

Failure: Failure beyond. The philosophical ludonarrative analysis of existential videogames.

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ABSTRACT/SHORT DESCRIPTION

While contributions from 'existential ludologists' have offered valuable insights into the field of video game studies, the area of existential failure remains largely unexplored. My doctoral research aims to address this gap by examining the subject from a non-existential perspective, with a particular focus on three case studies: *Disco Elysium*, *Dark Souls* and *Aurion: The Legacy of the Kori-Odan*.

Keywords

Existential ludology, nothingness, uncertainty, failure

INTRODUCTION

Video games convey failure within their digital mediality as a paradox. In *The art of failure*, Jesper Juul (2013) discusses the interdisciplinary connection between Aristotelian poetics and game studies based on this paradox. The interweaving of the topic of failure and its cultural embedding appears to be a pertinent when considered in this combination of philosophy and game studies. This is not only because it illuminates failure as an existential concept, but also because it seems to be an explicit component of a media theory of video games.

EXISTENCE AND PLAY

The paradox that Jesper Juul explores is not only a ludic or performative problem like it is described in Aytemiz & Smith (2020) or Costikyan (2015). It goes far beyond that, and is linked to an existential philosophical problem: In what way does failure mean questioning one's own existence between subjective choices and objective influences of the "world", i.e. the influences of society, the state of one's birth, and so on. Aristotelian poetics is lacking as a theory in this context, because drama is a different media system from videogames, and it does not deal with the aspect of interactivity.

I want to drive the problem of failure further on a philosophical level. Existential philosophy seems well suited to understanding this problem, while it is not exactly a theory of action, but rather a theory of understanding the connection between human hopes, ideas and methods of dealing with uncertainty. Its grounding question deals first in which human freedom is possible, and if human choices are relevant for free

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action of humans. In this way the existential philosophers reflect about the modern subject and its difficulties. Their concept of failure deals as an analytical toolbox in my research. Such a toolbox makes it possible to describe how failure is represented in video games. Since there is a well-founded theoretical basis for “existential ludology” (Leino, 2010, Möring, 2013, Gualeni and Vella, 2022), a concrete analysis on philosophical games is missing. My focus is to use their theoretical input to understand the ludonarrative connection between game, player and avatar in what I call “existential games”.

It is also important to reflect on our position as researchers when considering videogames as a medium of communication. Therefore, I would like to analyse how 'existential games' communicate the problem of failing using the toolbox of existential philosophers. In my definition, such games must reflect their own mediality as interactive narratives.

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, I will analyse two case studies similar to a philosophical text: *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019), and compare it with *Aurion. The Legacy of the Kori-Odan* (2016), a video game developed by the Cameroonian company Kiro'o Games. The struggles between failure and success are elucidated by the game characters, and the different perspectives engender a metaphysical and narrative space. The game mechanics are markedly disparate, yet the existential struggles are eminently suitable for comparison of their respective philosophical backgrounds.

In *Disco Elysium*, the “Pale” is a state beyond comprehension and measurement, plunging the world and its characters into a struggle with non-existence. This represents the uninvented part of the game world, the imperceptible unknown. Furthermore, at least the possibility of saving the fate of the “Zama” in *Aurion* seems rare. The two games deal with humanities struggle against fate and imply an alienated relationship with the world. The games are connected by the theme of uncontrollable destiny, with the use of metaphors as a means of providing a metaphysical model to address uncertainty and establish a connection between the disparate narratives that result from failure.

GOAL AND METHOD

Scholars of game studies have focused on existentialism in both aesthetic and media theoretical contexts, but they have not established a philosophical and analytical practice for understanding failure as an ambivalent term that seems to distinguish between right and wrong choices. Methodologically, I intend to develop an analytical concept that I refer to as the 'existential philosophies toolbox', which will be constructed around my case studies. I have taken some core aspects from the above authors to form a foundation for understanding videogames as philosophy and their form of communication. This could allow a new perspective on the subject's relationship with the game object through the avatar as a ludonarrative existential philosophy.

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