

# **GAMING REPRESENTATION**

*Race, Gender, and Sexuality  
in Video Games*

EDITED BY **JENNIFER MALKOWSKI** AND  
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*Part III*

**QUEERNESS, PLAY, SUBVERSION**

## PLAYING TO LOSE

### *The Queer Art of Failing at Video Games*

BONNIE RUBERG

WHEN WE PLAY VIDEO GAMES, WE PLAY TO WIN, DON'T WE? SOMETIMES WE fail—very often we fail—but failure itself amounts to little more than an unpleasant, if necessary, obstacle on the road to success. It's normal to hate to fail; taking pleasure in failure itself, playing a game intentionally to lose, would be very queer indeed. At least, these are the assumptions that underlie recent writing on failure in video games. These same assumptions are being challenged by contemporary queer theory, which explores the functions of failure but doesn't address video games. This chapter brings these two contemporary discourses into dialogue, in order to question and ultimately refute a set of accepted notions about games: that players find pleasure only in success, that players find only pain in failure, that the power of losing lies in the power of winning, and that it would be bafflingly abnormal and dismissively unlikely to revel in defying a game's expectations for success—to lie down willingly under the blows of our opponents, to crash our cars in a blaze of self-destruction.

My ultimate goal is to bring together queer theory and game studies to argue for failure as an inherently queer mode of play. To do this, I interweave two recent theoretical works of such strikingly similar titles that they beg us to read them together. In 2011 queer theorist Jack Halberstam published his book on failing and cultural resistance, *The Queer Art of Failure*. In 2013, games scholar Jesper Juul published his own treatise, an extended essay on “pain in video games,” *The Art of Failure*. The two texts share almost no common material and do not reference each other.<sup>1</sup> Halberstam doesn't talk about video games; Juul doesn't talk about queerness. However, considered as two pieces of one puzzle, these works, at once surprisingly similar and surprisingly different, form a conceptual basis for exploring queerness in video games beyond representation. That is, the abstract

nature of their connections allows us to look for the queer, in its many guises, in games that have no explicitly LGBT content. After presenting some of the ways that one might fail for failure's sake, I use the racing game *Burnout Revenge* (2005, Criterion Games) both to illustrate and nuance my basic claim: that, contrary to common assumptions, failure in video games can be pleasurable and powerful—a spectacular, masochistic mode of resistance that disassembles normative expectations in and out of the game world. To conclude, I propose a new understanding of play through queer failure, a new understanding of queer failure through play, and a framework for future crossovers between queer studies and game studies, two currently disparate disciplines with much to gain from opening their doors to one another.

### Beyond LGBT Representation: On Queering “Straight” Games

Putting queerness and games in dialogue is a nascent practice, for academics and game makers alike. Traditionally, mainstream video games have shied away from including LGBT characters or story lines—and what elements they have included often promote reductive or harmful stereotyping.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, approaching games through the lens of queerness seems at first counterintuitive. Lately, though, a number of independent game developers whose work directly addresses queerness have received national attention.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, recent years have seen the inauguration of multiple conventions and conferences exploring everything from LGBT discrimination in the games industry to different approaches to designing LGBT content to the LGBT “geek” lifestyle to the academic intersection of queer studies and game studies.<sup>4</sup> Scholarship around these issues has only recently begun to circulate. Previously, queer games writing frequently focused on questions like, “What are the experiences of LGBT gamers?” or “How do existing games depict LGBT characters, and how could they improve?”<sup>5</sup> This important work has played a crucial role in orienting our thinking around queerness and games. However, my focus lies elsewhere. I do not discuss literal representations of queer characters or the alienation of queer gamers denied representation. I do not lay out the history of queerness in games or the games industry or prescribe for queer content a brighter tomorrow. Instead, in the tradition of ludologists like Juul, algorithmic thinkers like Alexander Galloway, and classic theorists of play like Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Sigmund Freud, I focus on ludics, and I do so queerly. I don't mean to imply that we shouldn't dedicate attention to explicitly queer games elsewhere, that queerness is somehow inept by association with failure, or that player masochism equates to player sickness. Indeed, failure, masochism, and the queer are all used here as powerful, positive, and fluid concepts that allow us to see queerness where it often goes overlooked.

Before diving into Juul's and Halberstam's queer arts, I unpack the stakes of this proposition, that we might look for queerness beyond LGBT representation. What happens when we call a work—a video game, movie, and so on—“queer”

even if it doesn't seem to contain any explicitly queer content? If players can't play at gay marriage or choose transgendered avatars, if they can only race cars or throw punches, doesn't that make a game by default "straight"—or at least not gay? It's likely that the queer-free game in question includes no overt references to sexuality at all. To the player who sees queer as synonymous with gay, this game appears sexless, benign. Games like these make up a huge majority of commercially released titles. Yet it's specifically because this presumed straightness so dominates the medium that we need to challenge the mold and look at all types of games through the lens of queerness, not just those rare few where schoolboys kiss schoolboys (*Bully*, 2006, Rockstar Games) or women seduce women in the far reaches of outer space (*Mass Effect* series, 2007–2012, BioWare).

Queering the seemingly un-queer is a particularly touchy, and therefore particularly powerful, practice when it comes to video games, an artistic form with close ties to its historically homophobic player base.<sup>6</sup> The traditional wisdom from gaming's outspoken online community objects that when we explore queerness in "straight" games, we "read too much" into them, polluting the hetero safe space of queer-free play with our "gay" interpretations. The pervasiveness of this homophobia has been well documented.<sup>7</sup> Allow me to illustrate. Shortly after the release of the widely popular *Portal* (2007, Valve Corporation), I wrote a blog post for the *Village Voice* about lesbian overtones in the relationship between the game's female protagonist and GLaDOS, her taunting, female-coded robot tormentor.<sup>8</sup> In the post's comment thread, a reader left this response, one of many like it: "There is nothing gay about this game, you just made that up. No one ever says lesbian. You're just a dyke bitch who doesn't know what you're saying. If you want to think like that in your own home go ahead but don't force it down our throats."<sup>9</sup> This comment neatly encapsulates what I would identify as the main tenets of gamer homophobia. First, any game not clearly marked as gay must be straight. Second, any interpretation of a game not spelled out explicitly by the game itself must be personal, invented, and therefore invalid (e.g., "you just made that up"). Third, anyone who talks about queerness must be gay. Fourth, reading games queerly, like queerness itself, belongs in the closet (e.g., do it "in your own home"). Fifth, making queerness visible constitutes an act of violence against the hetero status quo. Sixth, this imagined violence is itself charged with unacknowledged homoerotics (e.g., "don't force it down our throats"). Seventh, there is a "we," and there is a "you"; women and queers fall in the "you" and stand outside an imagined, invisible community of "we"—real, normal, straight, male players. Needless to say, the beloved game itself, in this case *Portal*, is claimed without question for the "we"—up until the imagined moment when the word "lesbian," had it been included in the game, would have satisfactorily solidified the doubtful "queer" into the comprehensible, categorical "gay."

Game designers and scholars, arguing for the legitimacy of video games as an art form, often draw parallels between the tumultuous history of film and the



current state of interactive media—young and wobbly but blossoming in the face of criticism, as cinema did in its earliest decades. A similar parallel exists between queer film studies and queer game studies. The homophobic, anti-analytical community response exemplified by the *Portal* comment mirrors with surprising familiarity the dismissive, heterocentric backlash that film scholars faced in the mid-1990s when they began to queer classic straight movies. In *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Cannon* (2000), Alexander Doty describes the reactions of his peers to his queer readings of supposedly safe, sexless favorites like the movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). “It often seems as if people think that since you have chosen to read something queerly,” Doty laments, “you need to be pressured or patronized into feeling that you have made the wrong or the ‘less common and therefore easy to undermine or put in its place’ choice.”<sup>10</sup> Under the truism that mass media is produced for and by the average straight, white, middle-class male consumer—and is therefore itself straight—attitudes like those Doty encountered insistently categorize queer readings of mainstream films (or games) as “pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn’t there.”<sup>11</sup> At best, this hegemonic thinking posits that queer readings focus excessively on small tidbits of homoeroticism that are insubstantial, subtextual, subcultural, and always second-rate alternatives to the allegedly obvious, reasonable, literal, ostensibly hetero interpretation of bodies on-screen.

How do we argue for queerness in the face of such insistently narrow perspectives? First, we must understand the word “queer,” in its contemporary usage, to mean much more than gay, or even LGBT. Individuals who identify as queer might see themselves as defying heterosexual norms in any number of ways: through sexuality, gender queerness, non-mainstream relationship styles, and so on. And queerness isn’t just confined to the flesh. More abstractly, queerness means both desiring differently and simply being differently (or, in this case, playing differently): a longing to live life otherwise, a resistance to social structures, and an embrace of the strange.<sup>12</sup> So when we explore queerness in supposedly straight games, we’re not declaring them gay. We’re also not calling their players or makers gay. We’re not saying that developers intentionally built queerness into their games or that every player experiences queerness similarly. We’re not even necessarily labeling this queerness as sexual. These caveats may seem obvious, but for the video game community “queer” still represents untried and uneasy territory. The multiplicity of ways to interpret queerness also reminds us that there are many, equally valid ways to interpret games. Queer readings don’t necessarily seek to override straight ones. Instead, they offer queer ways of seeing games. These modes of seeing value experience above content, a particularly important approach for video games, where player input shapes the interactive world. Any game becomes queer, in a sense, when we experience it queerly.

Of course, to explore the queerness in all games, we must move past the homophobia and anti-intellectualism exemplified by my reader’s remark. If we want games to flourish as a rich, artful medium for entertainment and study, we’ll have

to set aside our knee-jerk, heterocentric defenses. Games may be fun, but that doesn't mean they're just fun. As Juul writes, video games speak to "something deeper, something truly human, something otherwise invisible" about their players and the world around them.<sup>13</sup> Games are fictional, fantasy, but they are also always at least half-real.<sup>14</sup> Understanding fantasy helps us understand desire, pleasure, pain, and ourselves. Besides, what does it mean to read a game too closely? "Too close" implies intimacy, inappropriate contact, poking and prodding and pressing—an almost sexual and certainly ludic encounter with the video game itself. It means caring too deeply. Gamers, of all people, know what it's like to be told by those who do not share their passion for games that they care too much. These intimacies are queer intimacies, alternate visions of the control-freedom dynamic—the intimacy between player and game, between flesh and the controller in our hands.

### The Arts of Failure: Halberstam and Juul

Juul opens *The Art of Failure* with a personal account of how much he hates to lose, admitting and proclaiming:

I am a sore loser. Something in me demands that I win, beat, or complete every game I try, and that part of me is outraged and tormented whenever I fail to do so. Still, I play video games though I know I will fail. . . . On a higher level, I think I enjoy playing video games, but why does this enjoyment contain at its core something that I most certainly do not enjoy?<sup>15</sup>

To illustrate this contradiction, this "pleasure spiked with pain," Juul describes failing at a level of the Japanese rhythm game *Patapon* (2008, Pyramid). Again and again, angry and dejected, he fails, puts the game away, then picks it up again, and then puts it away once more, returning as if compulsively to the site of his tantalizing torment—recalling Freud's fort-da game, in which a child repeatedly throws away and retrieves a toy that reminds him painfully of his absent father.<sup>16</sup> Everyone who plays video games participates in the same illogical dance, Juul asserts: "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, at least some of the time."<sup>17</sup>

These opening paragraphs make clear that Juul hates failing, and that he assumes everyone else hates failing too. Failure makes Juul viscerally upset. Therefore he tells us, unequivocally, to put any thoughts of masochism out of our minds. He "most certainly" does not enjoy his repeated demise, as we might be tempted to suggest. Indeed, Juul founds *The Art of Failure* on the presumption that displeasure is the logical and normal response to losing. Players who lose feel rotten, and loss jolts them out of the game with such a nauseating punch to their self-esteem that they contemplate giving up entirely. Yet players' drive to win pushes them forward past failure, inspiring them to walk over the emotional broken glass of lost levels in a rush of determination, pride, and testosterone. What Juul names

the “paradox of failure” sits at the crux of his argument—the confusing fact that we return time and again to play through what we hate (temporary defeat) in order to experience what we love (success). Though often overlooked, Juul reasons, failure is a crucial part of the play experience—so crucial, in fact, that Juul suggests we might call video games as an art form “the art of failure.” The presumption operating here, for Juul, is that meaning in failure comes not from the pleasure or pain of failure itself, but instead from the frustrations and rewards of struggling to overcome it. That failure might be its own success, its own pleasure, its own art—performed not by the game but by the player—does not enter into Juul’s equation.

Juul suggests and dismisses a number of possible explanations for this paradox. Perhaps video games offer a safe space for failure, a magic circle where falling on our faces is “neither painful nor the least unpleasant.” No, in some sense video game failure really does hurt, he insists. Perhaps failing in video games allows us to purge our reserves of pity and fear in response to fictional tragedy. No, writes Juul, “when we experience a humiliating defeat, we really are filled with emotions of humiliation and inadequacy. Games do not purge these emotions—they produce the emotions in the first place.”<sup>18</sup> Maybe failure motivates us to continue playing. Maybe failure keeps us agreeably honest. Maybe failure doesn’t matter.<sup>19</sup> Juul come closest to a decision about the paradox of failure when he posits that games make us feel flawed and deficient but also promise us the opportunity to overcome our flaws.<sup>20</sup> In each of these proposed answers, though, the appeal of failure remains inextricably linked to eventual success—to failure’s roundabout ability to cleanse bad feelings or encourage us to win. The solution, tautologically, replicates the assumptions of the paradox itself—success is good, failure hurts, and no one likes to hurt.

Though Juul’s *The Art of Failure* and Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* have nearly identical titles, Halberstam offers a very different take on losing. Halberstam’s book doesn’t discuss video games, but questions of success and self-destruction sit at its heart—making it a logical, if unexpected bedfellow for Juul’s distinctly queerness-free text. What’s more, because it so prominently uses language like “losing” and “winning,” we can easily envision it as a treatise about play. The basic imperative behind Halberstam’s argument is to stop thinking about failure as an onerous frustration to be overcome. Instead, think of all the heteronormative expectations we undermine when we refuse to succeed, to play along, to win. Think of the havoc we wreak on the status quo when we, under the charge of queer nonconformity, play to lose:

Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique. . . . [They] recategorize what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant. . . . Rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment,

the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd. . . . Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cling to all of our inevitable fantastic failures.<sup>21</sup>

In this vision, queer failure does not just mean falling facedown in the mud; it means taking pleasure in that fall. It means getting up, not because determination drives you to “die tryin’,” as Derek Burrill describes in his book on video games and performances of masculinity, but because you want to fall all over again.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, clean, happy, “normal” people pass by and shake their heads—their idea of happiness for a moment unsettled. The one who revels in “fantastic failures” is the one who loses, embraces losing, and likes it. If we adjust Halberstam’s language for games, we can read normative “advancement” as advancement through levels (or a refusal to advance), and “capital accumulation” as in-game points accumulated (or ignored, wasted). “Nonreproductive lifestyles” becomes the squandering of extra lives, the abandonment of hard-fought unsaved games. The queer takes on the guise of the bad subject, the bad player who rejects the regulating logic of the game and “[stalls] the business of the dominant,” the cheater who exercises her unsanctioned agency not so much to win as, in Mia Consalvo’s terms, “to challenge the notion that there is one ‘correct’ way to play.”<sup>23</sup>

Juul and Halberstam disagree on what exactly constitutes the art of failure. For Juul, it refers to games themselves as an art form, interactive experiences carefully designed to bring us to our knees and convince us to stay there. For Halberstam, by contrast, the art of failure isn’t an object that punishes us; it’s an art we enact, an art of being differently, of embracing self-destructive agency. When we fail fantastically, we are the queer artists. Halberstam’s use of “queer” in the phrase “the queer art” highlights the word’s double meaning—both sexually nonnormative and simply bizarre. Traditionally, artistry equates to being good at something; failure equates to being bad at it. Any art of failure would be queer indeed. After all, who throws themselves in the mud for fun? Someone masochistic. Someone exploring fun’s absurdities and abjections, playing with the meanings of pleasure, playing queerly. Thus, to play queerly means to play the wrong way around, to jump our unsuspecting, pixelated avatars into pits instead of over them, to choreograph the most unfortunate disasters. If Juul’s art of failure is games, in this sense Halberstam’s is also a game, one of our own making. It is a playful art, a ludic art, which makes a game of dying.

### Fail Fantastically: *Burnout Revenge* and the Pleasure of Self-Destruction

To question the notion that players simply hate failing, we need look no further than the multitude of “fail” videos accruing views on YouTube. In these videos, players record their own epic in-game fails and then post them proudly. Whereas live-action fail videos feature real bodies putting themselves in real peril, the failure in game videos is the failure to play well—or it’s the success of playing so badly it becomes absurd. A YouTube compilation uploaded in May 2013 composed of

clips from games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011, Infinite Ward) and *Halo 4* (2012, 343 Industries) promises scenes from “ULTIMATE Gaming Fails.”<sup>24</sup> In this montage, avatar after avatar finds a way to self-destruct in violent ecstasy. Players accidentally launch grenades at their own feet or blithely fire handguns into nearby caches of explosives. Game fail videos are most often filmed and uploaded by the very players who fail in them. These players find pleasure, not shame, in the infinite replay of their failure, which comes to function as an inverted performance of non-skill and bravado. The pleasure viewers take in watching these videos similarly speaks to the complex feelings surrounding failure. Spectators are bound to enjoy a fail video more if they have played the game in question. Through this identification, they imagine themselves failing by proxy. If, as Juul tells us, all players hate failing, who would watch these videos? Who would make them?

As we think through the potential pleasures of game failure, a taxonomy begins to emerge. Juul discusses many types of games at which we might fail: games that are difficult to master, games that can never really be completed, games that insult us, games that make us feel like failures to coax us into learning, fair games, unfair games, games of skill, sadistic games, cathartic games, suicide games.<sup>25</sup> This seemingly endless enumeration makes sense; after all, failure plays a role in almost every game. We can imagine failing in even more ways than Juul lists: failing with our bodies versus failing with our minds (e.g., messing up in a dancing game versus miscalculating in a tactical one), failure through inaction versus failure through action (e.g., forgetting to avoid an incoming missile versus stepping in front of it), failure by accident or failure on purpose (e.g., tripping over versus stepping on a ticking bomb). I want to stress one distinction I find particularly important for queer failure—the distinction between failing toward or against a game system. By this I mean the difference between failing in the way that a game wants us to (e.g., flinging one’s avatar to a gruesome demise in *Stair Dismount* or walking toward the inevitability of death in *Passage*) versus failing in the way that a game does not want. Determining what any given game “wants” is itself tricky, but I am thinking here about what outcomes the game instructs us to strive for, what outcomes it rewards, what outcomes it punishes, what outcomes it renders impossible.

To explore the pleasure of failing against a game, we might forfeit, allow ourselves to be beaten, or even commit virtual suicide. Failing on purpose takes on a particularly queer appeal in fighting games, where the express and monolithic goal is victory. Like many other long-standing fighting games series—*Mortal Kombat* (1992–2015, Midway Games), *Street Fighter* (1987–2014, Capcom), *Dead or Alive* (1996–2015, Tecmo)—*SoulCalibur IV*’s (2008, Namco) basic unit of gameplay is the two-person, attack-and-defend match. If you win, the game sings your praises and subjects the loser to a playback of his defeat. In my experience, the game unintentionally offers two ways to play that are more enjoyable than winning. Option one: let yourself be slowly and beautifully beaten by your opponent. While I am

losing, I get the chance to appreciate our rippling on-screen flesh, which I would normally miss while slashing away, and to revel in the physicality of my in-game proxy. With each hit, I am temporarily disabled; my avatar flies up into the air; my controller rumbles. This long, teasing self-torture makes me feel tantalizingly present. Option two: commit suicide after you've already won. The fighting stages in the *SoulCalibur* games frequently end in treacherous ledges. After winning a match, when the loser's body lays motionless on the ground, the winner is allowed a few seconds to gloat. I prefer to take that moment, when success looks certain, to jump off the edge of the level into oblivion. Out I go into the gorgeous, green-blue, soft-focus scenery. I am both victor and failure.

Alternatively, we might choose to fail against a game through nonaction. Racing games are another genre unambiguously oriented toward winning, making them a poignant site for experimenting with non-goal-oriented play. *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* (2012, Criterion Games) presents players with an open world where they can roam a wide network of urban streets dotted with racing challenges. Yet this same open world unintentionally affords players the opportunity to opt out of racing altogether. The *Need for Speed* series promises entertainment in the form of fast cars, illegal maneuvers, and high-speed chases. I therefore take great pleasure in driving slowly and respectfully. I stop my shiny coupe at red lights; I follow other cars at a safe distance. The game itches and aches, sending a frantic stream of pop-ups to remind me that I should be off actually playing. This tactic takes a slightly different form in the independent game *Nidhogg* (2014, Messhof), which combines fighting mechanics with classic platformer levels. Two players face off, attacking each other with pixelated epees. Here, I spend inordinate amounts of time dancing. Since *Nidhogg's* characters have fast, agile movements, leaping about produces something like an extemporaneous dance. But, because any contact between swordsmen results in a temporary death, the trick is to dance circles around an opponent without making contact. In an appropriately queer paradox, failing (i.e., playing in a way that the game refuses to recognize) requires something like success (i.e., staying alive).

While it's possible to fail in almost any type of game, I am particularly interested in games that blur the line between failing toward and against the system. These games illustrate, enrich, and yet ultimately complicate our thinking about queer play. The *Burnout* games, a long-standing racing series, have no explicitly queer content. They do, however, set themselves apart from other popular racing intellectual properties (like *Need for Speed*) with their emphasis on fantastic destruction rather than simulated realism. They boast failure in their very title. *Burnout Revenge* (2005, Criterion Games), released for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 2 as the fourth *Burnout* console title, continues the series' obsession with daredevil demises. Whereas most commercially successful racing games focus on impressive cars and driving physics, *Burnout* embraces the pleasures of the crash. In *Burnout Revenge's* primary racing mode, players earn rewards for swiping or taking down other racers in a show of sparks and metal. Traffic Attack mode ups the



ante, making destruction, not speed, the goal of each round. Players, unleashed on city streets buzzing with oblivious civilian vehicles, ram into as many cars as possible without getting caught in head-on collisions. However, it's in the Crash challenges that *Burnout's* fervor for failure becomes clearest. Though the game doesn't present Crash as its primary mode, Crash succinctly distills important elements from across the game, and some form of Crash exists in almost all *Burnout* titles. Succeeding at Crash mode means one thing—failing as spectacularly as possible. Players have their choice of location and vehicles. While the lightweight cars, designed for racing, have sleek curves and shiny finishes, the heavyweight crash cars (all the better to rear-end you with) wear their failure on their automotive skins. The paint chips off the sides of an old sedan. A pickup truck, covered in dents, looks like a fighter sporting yesterday's bruises. After players select a trusty, crappy steed, the game shoots them speeding down a street dotted with obstacles. Stay unharmed just long enough to spot the perfect crash site, where a traffic accident will do the most damage. A well-calculated leap off the side overpass rail might, for example, land you smack in the side of a semitruck. This truck, now stopped on a busy highway, swipes other cars, causing a pileup of screeches and explosions. Seventy-two cars in a row, seemingly unperturbed by the danger, happily plow into you without breaking or swerving—compelled by the logic of a world designed and destined for destruction, where the only choice is the choice to crash.

Success in *Burnout Revenge's* Crash mode—that is, self-destruction—feels undeniably good. Points, dollar signs, and other achievements accumulate on-screen throughout the pileup. Then there's the cinematic pleasure. Before beginning a level, the game presents a long tracking shot through the peaceful cityscape you are about to ravage. This establishing shot, to borrow a cinema term, serves equally as tactical shot, a chance to plot the exact path of your wreckage. Once you crash, tapping the B button rapidly at the right moment causes your car to explode, sending out an impressive mushroom-cloud boom that breaks apart nearby vehicles. A replay video shows each crash from multiple, dramatic angles, including swooping crane shots that seem to transform your humble handiwork into the culminating scene from *True Lies* (1994, James Cameron). Meanwhile, the raucous, punk-inspired soundtrack adds aural adrenaline. After the moment of crash, however, the music cuts to silence, broken only by the surprisingly distant sound of crashing cars and the cheers of an invisible crowd of male voices applauding your accomplishment. These cheering voices are as much confusing as congratulatory. There are no people in *Burnout Revenge*. No drivers, no pedestrians. The cars' tinted windows, when they crumble off the side of wrecked vehicles, reveal empty cabs. No blood. No victims. No victor. Instead, the bodies on-screen are the bodies of cars—their bumpers askew, their windows shattered. The blood is the blood in the veins of the player, who at once pushes to lose and to win.

Is it possible to fail at a game that you win by failing, to fail against the system in a game that encourages you to fail toward it? Yes, but this type of failure looks

different than we might expect. In *Burnout Revenge's* Crash mode, success means going out in a violent blaze; failing, however, means getting stuck on the shoulder of a highway while your engine lazily puffs out smoke. On your way to impale a tractor trailer, you accidentally swipe your car against a bollard. Here your turn comes to an end. The game again offers an array of epic shots of the (in this case decidedly nonepic and unsatisfying) destruction you have caused. A few other cars spin out around you, but for the most part traffic passes by unharmed. The action-movie pleasure of success becomes fail-video shame, inverted as a display of dullness, not bravado. As for the game's primary Race mode, it technically never wants you to crash your own vehicle, no matter how fantastically. Make contact with another car at the wrong angle and, instead of triumphantly sending them off course, the game forces you into a three-second, third-person, noninteractive slow-motion scene of your own car smashing itself to bits (only to appear, reconstituted and ready to race, once the scene is done). The game wants us to feel inconvenienced by the crashes in Race mode, and we do; for those three seconds we squirm as our competitors zoom by. At the same time, Race mode does want us to enjoy the spectacle of our own destruction, even as it incentivizes standard racing goals, like clocking in a record-breaking lap or simply finishing first. The cutscenes of our undesirable demise are as aesthetically appealing—shiny metal, flashing sparks—as those in which we receive cash and applause for our failure. The game also uses the same load screens for Race as for Crash—images of two cars smashing together at great speed. The images foreshadow the crashes sure to follow, taunting us with our imminent loss, and reminding us of the game's real goal, thinly veiled in talk of points and winners: destruction.

Juul addresses the *Burnout* series directly, but quickly dismisses it as an unremarkable example in the pantheon of video game failure. During a discussion about suicide games, Juul notes that a similar suicidal instinct does occasionally appear in commercial games, though in less direct forms. About failure in the *Burnout* series and its pleasures (or lack thereof), Juul writes:

This experience of self-destruction has an unpleasant aspect to it, but the game presents no human characters, and furthermore restarts immediately after a crash with no cost to the player, hence deemphasizing any human suffering caused. *Burnout Paradise* is part of a small trend that does not involve the long-time suffering of the protagonist, but rather fascinates through the immediate joyful discomfort of witnessing (bodily) destruction.<sup>26</sup>

Again, Juul emphasizes the unpleasantness of losing, but with a few new caveats. He proclaims *Burnout's* brand of self-destruction to be unpleasant but not unpleasant enough. Without any mangled bodies to mourn, without a suffering protagonist to identify with, surely players will never rise from petty fascination to true self-flagellation. Instead, they'll continue their victimless massacres without consequence, which by extension renders the massacres themselves inconsequential. To my eye, contrary to Juul's reading, accidents definitely do come at a cost



in Race mode. And in Crash mode, they're not the cost; they're the point. Also, how can we blithely group *Burnout*, in which there are no human bodies, with games that center around "witnessing (bodily) destruction"—all while shrugging off the game's impact for its lack of bodies? Most importantly, Juul is wrong about self-destruction in the game: it isn't unpleasant. It's highly pleasurable. In fact, it's fantastic.

Of course, since Halberstam's book doesn't reference video games, he doesn't discuss *Burnout*. However, his approach to understanding self-destruction helps fill in the missing pieces of Juul's interpretation. By joining Halberstam in insisting on the queer in the game's art of failure, we can reinstate *Burnout Revenge*'s masochistic pleasure. We can also begin to uncover the full queer potential of playing to lose. Halberstam, in his chapter on masochism and feminism, insists that we see self-destruction not as a pathological behavior from which the queer artist needs rescuing, but as a form of resistance against mainstream power structures. He writes, "I propose a radical form of masochistic passivity that . . . offers up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself. . . . The masochist tethers her notion of self to a spiral of pain and hurt. She refuses to cohere, refuses to fortify herself against the knowledge of death and dying."<sup>27</sup> Halberstam's masochist, like the loss-driven player, defines herself not through tenacity and recognition, but through her choice to embrace pain and death (one "dies" regularly in games). Juul argues that the suffering *Burnout* offers (that "immediate joyful discomfort") feels so good we hardly know whether it's suffering at all. Yet, if we look at *Burnout Revenge* through a masochistic lens, we see that the power of such games lies specifically in their combination of pain and pleasure, which scrambles our prescriptions for success and loss: the pain of seeing our automotive avatar splattered on the highway, the pain of not seeing our automotive avatar splattered on the highway, the pleasure of the fantastic crash when we go up in flames, the pleasure of living to die another day.

### Playing to Lose: The Queer Art of Failing at Video Games

What, then, can we call the queer art of failing at video games? Between queer theory and game studies, we have triangulated a new perspective. Failure is integral to games, and failure is queer. That leads to a handful of coherent, if controversial propositions: that failure (whether toward or against a game) must be a queer way to play, that failure brings queerness to games with no explicitly queer content, that a game based on failure must be a queer game, and that queerness (in the guise of failure) is itself integral to all games. Far from being a merely inconvenient and inconsequential obstacle on the road to success, video game failure matters and can be leveraged as a form of resistance. Together, these claims allow us to see a supposedly straight game like *Burnout Revenge*—with its fast cars, presumed heterosexual male player base, and war-gasm explosions—as something other than normative or sexless. The game becomes, in this view, one that plays differently, that we play differently, a queer game that queers us as we play. If failing at

video games is an art of playing the wrong way, every game has its own wrong way. In *Burnout Revenge*, it might take the form of lingering too long over destruction, or playing Crash mode on fort-da repeat as the game tries to inch us toward new levels. In these moments, the beautiful, painful, pleasurable vision of self-destruction, which players enact through their queer artistry, itself takes on the caliber of an undeniably alluring art.

However, before unambiguously claiming failed play in the name of queer game resistance, I want to complicate this calculation, as the *Burnout* games themselves demand. Keep in mind the distinction between failure toward and against a system. Here is the particular paradox of failure at work in *Burnout*: how can we claim to play queerly by failing in a game where failing is the way to win? In *Burnout Revenge*'s Crash mode, we win when we fail well. In the game's Racing mode, crashing makes it more likely that we'll lose, yet the game clearly wants us to take pleasure in crashes. Any way we fail, we seem to be failing toward the game. At the same time, cultural expectations outside of the game dictate that driving successfully doesn't mean catapulting into a semitruck, and that succeeding doesn't mean watching yourself go up in flames. When we crash in a brilliant blaze, then, we both conform to and ostentatiously reject systems of dominant logic—one belonging to the game, the other belonging to the social context in which we play it. What would it mean to fail against the game in *Burnout*? It might look quite similar to my dull, lawful meandering in *Need for Speed*. In *Need for Speed*, though, refusing to engage with the goal of the game (racing to win) is relatively easy: don't enter into a race. However, in *Burnout Revenge*, opting out takes skill, and even this form of failure is bound to inevitably fail. Opting out would mean driving but not crashing at all, and everything in the game is designed for impact. Like the *Nidhogg* dance, which requires avatar proximity but breaks with avatar contact, playing crashless in *Burnout Revenge* navigates a precarious line. It seems whatever system players choose to fail against, they fail into the arms of another. Admittedly, that basic contradiction does some queering of its own. Try gingerly navigating the streets of *Burnout Revenge* in a stubborn attempt to play at being the good subject in a world gone wrong. It makes driving in the real world, with all its reasonable precautions and normative regulations, seem equally absurd. When we embrace failure, we also queer success.

Ultimately, the true usefulness of *Burnout* isn't just in how it exemplifies the pleasures of self-destruction but also in how it lays bare the infinite and uniquely queer dialectical tangle between system and player, failure and success, pain and pleasure. It shows us that winning can be equal parts subversive and conformist, and that a player's hurt and joy are not contradictory, but interwoven blurs that shape and color experience. When it comes to queer failure in video games, this ambiguity is apt. Games allow us to play at queer failure, to examine it from different angles, to try and fail at failing. Juul posits many reasons why we return to game failure time and again, though we (supposedly) hate it. We could similarly posit many reasons for why we play at queer failure. The drive toward queer failure

itself reveals a contradiction within the queer art of failing at video games. When we throw ourselves in the mud for the hundredth time, we do it better than we did the first time. When we replay failure, we replay toward perfection, failing more and more fantastically. New games to fail at mean more elaborate deaths, deaths rendered more and more impressive by better graphics, an endless proliferation of ways to self-destruct. Perfecting the art of failure, an art defined by imperfection, abjection, and artlessness, puts us back in the realm of paradox. What we've learned, therefore, is to embrace the paradox, to explore alternate longings and nonnormative desires as they speak to us from within our play.

I close by reasserting an incendiary conjecture: that if we accept failure as fundamental to games and we accept failure as coded as queer, all games become queer, in a nonrepresentational sense. This doesn't just apply to games in which players willingly blow themselves to pieces. To the extent that no game can exist without failure, no game can exist without queerness. In response, then, to the homophobic voices who would silence queer thinking as marginal, this conjecture lays claim to all games as fair territory for exploring queerly. It also offers a platform on which future queer studies and game studies might intermingle and models how we can uncover and unleash the queer, subversive tensions inherent to any game.

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## Notes

1. Though their books do not reference one another, Halberstam and Juul did present a conversation, "Queer Arts of Failure," at the 2013 Queerness and Games Conference in Berkeley, California.

2. For an overview of the history of LGBT representation in games and its discontents, see Edmond Chang, "Queer(ing) Video Games and Video Game Studies," presentation at the 129th Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Chicago, January 9, available at <http://www.edmondchang.com/2014/01/08/mla14>.

3. Brendan Keogh, "Just Making Things and Being Alive about It: The Queer Games Scene," *Polygon*, May 24, 2013, <http://www.polygon.com/features/2013/5/24/4341042/the-queer-games-scene>.

4. Electronic Arts hosted Full Spectrum, a one-day event addressing discrimination in the video games industry, in March 2013; New York University hosted Different Games, a collaborative conference on diversity and inclusivity in games, in April 2013; Gaymer Connect hosted GaymerX in August 2013 in San Francisco, a fan expo that drew thousands of attendees; and the University of California at Berkeley hosted the Queerness and Games Conference in October 2013, bringing together scholars and game developers.

5. Adrienne Shaw's work epitomizes this field. See *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

6. Many articles, both inside and outside the gaming community, have addressed this issue. For a representative piece, see Erik Kain, "Homophobia at BlizzCon: Is Gamer Culture Anti-Gay?" *Forbes*, October 27, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2011/10/27/homophobia-at-blizzcon-is-gamer-culture-anti-gay/>.

7. See *Gaming in Color*, directed by Philip Jones (MidBoss, 2015).

8. Bonnie Ruberg, "'Portal' Is for Lesbians," *Heroine Sheik*, October 17, 2007, <http://www.heroine-sheik.com/2007/10/17/portal-is-for-lesbians/>.

9. This comment, along with other overtly hateful remarks, were shortly thereafter removed from the post at the request of the *Village Voice*.

10. Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4; Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 1.

13. Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 22.

14. Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

15. Juul, *Art of Failure*, xi.

16. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Bantam, 1967).

17. Juul, *Art of Failure*, 2.

18. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

19. *Ibid.*, 9, 15, 5.

20. *Ibid.*, 7.

21. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 89, 88, 187.

22. Derek Burrill, *Die Tryin': Video Games, Masculinity, and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

23. Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 2.

24. LOL Cod Comedy, "ULTIMATE Gaming Fail Compilation 2013!" *YouTube*, May 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpROt6ipiwE>.

25. Juul, *Art of Failure*, 31, 48, 52.

26. *Ibid.*, 100.

27. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 131, 144–145.