey a death of a character, for instance. This type of scene can be found in Bioware games, such as *Mass Effect*, where a player's choices have a major influence on non-player characters' decisions, like whether they join player's crew or even life and death. These are equivalent to the

[1] Alternatively "cut-scenes" or "cut scenes" (Cheng, 2007).

tragic events that might be observed in a movie or read in a novel, but they also combine the player's agency, choice and – what comes with it - the responsibility.

The other type of failure, the one that is strictly bound to the video games, is the player's failure to perform at the expected level. It can also lead to a narrative failure. The most common example is the "game over" screen which usually means the death of the character – in the *Uncharted* franchise when the player-controlled Nathan Drake misses the jump and falls from the cliff, the screen goes black-and-white and his companions are heard screaming his name dramatically. Then the game resets to the last checkpoint and the player can try to repeat the jump, again and again, an infinite number of times, if required. This kind of a failure is by implication the player's fault, which, as Juul argues, can be hard to accept. Juul describes three "paths to success" and three types of games and game requirements: skill, chance, and labour (Juul 2013, 74–76). The type of failure described above would be related to the first type – when the player fails, causing their character to die in the process because they did not make a jump or did not manage to beat the enemy, it is connected to the player's skill level. The consequence of this is twofold. On the one hand, it is tempting to feel this failure as a critique of a gamer as a person and as a proof of one's own inadequacy even when the failure is caused more by the bug or other problems in the game's design. However, at the same time, it means that the player is encouraged to try and improve and thus experience learning through failure (Juul 2013, 74).

If the player is expected to develop their skill, the game is required to be fair. *Souls* series, which includes the *Demon's Souls* (2009) and *Dark Souls* (2011), is praised for being increasingly difficult but, at the same time, consistently fair, which means that the players each time know why they failed and can learn the strategies needed to succeed. In order to win the player has to understand the mechanics of the game and to prove their[2] skill. This fairness is what guarantees that even when failing, the players can take responsibility for their failure and learn through it. The death of the character is a punishment for an insufficient level of skill.

It seems that perceived fairness of the game is associated with the difficulty level and forgiveness – the first arcade games were famous for being unforgiving, meaning that they offered a limited number of "lives" lost, which resulted in a need to repeat the whole game from its very beginning. Starting from the 1990s and 2000s the single-player games started to offer limitless lives with little to no punishment for the failure (Juul 2013, 72). Nowadays most of the games, and almost all of the big, high budget titles, ensure the player does not suffer a major setback upon failure – jumping to one's death in the *Uncharted* series means its protagonist, Nathan Drake would respawn at the very spot from which he tried to make the unfortunate jump instead of

[2] Through the entirety of the article the singular "they" have been used in order to avoid the unnecessary, binary gendering of the player - the practice that has been not only widely accepted in English language and used since 18th century, but also marks an important social change in awareness (Bodine, 1975).

pushing him all the way back to the beginning of the climb. When players encounter games which, instead of autosaving every move, offer a checkpoint to which the player is returned upon death, no matter how far into the level they would be, it can be met with a surprise and displeasure of the game's harshness.

As an interesting voice in the never-stopping discussion on the causality between playing video games and violence, Andrew Przybylski and colleagues (2014) argue that contrary to the popular opinion, it is not violence in those games that causes players to experience more aggression and to seek ways to release it, but frustration. They have conducted a number of experiments with nearly 600 college-aged participants who have been asked to play an easy or a frustratingly difficult game of *Tetris* and then were ordered to assign the time in which the next participant would have to hold their hand in a bowl of a painfully cold water. Those who were asked to play on the harder settings were assigned, on average, 10 seconds more of the unpleasant experience to subsequent players than those who played the easy version. Since Tetris is a hardly violent game, it was the lack of mastery of the controls of the game and subsequent frustration that caused more aggressive response and thoughts (Przybylski et al. 2014). While failure can be painful when it is believed to be an effect of one's inability and just general lack of skill, it is more frustrating when it is caused by an exterior situation, including the controls which are too difficult or unfair (for example, because of their poor quality).

The Telltale Games' title is trying to follow in the footsteps of its predecessors and it introduces the same world and the same ruthless rules. Young Gared, a squire to the house Forrester, has been promised a promotion but before he can share the news with anybody, his garrison was attacked; it is the infamous Red Wedding, seen from the backstage, not from the inside of the Frey's dining hall but from the perspective of the lesser players. Following Hitchcock's advice to start a story with an earthquake so then the tension might rise, it is only a beginning of Gared's problems: before he reunites with the House of Forrester, now weakened and being targeted as bannermen of disgraced Starks, he will see his family murdered and he himself will be sentenced to join the Night Watch at the Wall. Gared is just one of five playable characters and maybe one who is the least prone to failure in the game.

The second arc and the location where the player spends more of their time in-game, is the Ironrath, the domain of Forresters. There, in the event of his father's death during the Red Wedding, it is young Ethan Forrester who has to become a new Lord of the house. He is naive and innocent but tries his best to be the man the house needs him to be. In a surprise ending of the first chapter, Ethan is killed by Ramsey Bolton, a sadistic and terrifying bastard and enforcer of the new Warden of the North, Roose Bolton. Consequently, , the next chapter starts with the new playable character, Ethan's brother, Rodrik, previously thought to be deceased. The last two playable characters are also their siblings – Asher, a rowdy second-born son exiled to Essos and Mira, who serves as a handmaiden to Margaery Tyrell. All of the characters are struggling to stay alive and to aid their house in the fight against the Whitehills, but their lives are

just a strand of misfortune and failures and in the end, hardly any character finds what could be called a happy ending – or at least a non-tragic one. Here lies the problem with the story: putting it bluntly, it seems too tragic.

Games made by the Telltale Games' are mostly adventure games, heavily focused on the narrative, where the player leads the protagonists through the series of QTEs.[3] Seemingly, the dialogue options are much more important. There are always four choices and most of the time they result in information at the top left corner of the screen saying that the choice is important and that whoever the character was talking to would remember our choice (i.e. "Cersei will remember this" or "Margaery notices your silence"), making clear the player understands the importance of each choice. It builds up the tension and reinforces the responsibility felt , but, at the same time, this mechanism has a downside. One of the first moments when this is applied is when the sign confirms that lord Forester would remember the answer Gared gives. The moment makes a player feel important and flattered, identifying with a young squire who has been noticed by the head of the House. That is, until just few moments later the lord is killed, thus deeming the choice unimportant. He is not going to remember it, and the choice, in fact, has been meaningless; it did not matter which one of the four options has been chosen. If the game had not made the special acknowledgement, the moment of the death of the lord Forester would not cause such dissonance and could have been experienced solely as a strong narrative point. The surprising thing is that this moment occurs so early in the game, in the very first scene, and thus very early implants the idea in the head of the player that the choices might not be as important as suggested. This dissonance appears later in the game as well and every time it does, it becomes more obvious.

The dissonance is especially disturbing because it confuses the player about the core nature of their responsibility – on the one hand, it implies the responsibility for the choices is entirely on the player's part and that it is vastly important, that the literal life and death of the character might depend on them but then, it does not. In *Game of Thrones* the characters die frequently, including the player characters, but from the very start, the player understands that they are not the ones causing it. The failure is not because of their lack of skill or their choices, but it is pre-scripted narrative.

Quite similar is the timing of the first major death of the player character, which is the aforementioned death of Ethan Forrester, marking the ending of the first chapter. The death is surprising, both because it appears so early in the game and because in the vast majority of the video games the main character does not die unless it is a tem-

[3] QTE stands for the quick time event, a method of context-sensitive gameplay in which the player performs simple actions, such as pressing one letter or a button, or moving an arrow after the respective instruction appears on the screen. These actions usually require quick response and appear in the critical moment. Failure to react on time thus results in the death and "game over" screen. Usually the QTEs are a singular addition to involve the player more during a cutscene, but are also often criticised for breaking the immersion since they force the player to repeat the scene until they master the QTE, especially because often their appearance comes as a surprise.

porary, fixable death resulting from the player's mistake. It clearly becomes obvious that the game does not intend to spare the player's characters and even though next important deaths do not happen until the end of the fifth episode and then, optionally, the end of the sixth one, this early and first death is especially painful both because Ethan probably represents the only really innocent type, trying his best to fulfill his duties and dying before he could be forced to be crueler. The reason for such an event at such a moment is to, in a way, recreate the shocking death of Ned Stark in the first season/first volume, which is a really iconic moment in the world of *Game of Thrones*. Nevertheless, there is a difference between losing one of many characters in the show that is being watched passively and experiencing a permanent death of a second player character to whom a player has already formed an attachment.

Psychological consequences of failure

The complete lack of control over the events and inability to stop the harshest of punishments can lead to discouragement. The beliefs about control over outcomes are an important element in research on learned helplessness (Diener, Dweck, 1980). The term coined by Seligman in 1967 refers to a type of behaviour which occurs in humans and animals in the presence of multiple aversive stimuli they have no control over and which cannot be avoided. Humans can learn certain helplessness and give up trying to achieve success and accept t failure. This theory is often closely associated with the theory of attribution which in social psychology means the process by which individuals explain the causes of behavior and events. According to the self-serving bias, people have a tendency to attribute their successes to internal factors but attribute their failures to external ones (Larson, 1977) in order to protect their ego and self. This partially explains why people do not like to take responsibility for their failures, but at the same time, as Juul points out, only by doing so is it possible to learn and only by taking responsibility for it, is it possible to feel self-efficacy after success and improvement. However, at the same time, poor feedback that makes a person attribute the failure to the internal causes can have horrendous results: research shows that students who feel that failure is on their side are more prone to give up trying entirely. Juul (2013, 51) explains the mechanism in detail:

For each of these dimensions, the first option is more likely to lead to learned helplessness:

- Internal vs. external: attributing failure to the user or to the test (game).
- Stable vs. unstable: whether the user believes failure to be consistent or subject to chance or improvement.
- Global vs. specific: whether the user attributes failure to general inability or inability in this specific task.

The worst case for a student is when he or she attributes a failed mathematics test to a cause that is internal (my fault), stable (cannot be changed), and global (lack of

intelligence in general). Since the student believes that no improvement is possible, he or she risks feeling permanently helpless in the face of future tests. (Juul 2013, 51)

This is where *Game of Thrones* has failed at introducing failure as a part of its narrative. Where the original story uses characters' failures for world-building techniques and uses it as a way to make them stronger or to use it as a milestone in their epic struggles, the game somewhat forgets about the importance of the self-efficiency of the active player.

With the already described mechanism that points out each of an allegedly important and meaningful decision, the player is informed about which of their choices have – or should have – great impact. First of all, in doing so, the game ensures that the player starts to treat every single decision concerning the dialogue option as valid and important, which raises the stakes and brings the tension to relatively high levels. On the other hand, it is very clear to the player that they have sole responsibility for their choices – because if picking one or the other dialogue option is going to be remembered by the characters, all of them usually are powerful players in the game of thrones (like the queen, queen-to-be and soldiers much higher in hierarchy than the player characters), it must be what causes their future reactions. And thus, when the consequence is the death of an individual and fall of the whole House, the player is in the position of thinking it is their fault. And thus, the failure is attributed internally.

The second dimension which Juul mentions is "stable vs. unstable." Here the discussed game also falls under the category of a "stable" type of game, which does not leave the space for improvement or chance because it is not skill-based. The chance factor could be applied if pressing one of the dialogue options accidentally or choosing them blindly, on a whim, instead of trying to choose the optimal one. Although in this case, despite the way Telltale advertises their games, the choice does not fully matter in the end. There are two moments near the end of the game where the player can decide the fate of characters, choosing between two deaths. At the end of the fifth chapter, a player needs to decide whether it is Rodrick or Asher who dies (both being playable characters), and continues playing as the one who has survived until he too fails to protect their family, friends and House. He escapes death not because of his skill, but because of being passively saved. The very last decision involves a choice between Mira's life and the life of innocent Tom who has been helping her through the whole story; she is offered a morally dubious choice as a result of which she can save her life but condemn her probably one true ally. Unlike Bioware's *Mass Effect* series (2007–2012), where dramatic deaths and losses of friends rely entirely upon the series of choices the player makes – even if they are not always visible to them from the beginning instead of a clear and transparent choice; here the choice is always between death and death. The fact that the player is always aware of what they choose between reinforces the effect of learnt helplessness. Here the failure feels stable because it seems that every choice and every movement in the game consistently leads to failure in the shape of death of important and liked characters.

Finally, the last dimension proposed by Juul might bring some weak hope, for the player develops a belief that they are not active performers in the fate of the characters. Their inability to prevent deaths and a tragic outcome is specific to this game rather than lack of general skill. But in this case, global attribution can be argued, since the player starts to expect failure in regard to every single event presented in the game – and subsequently, maybe even in other Telltale games, especially when they prove that the choices in there do not affect the final outcome.

As it has been found in research concerning learnt helplessness, the internal/stable/global attribution is associated with emotion-focused coping and distancing coping. The latter also has a direct effect on performance and is mostly associated with the stable attribution to failure (Mikulincer, 1989). In this case, it can mean that experiencing loss of so many important characters, which is so completely out of the player's hand, might lead them to develop distancing mechanisms. In practice that could mean various degrees of trying to cut themselves emotionally from the characters in order to not become too invested in their fate in case of losing them.

The queer failure

Juul's understanding of failure betrays the core assumption of it being something negative, a 'necessary evil' one has to accept in order to achieve the much more desirable price in the form of winning. Halberstam, by queering the concept of failure, shows a diametrically different approach, which understands failure as its own pleasure and its own art form. When Halberstam correlates queerness with failure, he understands queer not just as LGBT+ sexualities, but, in its most broad sense, as being different or differently to the (hetero)normative mainstream. Bonnie Ruberg (2017b) explains how queerness connects to the video game reading, putting an emphasis on the fact that it does not "necessarily seek to override straight ones." Failure, thus, can be celebrated or even sought out as a part of a philosophy that prompts one not to follow the required path, nor to succumb to the normative standards – even if they mean, quite literally, 'playing by the rules.'

Ruberg suggests several additional types of failure apart from those listed by Juul, the two most important of which being: failing towards a game and failing against it. The former means failing in those ways that are unavoidable (plot-related) and the other – failing in ways that are not considered by the game as productive (accidental, caused by a lack of skill).

However, how does one fail against a game, the premise of which seems to be failure itself? Most of the cases of failure experienced by player characters in *Game of Thrones* would be categorised as failing towards the game; the previous parts of the article discuss how this failure has been coded and it has been argued that the poor construction of failure can have negative consequences. Therefore, failure against can serve as maybe the most effective means of taking back the control and therefore

pleasure of the gameplay. The game allows for two types of failure against it: one on the gameplay level, which means disobeying the required QTE order or picking such answers that lead to characters game and, subsequently, to the 'game over' screen, and the other.

The first kind is similar to when Ruberg describes deliberately driving slowly in a car race game and it seems that it includes rebelling against a game just for a sake for it and is rather short-lived. Defying the game's rules – by not pressing the right combination of buttons or not achieving the scripted goals – eventually would lead to the situation in which a player needs to repeat a sequence over and over until, finally, they give in to the game rules.' On the other hand, one could play around the choices offered by the game - in this case, by subverting the expectations.

That second kind does bear characteristics of the queer failings and could require crashing cars in racing games because one takes bigger pleasure from the destruction than from winning a game; in the case of the Telltale game, this would mean not following QTE orders in order to cause the 'game over' screen. The other way might involve making one's choices with the aim of causing the most trouble for the characters – then, the player can regain agency by abandoning the game's imposed goal of helping the Forresters survive. By redefining the objective, the failure ceases to be frustrating.

Conclusion

Leaning heavily on Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure* and psychological theories of attribution and learned helplessness, the article provided an analysis of the *Game of Thrones* game by the Telltale Games', arguing that the game's failures fail on at least two levels. First of all, it fails to capture the true spirit of its paper predecessor, which uses failure skillfully to create a merciless, cruel, yet fair world. Secondly, it fails to incorporate the player's agency in this particular story, not fully understanding the differences between the game and novel medium. Where failure and tragedy can be more compelling and engrossing in the media with less active audience, in the case of video games it should be more important to take under consideration the agency of the player and the importance of letting them to take responsibility for both their choices – if it is a type of a game that allows for dialogue options – and their failures – when it is a skill-based game, which would be a majority. The queer perspective can be used in these cases in order to re-code the game and shelter oneself from the possible negative consequences of the dissonance between one's investment and the notoriety of the failure.

Although the article has tried to assess the failure on multiple different layers, it is worth noting that the narrative impact of failure is a complex issue that would might invite a more nuanced exploration.

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