

Game (Not)  
Over

## PEER SUPPORT

Facing failure repeatedly can lead a player to feel like they hit a wall.

Forums, Discord servers, streams, mentorship, their friend sitting next to them on the couch - many players turn to external resources and other people for help.

For more: see helpbook, p. X.

# THE THEME OF FAILURE

Some games are (partly) about failure, or about forms of failure. Failure can be woven into the story and/or the game's mechanics, as a theme or a metaphor. Failure is an experience inseparable from what the game is about.

For more: see helpbook.

# FAILURE DEFINES LIMITATIONS

Failure can happen when a player is unable to achieve an objective set by the game or themselves. Failure can be a way for the game to communicate to the player the limitations of an action, item, strategy, environment, narrative branch, etc - and to direct them elsewhere.

For more: see helpbook.

# FAILURE AND REAL LIFE

Failure exists outside of games. Facing failure in a game may help players develop skills they can apply when confronting failure in real life. Or, they can draw from real-life experiences to address situations of failure in games.

For more: see helpbook.

## NO RE-TRY

In games with failure states, it is possible to let the story continue, “no matter what”. The game takes away the die-and-retry model, and prevents any possibility of re-loading to correct a mistake.

Ex: The Red Strings Club.

For more: see helpbook.

## PAINFUL STORY EVENT

To create rich and emotional content, failure can lead to negative story content. Such painful/sad/distressing narrative developments, coupled with a sense of player responsibility over the outcome, can create powerful “positive negative experiences”.

Ex: Life Is Strange.

For more: see helpbook.

# THE SPECTACLE OF FAILURE

Failure can be an abrupt and spectacular event. Some games embrace it by making it humorous and comedic; others, by making it utterly catastrophic and horrific. Watching yourself, or someone else, fail, is an entertaining experience.

Ex: Surgeon Simulator & Until Dawn.

For more: see helpbook.



# THE THREAT OF FAILURE

In games where failure has consequences (on story, progression, or both), the looming threat of “messing up” encourages players to make more careful decisions. The threat of failure raises the stakes, and prompts players to take the game seriously.

For more: see helpbook.

# ALTERNATIVE STORIES

In games where the story can go in different directions (branches, story beats...), failure can let the player access alternative, but equally rich story content. This creates storylines and narrative development not accessible through a success-only experience.

Ex: Sunless Sea & Disco Elysium.

For more: see helpbook.

# MAKING FAILURE MAKE SENSE

In some games, game designers ensure that the presence of failure is explained in the game world and its lore (ex: the game explain why the main character resurrects after death). A seamless integration of failure in the worldbuilding provides a narrative justification to a mechanic decision.

Ex: Bioshock & Gods Will Be Watching.

For more: see helpbook.

## SPENDING TIME WITH NPCs

Having few opportunities for NPC deaths means that players spend more time bonding with these characters. The more time they spend with them, the more likely they are to care about them - and to have a powerful experience when a character's fate is at risk under their watch.

Ex: Pyre & The Walking Dead.

For more: see helpbook.

# PLAYER EXPECTATIONS

Some genres are associated with different forms of failure (ex: Roguelikes VS dating simulators). Players may have learnt to expect specific forms of failure by playing such games: which makes it possible to anticipate and subvert their expectations.

Ex: Hades.

For more: see helpbook.

# FROM ZERO TO HERO

Replaying a section, getting a chance at redemption: having the opportunity to bounce back from failure, and the satisfaction of finally overcoming it, turns failure from a negative into a positive experience, making it “worth it”.

Ex: Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy.

For more: see helpbook.

## STORY OR MASTERY?

Worrying about avoiding failure can distract players from the story and themes of the game. Adjusting the way players fail, and how it derails them from their goal (ex: an objective to complete? or just avoiding to die?), can allow players to focus less on mastery, and to better absorb the game's story.

For more: see helpbook.

## UNNECESSARY SUCCESS?

In many games, the player is asked to successfully complete quests and objectives. In some other games, not all goals are designed to be completed. The notion of success can be more ambiguous, and victory, success, or triumph, are not the point of the game.

Ex: Before I Forget.

For more: see helpbook.



# BREAKING THE HERO'S JOURNEY

By including failure in the story, or by making the game account for player failure, the player character may feel more human and relatable. In a mostly success-driven medium, this helps dispel the myth of the undefeated, god-like hero.

Ex: Spec Ops: The Line.

For more: see helpbook.

# BUTTERFLY EFFECT

When failure has consequences, the player's failure can have deep, transformative effects on the game world. This transformation can be observed directly, and can shape the story into a more personalised experience.

Ex: Frostpunk.

For more: see helpbook.

# UNCERTAINTY

In story-driven games, failure can trigger a sense of uncertainty as to what will unfold as a consequence of failure. This can be a source of confusion, worry, or curiosity for the player.

Ex: Disco Elysium.

For more: see helpbook.

# ACCEPTING FAILURE

Players who are used to playing video games may expect to experience failure when playing them - seeing it as a normal convention in gaming. Other, more novice players, may not have that familiarity and resilience to failure.

For more: see helpbook.

# UNAMBIGUOUS FEEDBACK

Explicit feedback from the game can help ensure that the player knows the cause of their failure, and the extent of their own responsibility in it. The player can then start thinking about how to avoid repeating it.

Ex: Papers Please.

For more: see helpbook.

# PLAYER RESPONSIBILITY

In games where failure is accounted for in the narrative, the story and game mechanics work together, and tie player failure to character failure. If the character fails, it is because of the player's actions. This can foster a sense of agency (when there is success) and responsibility (when there is failure).

For more: see helpbook.

# COMMUNITIES

Communities can transform the sting of failure into something else (ex: fun, or otherwise memorable moments). There can be a social, communal aspect to failure, that makes its frustrating effects more bearable.

For more: see helpbook.

# IT NEVER HAPPENED

Many games include a dissonance, where the player fails at a task, but respawns and can re-try the same challenge, without the failure being acknowledged in the game's story. In the story, the failure never really took place, and the character never actually fails.

Ex: Uncharted.

For more: see helpbook.



# NO FAILURE

Some games, such as walking simulators, do not include any experience of failure, both mechanically and thematically. Such games are often disputed as not being “real games”.

Ex: Gone Home.

For more: see helpbook.

# WHAT IS FAILURE?

Through experiences of failure in video games, players can reshape and rethink their relationship to failure, even beyond the game (in sports, their everyday life, etc).

For more: see helpbook.

## SAFE (?) EMOTIONAL REFLECTION

Failure can trigger powerful emotional responses, and allow the player to process a range of emotions that failure induces through the game's story and mechanics. This can include disappointment, anger, frustration, sadness, grief, and more.

For more: see helpbook.

## DIFFICULT THEMES

Having the player fail at tasks related to difficult themes (ex: grief, war, mental health...) can leave a deep impression and create a powerful experience, if carefully considering the message it may communicate.

Ex: Through the Darkest of Times.

For more: see helpbook.

# FOSTERING POSITIVE VALUES

Failure can trigger reflections on larger questions, that the game and failure touch upon. The player gets the chance to reflect upon themes related to failure, their own behaviour towards it, and values, such as acceptance of loss, patience, or sportsmanship.

For more: see helpbook.

# MONETISATION

For some game studio models, especially in the free-to-play and/or mobile space, failure can fit within the monetisation process.

Ex: Fallen London.

For more: see helpbook.

# THE PLAYER AND THE GAME

Some players argue that failure adds depth and layers to a game.

Experiencing failure encourages players to reconsider what they thought the game was about, how it works, and what their position and role, as players, is within it.

For more: see helpbook.

# PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FAILURE

Not everybody has the same definition of failure; and not everyone will be affected the same way by different kinds of failure.

For more: see helpbook.



# WHAT ARE GAMES?

Some games deliberately toy with conventions, including the presence of failure, or the role it plays, and reshape the player's understanding of what makes a game, a game. Is it a game if you can't fail?

For more: see helpbook.

# AN INTROSPECTIVE JOURNEY

Failure is a process that can draw the player's attention inwards, to their emotional state, and trigger a sense of awareness of their emotional state as they play. Why are they getting frustrated, angry, sad? Are they the problem or is it the game?

For more: see helpbook.

# WILDCARD!

Anything that comes to mind that you haven't discussed yet? That isn't covered by the other cards? Now is your chance!

For more: see helpbook.