Failure as an Inescapable Unpredictable Feature of Gaming Theater Experiences

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the role and significance of failure within the context of gaming theaters, arguing that rather than being perceived as a negative outcome, failure can be a fundamental design feature of such performances. In gaming theater, the audience is an active participant, and failure is embraced as a necessary experience for the progression of the narrative and deeper engagement. Using a combination of analytical frameworks and case studies, the paper demonstrates how failure can serve as a catalyst for emergent and unexpected narratives. In this form of theater, unpredictable choices and even mistakes made by the audience can lead to alterations in the storyline, transforming the narrative from a linear to a fluid and dynamic state. Moreover, the acceptance of failure as part of the experience fosters a deeper, more interactive relationship between the audience and performers, creating an environment where every choice, even if it leads to failure, contributes to the construction of a unique and potentially richer narrative. The findings of this research suggest that the integration of failure into gaming theater not only enhances audience participation but also opens up new avenues for innovation in the design of narrative and interactive experiences within this emerging genre.

Keywords: Gaming Theater, unpredictability, failure, narrative design, interactive storytelling.

1. Introduction

In traditional video game design, failure is often viewed as a negative outcome that leads to frustration and the need to restart a level or section. Juul argues that while games produce pleasurable sensations, the experience of overcoming failure is central to enjoying them (Juul, 2013). When players encounter obstacles or challenges that result in the death of their in-game avatar or the end of progress, they typically experience a sense of frustration and a compulsion to try again from the beginning. This traditional design philosophy stems from the long-held notion that mistakes or shortcomings during gameplay should be met with punishment, forcing players to hone their skills and strategies to overcome obstacles and achieve success. The finality of a "Game Over" screen or the need to repeat content reinforces the idea that failure is an undesirable state to be avoided rather than an integral part of the learning and progression process. Researchers have shown that players value failure as an opportunity for learning, social interaction, and emotional engagement (Foch & Kirman, 2021). This traditional view of failure is deeply ingrained in the collective understanding of how games are designed and experienced, shaping player expectations and the overall landscape of game development.

In contrast to traditional game design and theatrical performances, a new genre has emerged that challenges the boundaries between these distinct media. "Gaming theater" experiences represent a dynamic evolution, effectively combining the qualities of live theater with the interactive elements inherent in the gaming world. This hybridization enables the creation of unique performance-based narratives that actively engage audiences, transforming them from passive spectators into integral participants in the unfolding story.

At the core of gaming theater experiences lies the centrality of audience interaction. Rather than observing a predetermined sequence of events, participants are empowered to make choices, solve problems, and directly influence the trajectory of the performance. This level of agency disrupts the traditional model of theater where the audience's primary role is to observe and appreciate the work of the actors. In gaming theater, the audience becomes an active co-creator, with their decisions and actions shaping emergent narratives and steering the overall experience in unexpected directions. This evolving dynamic challenge traditional assumptions about the relationship between actors and spectators, fostering a more participatory and unpredictable theatrical environment.

While the traditional view of failure in games has led to feelings of frustration and the need to start over, the emerging genre of gaming theater presents an opportunity to reframe this concept. Within the realm of gaming theater experiences, the notion of "failure as a feature" has the potential to cultivate unique and unpredictable narratives. By embracing failure as an integral part of the performance, rather than a flaw to be avoided, gaming theater can

create an engaging environment where unexpected outcomes and narrative diversions become a source of creative exploration and deeper audience engagement. Rethinking failure challenges the traditional design conventions of both games and theater, opening new pathways for innovative performance-based experiences. The primary research question guiding this inquiry is: How does the acceptance of failure as a feature contribute to the development and acceptance of gaming theater experiences?

2. Research Background

Research on failure within gaming experiences reveals a complex interplay between failure, engagement, and learning. Within the context of an activity framed as a game, the negative effects of failure do not necessarily impact a player's intrinsic motivation; however, additional contextual information may diminish its positive effects (Brühlmann, 2016). Despite the negative emotions associated with failure, games continue to engage players through the experience of inadequacy and the subsequent desire to escape it (Juul, 2013). The level at which failure occurs within the game structure influences whether players abandon tasks or become more motivated to try new strategies (Sharritt & Suthers, 2011). The paradoxical relationship between failure and engagement makes games a distinct art form for exploring and experimenting with failure (Juul, 2013). Researchers further examine players' perspectives and identify three positive aspects of failure: opportunities for learning, meaningful social interactions, and emotional experiences (Foch & Kirman, 2021). However, researchers note that not all failures lead to positive outcomes (Sharritt & Suthers, 2011). Their study shows that while some failures increase motivation and encourage players to try new strategies, others can frustrate players to the point of quitting.

Research on failure in video games highlights its complex role in player experiences. Juul argues that failure in games is unique because it reflects the player's inadequacy but also motivates players to continue playing in order to overcome this feeling (Juul, 2013). Game designers face constraints in implementing failure that balance industry expectations with creative decisions, often aiming to reimagine the role of failure within gaming culture (Foch & Kirman, 2022). These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of failure in video games, emphasizing its potential for both frustration and growth, and highlighting the importance of careful design in shaping player experiences.

Traditional game narratives often follow heroic archetypes, such as the "fall and rise" structure inspired by medieval Grail stories (de Lima et al., 2016). These typically involve character development, challenges, and ultimate triumph. However, the relationship between games and storytelling is contested among researchers (Henry, 2002). Failure is a paradoxical yet integral aspect of gaming experiences, as players seek out games despite the possibility of failure (Césaire, 2012). The concept of failure in games is intertwined with broader cultural and personal perspectives. Game narratives employ various techniques: from the hero's journey, three-act structure, and different archetypes; and studies of interactive narratives in games reveal consistent patterns in storytelling methods, such as the use of backstories, cut scenes, and on-screen text (Ip, 2011). Consequently, the complex interplay between traditional narrative structures and the unique interactive nature of video games is highlighted.

Modern video game narratives offer complex representations of gender and failure that shape player experiences and cultural understandings. Friedberg found that male protagonists outnumber female ones, and women often serve as catalysts for conflict (Friedberg, 2015). Both male and female characters tend to become masculinized as narratives progress, embodying male power fantasies. Studies collectively highlight the complex relationship between narrative design, gender representation, and mechanics of failure in modern games, emphasizing the need for critical analysis of the messages conveyed through these interactive storytelling media.

Research on audience experiences in participatory theater reveals complex dynamics of engagement. Participatory theater often blurs the lines between reality and fiction, creating a "productive insecurity" that challenges the audience's understanding (Stephenson, 2016). Audience participation is an internal state emerging from embodied relationships with performances, rather than an external experience imposed on participants. Some participatory theater practices promote neoliberal values like risk-taking and personal responsibility, as well as encouraging "entrepreneurial participation" (Alston, 2013).

Regarding audience participation and failure in interactive theater experiences, there are diverse perspectives. Some studies focus on the intentional design for aesthetic failure (Hazzard et al., 2019), while others examine how audiences navigate and participate in performances(Cerratto-Pargman et al., 2014). Failures in interactive experiences can lead to new goals as well as maintaining audience interest (Knickmeyer & Mateas, 2005). The concept of "errant immersion" suggests that unintended explorations by audience members beyond designed boundaries, rather than being a threat, can contribute to the narrative as an interactive experience (Alston, 2016). Studies emphasize the creative role of audiences in shaping interactive experiences, demonstrating that failures, both intentional and accidental, can be used as aesthetic and improvisational resources in interactive theater (Hazzard et al., 2019; Knickmeyer & Mateas, 2005).

3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the concept of failure in gaming theaters. The research methodology involves a theoretical analysis based on existing articles and research related to failure and interaction in games and theater. The paper also utilizes case studies to explore practical experiences of gaming theater where failure is embraced as a fundamental feature. Case studies demonstrate how the integration of failure as a narrative and interactive element not only enhances audience participation but also opens new pathways for storytelling and shaping emergent narratives. Data from these studies are analyzed to examine how failure impacts audience participation, narrative formation, and the overall experience of gaming theater.

4. Analysis

4.1 Failure as a Feature in Gaming Theater

At the heart of the gaming theater experience lies a fundamental redefinition of the concept of failure. Rather than being viewed as a negative outcome to be avoided, failure is embraced as an integral component of the narrative and audience participation. This rethinking challenges the paradigms of traditional gaming.

In gaming theater, failure is embedded within the performance fabric, serving as a catalyst for emergent storytelling and audience engagement. The design of gaming theater experiences intentionally incorporates failures or unexpected audience choices, allowing these moments to shape the unfolding narrative in dynamic and unpredictable ways. The audience has the power to make decisions, create unintended consequences, and explore alternative paths, deviating from the narrative. By integrating failure as a feature, rather than an obstacle, a heightened sense of agency and impact is fostered among participants as they navigate the uneven terrain of the performance.

Moreover, the role of failure in gaming theater extends beyond its impact on the narrative. It also serves as a mechanism for creating a deeper connection between the audience and performers, as both parties collaborate to navigate the challenges and emerging opportunities presented by the unfolding experience. The shared acceptance of failure cultivates a sense of intimacy and collective exploration, where audience and performers engage in a process of collaborative problem-solving and narrative creation.

Gaming Theater is distinguished by the unpredictable choices and actions of its participating audience. Unlike traditional theatrical performances with predetermined narratives, gaming theater intentionally empowers audiences to make decisions that can significantly influence the unfolding of the story. Unexpected audience contributions introduce an element of uncertainty that disrupts the linear progression of the performance, leading to unforeseen narrative consequences and deviations.

As audience members navigate the interactive landscape of a gaming theater experience, their choices and interventions can set off a chain of narrative transformations. A decision that may seem innocuous at one moment can have ripple effects, diverting the performance into entirely new directions that were not initially anticipated by the creators. This dynamic quality challenges traditional notions of authorship and control, as the audience assumes the role of co-creator, actively shaping the evolving narrative through their participation.

By embracing "failures" or deviations from the expected narrative path, gaming theater experiences unlock the potential for emergent storytelling. Rather than adhering to a fixed and rigid script, the performance becomes a responsive and living entity that adapts to the actions and decisions of the audience. This flexibility creates a more engaging experience, as both participants and performers navigate uncharted territory, creating a unique and unpredictable narrative.

4.2 Case Study: Designing for Failure: Forgotten Echoes

This performance was set in the evocative and eerie ambiance of an abandoned shelter, exploring themes of memory, identity, and the ambiguous nature of truth. By embracing failure as a central narrative structure, the performance challenged participants to navigate a complex and ever-evolving environment where their actions had irreversible consequences. This case study delves into the intricate design of "Forgotten Echoes" and highlights how the combination of adaptive technology, layered storytelling, and audience agency created a compelling and unpredictable theatrical experience.

"Forgotten Echoes" delved into the interplay between memory, identity, and choice, where audience decisions had profound and irreversible consequences. Unpredictability was heightened through a narrative that constantly evolved based on audience actions, with "failures" reframing the narrative rather than halting it. The performance was set in a sprawling, multi-room space designed to resemble an abandoned shelter, with each room representing a fragment of a forgotten past. The environment was meticulously designed, with crumbling walls, faded photographs, and artifacts from different eras. The space itself was a character, responding to the audience's presence with shifting light patterns, eerie soundscapes, and sudden changes in room configurations.

Upon entering, each audience member was assigned a unique identity, complete with a fragmented backstory tied to the shelter's history. Their goal was to piece together their forgotten memories by interacting with the environment and actors. However, the narrative was designed to be deceptive; the memories they uncovered may not belong to them, leading to confusion and uncertainty about their true identities.

Audience decisions were recorded and had a real-time impact on the progression of the story. Certain actions resulted in irreversible changes to the environment, such as locking doors, altering paths, or even permanently deleting parts of the narrative, creating a sense of urgency and weight to each choice.

The actors portrayed former inhabitants of the shelter, each with their own incomplete stories. They served as both guides and obstacles, providing cryptic clues that could lead to either truth or further mislead the audience. Some actors played dual roles that shifted based on audience interactions, adding layers of complexity to the narrative.

The performance employed advanced technology to enhance unpredictability and fully engage the audience:

- **Adaptive AI:** Each room was equipped with AI that monitored audience interactions and adjusted the narrative in real-time. For instance, if an audience member lingered in one room for too long, the AI might trigger a sudden blackout, forcing them to navigate in darkness.

- **Holographic Projections:** Holograms of the shelter's former inhabitants appeared intermittently, offering fleeting glimpses of the past. These holograms were interactive, responding to the audience's presence by altering their messages or leading to hidden areas.

- **Memory Stimulation Devices:** Audience members wore wristbands that vibrated or emitted sounds when they approached significant objects or locations, hinting at hidden memories. These devices were also used to manipulate the audience's emotions, such as increasing fear during tense moments.

The narrative was intricately structured, offering multiple potential outcomes. The central premise revolved around the idea that the shelter was a collective consciousness where lost souls were trapped in a cycle of their final memories. The audience's objective was to break this cycle, but the path was deliberately ambiguous, with the potential for numerous, equally valid conclusions.

Audience decisions could give rise to various "echoes" of the story—parallel versions of events that might contradict each other. For instance, in one version, a character might be revealed as the victim, whereas in another, they could be the perpetrator. These contradictions compelled the audience to question the reliability of memory and the narrative itself.

Failure was not merely a possibility but a central theme. The narrative was designed to encourage audiences to make what might be considered "incorrect" choices, leading to darker or more tragic versions of the story. However, these failures unveiled new layers of the narrative, revealing deeper truths or alternative perspectives that were concealed in a "successful" play through. For example:

- **Failing to rescue a character:** Instead of concluding the story, this failure could trigger a haunting sequence where the character's spirit guides the audience to a hidden room containing crucial clues.

- **Choosing the wrong path:** This might result in a complete shift in the narrative, with the audience now trapped in a more perilous version of the shelter where time and memory become increasingly distorted.

5. Discussion

The integration of failure as a central feature in gaming theater experiences marks a paradigm shift in both gameplay and theater design, challenging traditional understandings and opening up new avenues for creative exploration.

One of the most significant outcomes of integrating failure as a feature is the redefinition of the audience's role. In traditional theater, the audience is often a passive observer with little or no influence over the unfolding narrative. However, in gaming theater, the audience is not merely a participant but a co-creator. The unpredictability of audience choices, especially those leading to "failures," shifts the power dynamic, allowing the audience to directly shape the narrative. Active participation fosters a deeper emotional impact and a stronger sense of agency, as the audience drives the performance with the knowledge that their decisions have real and meaningful consequences.

Furthermore, the reconceptualization of failure transforms the narrative structure of gaming theater. Traditional narratives often rely on a linear progression, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Failures are typically seen as disruptions to this flow, requiring correction to return to the "right" track. However, by embracing failure as a feature, gaming theater experiences adopt a more fluid and nonlinear narrative structure. Failures become branching points, leading to alternate storylines, unexpected plot twists, and emergent narratives that are unique to each performance. Nonlinearity not only increases the replay ability of the experience but also creates a sense of unpredictability that keeps both audiences and performers engaged.

The deliberate integration of failure into the design of gaming theater experiences challenges the traditional notion of failure as inherently negative, evoking fear and disappointment (Lala & Mentz, 2021). In contrast, gaming theater reinterprets failure as an opportunity for discovery and growth. Audience members are encouraged to embrace the unknown and explore the consequences of their actions. This approach aligns with broader trends in game design that emphasize exploration, experimentation, and risk-taking as integral components of the player experience.

However, the success of this approach is not without its challenges. Designing for failure requires a delicate balance between providing meaningful consequences and ensuring that the experience remains enjoyable and engaging. In educational design, failure-based strategies can be beneficial for learning, but repeated failures can negatively impact self-efficacy and engagement (Arrington & Tawfik, 2022). If not managed well, failure can lead to confusion or frustration, particularly if the audience feels that their choices are arbitrary or the narrative becomes overly fragmented. The key lies in crafting a narrative that is resilient to failure, where every outcome, whether perceived as a success or failure, contributes meaningfully to the overall storytelling experience.

Embracing failure as a feature in audience-centric gaming theater offers compelling benefits. One of the primary advantages is the enhancement of engagement. Additionally, the unpredictability introduced by failure makes each performance unique, not only increasing replay ability but also fostering creativity and a sense of adventure as both audience members and performers co-create the evolving narrative. However, while unpredictability can enhance engagement, it can also introduce a level of uncertainty that may be unsettling for some audience members, leading to frustration if the consequences of their actions are unclear or overly punitive. Balancing these elements to ensure that failure enhances rather than detracts from the overall experience is crucial.

6. Conclusion

Failure, as a feature in gaming theater, demonstrates the potential to revolutionize how narratives are experienced and constructed within this emerging genre. By embracing unpredictability and integrating the possibility of failure into the core design, creators can craft experiences that are deeply engaging, highly interactive, and uniquely tailored for each participant. Shifting from viewing failure as a negative outcome to recognizing it as a catalyst for narrative evolution challenges traditional conventions in both gaming and theater, offering a novel perspective on audience participation.

This approach not only empowers audiences to become active co-creators of the story but also fosters a richer storytelling environment where unexpected elements can lead to deep emotional and intellectual engagement.

However, this innovative approach is also accompanied by significant challenges that must be carefully managed. The success of gaming theater hinges on the ability to balance the creative freedom that failure affords with the need for a coherent and satisfying narrative structure. The unpredictability that makes these experiences so compelling can also pose the risk of alienating or confusing the audience if not carefully managed. As this genre continues to evolve, future research and practice should focus on refining the integration of failure, ensuring that it enhances rather than hinders the storytelling experience. Ultimately, the deliberate integration of failure in gaming theater promises not only to redefine audience participation but also to expand the boundaries of what is possible in interactive and participatory storytelling.

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