

Queer

Game

BONNIE RUBERG AND ADRIENNE SHAW, Editors

Studies



University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

Chapter 6, “Playing Outside,” by Leigh Alexander, originally appeared in *The New Inquiry*, <http://thenewinquiry.com/>, June 17, 2013; reproduced by permission from *The New Inquiry*. Chapter 18, “The Nightmare Is Over,” by Katherine Cross, originally appeared as “The Nightmare Is Over: They’re Not Coming for Your Games,” at <http://www.polygon.com/>, July 29, 2014; reproduced by permission from Polygon.com and Vox Media Inc.

Copyright 2017 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

23 22 21 20 19 18 17

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ruberg, Bonnie, editor. | Shaw, Adrienne, editor.

Title: Queer game studies / [edited by] Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw.

Description: Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016036903 (print) | ISBN 978-1-5179-0036-6 (hc) |

ISBN 978-1-5179-0037-3 (pb)

Subjects: LCSH: Video games—Social aspects. | Electronic games—Social aspects. |

Games—Social aspects. | Gender identity. | Gays. | Queer theory.

Classification: LCC GV1469.17.S63 Q44 2017 (print) | DDC 794.8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016036903>

Chapter 20

The Arts of Failure

Jack Halberstam in Conversation with Jesper Juul

MODERATED BY BONNIE RUBERG

“The Arts of Failure” session took place in October 2013 as part of the inaugural Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon). The QGCon organizers placed Halberstam and Juul in dialogue in order to explore the crossovers between their respective work theorizing failure—in both the context of games and the context of queer theory. Volume coeditor Bonnie Ruberg served as moderator. The floor was also opened to audience questions in the latter half of the session.

RUBERG: We are thrilled to have Jack Halberstam and Jesper Juul with us here. Jack is one of the most influential queer theorists working today. He is a professor at the University of Southern California and the author most recently of *The Queer Art of Failure* and *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Jesper is one of our most influential contemporary games studies thinkers. He’s currently a professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Art, and author of books like *Half-Real*, *The Casual Revolution*, and, most recently, *The Art of Failure*. From the similarities between the titles of Jack and Jesper’s

books on failure you can tell why we wanted to put these two scholars in dialogue. Despite the overlaps in their interests, Jack and Jesper have never previously spoken. Jesper's book doesn't mention Jack's. Jack's doesn't mention video games. Yet it seemed natural to explore the ways the two texts speak to each other. I'll start by giving both Jack and Jesper a few moments to introduce themselves.

HALBERSTAM: My book, which followed some of the same argumentative strands that Jesper's did, was interested in the logic of success and failure, and the way that logic constrains us to a very normative viewpoint, such that different social circumstances produce different outcomes: success or failure. So my big claim is that someone might actually want to fail, because they're so dissatisfied with a particular social context. Take the social context of capitalism, for example. If winning the game of capitalism means accumulating wealth, then it may well be that anticapitalists want to fail at that game in order to produce other ways of thinking about money, other ways of thinking about relationships through property, or possession, or whatever it may be. But if you move to the realm of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, the queer becomes the failure logic. In a homophobic logic, the queer fails to be straight, literally. The butch fails to be a woman. The sissy boy fails to be a man. The queer adult fails to get married and have children. They all fail in their socially prescribed role. There are two responses you can have to that. One is to try and play the game as it's been written, to say, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize. I will now get married and have children, and then maybe you will accept me as a success on your terms." Or you refuse the game. You say, "Actually, that outcome is not what I desire." You rewrite the game, and in the process you accept what we call failure. So, that acceptance in failure, that investment in failure, that excitement about failure, is the queer art of failure.

JUUL: My book has lots of similarities and lots of differences from Jack's. It really came from the personal experience of being a

sore loser at video games. I was playing all these games, and I'd be unhappy when I played them. I felt like I was returning to games that made me unhappy, and I wondered why that was. At the same time, there's also a cultural movement around failure, a kind of self-help book attitude that says, "Actually, failing is great. Investment companies should fail fast," and all that stuff. I think that's very superficial, because failure also does hurt most of the time. I tried to look at this in a historical, aesthetical way and to look at what's called the paradox of tragedy: why we watch tragic cinema, or read tragic novels, or go to horror cinema even though it makes us uncomfortable or deeply unhappy. I looked at various historical answers to that question, but none of them quite resolved or answered it. So I tried to ask whether failure in games was in some fundamental way different from failure in nongame contexts. One of the examples I had is "gamification": the idea that you can use game structures to, say, educate students or run a company. My conclusion on this is that you can actually look at the 2008 financial crisis and say that, in a way, it was caused by making companies too much like games. You had these clear incentive structures, and if someone just approved a lot of loans, they would get huge bonuses. Then, of course, lots of companies collapsed. You can see that one of the problems is having something important that uses a gamelike structure—whereas, if you play an actual game, you have the option of denying that it's important to you. You can always say, "It's a stupid game." Games, in a way, make these kinds of arguments within themselves. The problem is, if you try to apply this approach elsewhere, you can't say, "I think this performance ratio or this score on my report card is stupid," because you would be fired or you would fail. So it's not true that there's no safe space within games. The idea of the safe space is actually pretty important, because it gives us the opportunity to deny that we care about failure. To me, that's the art of failure in video games: the opportunity for denial, even if we lie to ourselves or to other people.

RUBERG: I wonder if we can triangulate your respective positions on “the art of failure.” Jesper is talking about failure in games. Jack is talking about failure in life. What happens when we bring these ideas together? Do we create a queer art of failing at video games?

HALBERSTAM: There are a lot of moments in Jesper’s *Art of Failure* that are implicitly queer. It’s a really great book for schematizing all the ways you might experience failure in games, and then you can extrapolate from there into other contexts. One category Jesper uses in the introduction is ahedonism. Ahedonism is the idea that humans aren’t only oriented around pleasure. This idea that you want to play to win, and that only winning will do, is not simply wrong about games, it’s wrong about the human. That feels to me to be a very queer insight. We could also call this a certain type of negativity, which is part of who we are.

JUUL: One similarity between the two books is a certain reluctance to only do a relabeling, to say, “Actually what we thought was failure was success, so just flip it around.” What’s interesting when you ask this question of games, for example if you’re playing single-player games, is that people do strange things a lot of the time. They don’t necessarily play for the goal, or they goof around in various ways. Then the question is: What would queer playing entail? Would it mean having a game that allows you to do non-goal-oriented things? But are you supposed to follow the game’s logic or reject it? It’s a hard question, because games have so many variations on the theme of failure.

HALBERSTAM: Already at this conference lots of people have been thinking through the connection between queerness and games. There’s the level of character, and the way in which characters, even when you can choose different genders for them, are mostly all modeled on the heroic, lone male. Then there’s something we could call orientation within the game. This might mean using a queer phenomenological approach, for example. Are we oriented in the game? Are we disoriented?

I was just watching the movie *Gravity*, and when you're watching it, especially in 3-D, you really feel like you're in a video game. You're being spun around wildly in space; you're in an antigravity context, and you're trying to propel yourself toward an object, and you may or may not make it. What is it about that experience of disorientation—which might make you nauseous, or might make you completely lose where you are in the game—that's still pleasurable? That's not necessarily connected to ahedonism, but to distinctly other forms of pleasure, not just goal-oriented, pleasure-filled, success-oriented pleasure. In fact, it might deliver you to a place of desolation or being lost, but we pursue it nonetheless. I think that's part of the appeal of this set of interests in failure. It's an irrational side of human impulse that can't be explained away by who will get this many points or who will access the next level. People repeat levels over and over and over and over again, so there's a sort of Freudian pleasure in repetition. I think both Jesper and I are opening up different ways of understanding pleasure. So, to go back to the question, queerness in games goes way beyond the character that you're playing.

RUBERG: Jesper, your book talks so much about the pain of failing at games, but it doesn't address the pleasure of failing at games. It begins to seem like masochism is an unspeakable word. What is the place of masochism in both of your thoughts on failure?

JUUL: I use the line of "pleasure spiked with pain"; that's the closest I come to talking about masochism. There's something fundamental there. I think it's very common, if you're frustrated with the game, not to lower the level of difficulty, but to keep banging your head against it—even though it's futile and you don't really expect to get any farther. It's something that also occurs in education, the idea of self-defeating behavior. If they are about to take a test or give a talk, people do strange things. You stay up all night or get drunk, then if you fail the test the next morning you don't feel so bad about it, because it's not that you're stupid, you're just hung over. Sometimes we

seek out failure because, by directly seeking it out, we lessen it; we find a kind of enjoyment of it. I think the worry is that you make this a habit. You should always try to think about what really is in your own personal best interest, and not just aestheticize always being hung over when you take tests, for example, even though there's some enjoyment in that.

HALBERSTAM: The masochism question is a good one. I was also thinking about this when I was reading Jesper's book. One of the examples that comes up in the book is horror films. If we go watch horror films, we know that we're going to be shocked and terrified, and yet we go nonetheless. They don't deliver pleasure in the conventional format. The queer understanding of the horror film that's been articulated by a whole range of queer theorists is that maybe people are longing for other modes of identification. We presume that we only want to identify with the heroic male, but in fact, as Carol Clover's work has shown, lots of young men watching horror films also want to be able to identify with the victim, because it affords them a certain kind of masochistic pleasure to not always be in control. That masochistic pleasure was never considered to be part of a horror film's pleasure-scape, because we assume that we want to avoid masochistic scenarios. Bonnie, your work takes us into this territory, too. You're thinking about why we might want to desire our own unbecoming, the ways in which we desire to be undone. In Jesper's book, if you play the game and you win, you're kind of done. So masochism has been built into all of these experiences in ways that reveal some of the less obvious and less linear aspects of our pleasure centers.

RUBERG: Jack, you and I were talking about agency yesterday, and I put my foot in my mouth by saying, "I'd summarize your 'art of failure' as being about the agency of embracing self-destruction." You said, "Be careful of the word 'agency.'" I wonder how agency fits into this discussion. I do hear it in the way you both describe failure and choosing to fail.

JUUL: In my book, I'm talking about playing games that you yourself have selected. There is a kind of switch between the mo-

ment you choose to play a game and the moment you start playing it. When you start playing you are pressured to accept the logic of the game. I think I assume less agency than Jack does. In a way, what I'm saying is that even if you want to decide that you don't care about a particular failure in the game, it's not necessarily something you can control. It might have social consequences even though we might want to deny those consequences, or we might consider them irrelevant, or we might sometimes be betrayed by our own emotions. Failure in a game is subjective, but it doesn't mean that we can actually control it.

HALBERSTAM: Even though I'm talking about the embrace of failure, I'm not suggesting that it's always under our control. In fact, I'm not countering the idea that it's *not* in our control by asking that it *be* in our control. I'm pushing in the direction of undoing. I think that my book is invested in counterintuitive strategies that counteract the logic of failure without offering a new form of agency. I think that what's interesting when you enter the territory of unbecoming, you lose vocabulary, because the vocabulary available to us is much more an active doing/playing vocabulary, which makes sense given our political trajectories. So, when our political trajectory is to not become, or to not complete or to not gain, we only have these negative models. We don't have the full suite of words that we might need to explain these other forms of human experience. That's because they are counterintuitive. What I really appreciate about Jesper's book and the conversation that it opens up is the idea of a counterintuitive mode of playing that takes us to a completely different level, where we're not simply thinking about moving through the game, acquiring points, building strength, getting our health up, and completing, we're actually repeating, spinning, falling, failing, disappearing—all of these other things that offer another kind of pleasure.

AUDIENCE (KATHRYN BOND STOCKTON): Thinking about these two books together, two words that seem important to me are

“accumulation” and “delay.” In Jesper’s work, as I understand it, inside the game there’s this temporal moment, whereas Jack was talking about the long arc of these things. Like, if Jack and I were to think of ourselves in childhood failing to be boys, if someone said, “It’s great, embrace that!” we’d say, “No way.” But in the long arc of things, it became a great and wonderful thing. It’s actually the accumulation of loss, of anti-capital, the accumulation of all these experiences over these games that adds up. In life, I don’t want to fail at any particular moment: giving a talk, teaching a class, et cetera. But sometimes in the long arc of the accumulation of loss something builds through that that you then retrospectively understand as this tremendous benefit and generative aspect of failure. In *Fight Club*, the whole point is to go out and lose a fight. You really can’t understand *Fight Club* without some understanding of Georges Bataille. It’s this great film about masculinity, but you have to remember that the point is to lose a fight. By no version of masculinity that we generally know is that true.

HALBERSTAM: This reminds me of a line from a Julian Barnes novel, *The Sense of an Ending*. He says, when we think about profit, we think about gaining resources. Resources accumulate over time, they add up, but he says maybe loss also accumulates over time. But again, we don’t know how to measure the thing that we’ve lost, because it’s always in that negative register. So we have to think about both the fact that two negatives can make a positive (that is, over time failure could produce a different outcome than you might expect: some self-motivation or the becoming of something else entirely) and the fact that we need to reckon with what it means to accumulate loss over time. That’s a model of history. It’s a model of being. It’s a critique of capital. It’s a way of thinking about being in relationship to losing that might be useful here. What are these games that we’re supposed to lose, when losing doesn’t necessarily mean the elimination of the player? What other models of losing would be enticing or interesting or not interesting? I don’t just mean this as a nice little tidy model of giving yourself up

for others, a sacrifice message. Maybe we can think of some more complex reasons to design games where the only outcome is losing.

JUUL: I think that's a great point. There are certain preestablished models for failing. On paper they seem like failure, but they're actually great things. The prescribed versions seem safe and worthwhile, but that's not how you want to actually see it happen.

HALBERSTAM: Jesper, you gave the example of corporations that turn failure into self-help. What we learned in the last financial crisis is that those bad mortgages were designed to fail. They weren't designed to succeed. They certainly weren't designed to be an avenue to success. The person who gets the loan will fail, at which point the insurance company kicks in. So there's failure built in. We have to find a way around that logic, too, otherwise you just keep yourself hemmed into a normative structure, where it will always win and you will always lose. At the same time, I'm thinking about the radical theory of indebtedness as a different form of community. It's not just a community where we all support one another, but where we recognize mutual indebtedness that we owe—not that we gain, but that we owe. Failure doesn't necessarily open us up to freedom, but to degrees of freedom. When you read Jesper's book, you have this sense that there are little tiny pockets, these moments that open up in a game, but that they never give you the wide open feeling of freedom, which of course is just a fantasy anyway. There are moments where the game has shifted, or your loss has revealed something else. Maybe this notion of freedom is as good as we're going to get.

AUDIENCE (ADRIENNE SHAW): Chris Paul, at Seattle University, writes about the myth of meritocracy in games—this idea that anyone can succeed in games, as long as you set the level right for you—and how that belies the history of how people get involved in games in the first place. You can't just pick up any old game and suddenly succeed at it. It's a kind of hegemony, this idea that if you try hard you can succeed, and if you didn't

you just didn't try hard enough, as opposed to the idea that the game is not set up for you. Hearing you both talk, I wonder if there is some connection between failure and meritocracy you might speak to.

JUUL: It's interesting, because that has changed a lot over time in video games. In my book, I have this quote from a British game developer who talks about how, in the 1980s when he made games, game designers weren't even expected to be able to complete the games they made themselves. They just assumed that eventually somebody would do it. These days I think that games come with a much stronger promise that you will be able to finish them than they used to. Some people feel that that's bad. I think that demonstrates one of the things that's hard to pin down about games. Is it boring that everyone can complete a game, or is inclusivity a good thing? It can be both at the same time. It's hard to say what the answer should be.

"The Arts of Failure" session concluded with a recap of the threads and themes that emerged in the conversation between Halberstam and Juul. Importantly, both speakers had argued for reimagining the notion of goals in games and for opening up alternative ways of understanding pleasure as a function of play. Also notable was their focus on ideas of loss as accumulation, disorientation, and the potential for a queer phenomenology in video games.