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The Aesthetics of Failure in Videogames. Beyond the Immersion/ Emersion Dichotomy

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Abstract. The discussion about the aesthetic value of failure in videogames has taken two main directions. On the one hand, failure has been explored as fundamental mechanic within the general framework of immersive flow experiences. On the other hand, failure has been understood as a means of emersion and self-reflexivity, namely as a moment that highlights the conventions and made-up nature of games from a metacommunicative point of view. Instead, this paper investigates a third option, namely how video games can use failure neither to create flow state immersion nor to disrupt it in a self-referential manner. I will show that videogames also employ certain types of *emersive* mechanisms, that I will call *out-of-flow failures*, to strengthen the believability of the game world in an immersive manner but without aiming at flow. This discussion will shed light to the immersion/emersion dichotomy.

Keywords. Immersion, emersion, flow theory, failure, aesthetics of videogames.

Introduction

Videogames are frequently celebrated and examined for their capacity to create immersive experiences (Brown and Cairns [2004]; Ermi

and Mäyrä [2005]; Jennett et al. [2008]; Christou [2014]). Immersion is defined as «the sense of being absorbed in a game to the exclusion of all else outside of the game» (Cox et al. [2012]: 80). In order to facilitate experiences that engage players in such a manner, game designers, players and game critics frequently employ a paradigm grounded in flow theory.

In line with this theoretical framework, the design of a game is contingent upon the establishment of a balanced challenge and the provision of a reasonable level of difficulty. This is posited as a prerequisite for the creation of experiences that facilitate the attainment of a state of flow, as postulated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). The concept of a flow state can be defined as a state of optimal experience in which an individual's cognitive abilities are fully engaged, allowing for optimal performance and complete absorption in the task at hand. The challenges presented by the game are of a nature such that players are able to overcome them through the application of prior skills, knowledge and active problem solving (Cox et al. [2012]). In order to maintain engagement, these challenges must be neither excessively simple (risking boredom) nor excessively difficult (eliciting anxiety or frustration). This fundamental principle is encapsulated in the concept of the «hedonistic loop» (Cardoso et al. [2019]), which refers to the experience of pleasure derived from engaging in a game that offers a balanced and challenging experience.

However, it has been argued that a design philosophy based on the flow paradigm can result in the «devaluation of the development of skills such as performing critical evaluation» (Soderman [2021]: 64). In other words, games which are designed to induce a flow state in players seems to be forced to necessarily suppress other forms of experience and mental agency to guarantee that players will perceive them as well-ordered activities. In a flow experience, all elements are predictable and proceed in accordance with expectations. In this, a flow-based design philosophy might be seen as the perfect example of the user-centred paradigm. Flow is a specific type of immersion, which is in turn a specific type of engagement that players entertain with game systems, and which is based on player centrality as defined by international standards (ISO 9241-210:2019(E)). This kind of critique was similarly posed by other scholars aiming to cast light «on expressive possibilities that are not customarily part of the dominant paradigm of user-centred design» (Gualeni, Van de Mosselaer [2021]).

Several scholars worked to create a theoretical paradigm to understand all the games that are not tailored to offer flow experiences. The result can be labelled as a paradigm of *critical engagement* which acknowledges the potential of videogames to entertain and engage players by invoking critical thinking rather than suppressing it. This article contributes to this body of research that

highlights the expressive and aesthetics variety of video games by going beyond the most common understanding of them as only an immersive medium based on flow experiences. However, this article also questions the simplistic correlation between critical engagement and emersive strategies. Rather than opposing uncritical immersion to critical emersion, I aim to illustrate how video games can create a richer type of *immersion* – one that goes beyond flow state. This more nuanced form of immersion integrates types of design strategies often associated with emersive effects, paradoxically using them to enhance, rather than disrupt, the immersive experience. This can mainly be read as a rhetorical move: rather than opposing immersion and emersion, I will appropriate the term immersion, that is so «ill-defined» (see Nilsson et al. [2016] and Calleja [2011]), and interpret it in a new way. Gordon Calleja (2011) was the first one to recognize the confusion surrounding immersion as a concept. In his analysis he identifies two main meanings of the concept of immersion: immersion as simple attention and a state of cognitive engagement (which we identified in the first part of the article and associated with flow theories); and immersion as habitation of a virtual world. In this second type of immersion, which unlike the first is necessarily technologically mediated, Calleja considers the importance of the body and perception in order to be transported and enable the experience of a «spatial elsewhere», not just a mental one. In this article, using Calleja's terminology, I will seemingly move from the analysis of immersion as cognitive engagement and attention enhanced by flow to the more dynamic concept of immersion as habitation, what Calleja calls «incorporation». However, my goal will be to show a specific way to sustain immersion as incorporation that depends on the believability of the game world, a believability that in turn depends on how the various narrative and playful elements fit together. The counterexample of unpredictable failure, a moment of severe disruption and apparent contradiction between playful and narrative elements, will serve to show how important high-level consistency can be in sustaining immersion and shape believability as a way to sustain habitation (incorporation of the virtual body) beyond simple concentration, as perception of the referential solidity and autonomy of the game world from players' desires and expectations.

In this article I will follow this outline. First, I reconstruct the foundations of the immersive paradigm grounded in the concepts of practical clarity and flow theory, highlighting its aesthetic and design implications especially regarding players' failure. I then turn to the major emersive interpretations of failure, examining their contribution to the metacommunicative and self-referential dimensions of videogames. From this dual theoretical background, I introduce a distinction between different types of failure, focusing in particular on cases in which failure neither sustains flow nor produces critical distance, but instead

reinforces the believability of the game world. On this basis, I develop the notion of *out-of-flow failure*, showing how it would allow us to overcome a rigid immersion/emersion dichotomy. In this, my aim is to challenge the philosophical assumption of a punctual immersion state, opposing to it a more realistic account of immersion as a process which can involve emersive mechanics[1].

1. *Immersion, flow and clarity*

Before being a player's experience, immersion is a technological characteristic of the medium of games. It is a commonly held view amongst authors that the clarity of in-game objectives and rules is the primary factor that enables games to function as a highly immersive medium. Nguyen ([2020]: 65-66) conceptualises this phenomenon as «clarity of practicality», which occurs in video games since there is a stable and reliable correlation between inputs and outputs, clarity of goals and definite rules to be «invoked by players» (Sicart [2008]) to achieve them. Within these boundaries, clear and unambiguous rules apply, which enable even the most complicated challenges to be broken down into the steps necessary to complete them as if playing was a puzzle-solving activity (Koster [2013]).

The relative stability and reliability of game systems, in terms of consistent rules and explicit goals, facilitates the establishment of a phenomenon referred to as the «hedonistic loop» (Cardoso et al. [2019]). This phenomenon depends on the premise that the game will align with players' skills and expectations in a consistent manner. Consequently, it can be posited that the incorporation of immersive features in videogames produces the establishment of an implicit pact of trustworthiness between the game system and the player. The issue of expectations is fundamental in this regard. Videogames must stay consistent with the expectations they established, in order to sustain players immersion in the virtual world.

However, consistency cannot simply translate into the mechanical repetition of familiar patterns: absolute predictability quickly leads to stagnation. For this reason, beyond maintaining a stable framework, designers must also introduce degrees of variation in the nature and configuration of challenges to prevent repetitive structures from devolving into boredom or cognitive saturation. Im-

1 The Game Studies field owes Calleja (2011) a still unrecognized merit of clearing the ground out of bad definitions of immersion, which he replaced with the concept of incorporation. His analysis had the merit to distinguish two different meanings of the term: one is immersion as involvement, the other is immersion as habitation of a virtual environment. Incorporation considers the importance of the body and perception in the experience of habitation of a virtual world. In this article, I will adopt a slightly different perspective. Rather than focusing simply on the body, I will consider the way in which we can believe a world thanks to the believability of its ludo-narrative coherence in extreme cases in which the believability seems challenged.

mersion therefore depends on a dynamic balance between recognizability and surprise, between the confirmation of expectations and carefully modulated deviations from them. It is this alternation that keeps players invested and preserves the vitality of the ludic system. What interests me in this context is the degree of clarity and care for the players that the novelties are introduced with.

The practical clarity of the game's goals and rules functions similarly to other narrative media in offering an epistemic framework that presents the illusion of necessary «sustained temporal-causal relations» between events (Currie [2010]: 27). This is the kind of claim made by Koster (2013) in his influential book, *A theory of fun for Game design*, in which he argues that a game is fun to play when it proposes challenges that are to be solved applying meaningful patterns of action. More specifically, what constitutes fun is the *discovering* of the patterns. This feature of videogames is based on the premise that games are reliable systems that reward appropriate solutions and punish incorrect ones in a meritocratic and objective manner. Games may be used to propose this dream of clarity by exploiting the necessary causal chain in response to player actions that rules, and computer-mediated technologies, enable.

In a book in which he offers a critical analysis of Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow as applied to game design, Soderman similarly argues that «in the flow experience, psychic order arises when each bit of experienced information is organized to obtain the same goal» (Soderman [2021]: 52). The correlation between immersion and flow are so common that a literature review by Michailidis et al. (2018) shows that most theories of immersion use the two terms interchangeably.

However, while the paradigm of flow ensures engagement through clarity, system stability, and player care, it leaves little space for ambiguity, uncertainty, and surprises – experiences that are nevertheless part of what makes many games interesting.

2. *Emersion, self-reflexivity and metacommunication*

In game studies, the role of ambiguity, uncertainty and surprises is a theme popularized by Frasca (2001) and later expanded by Sicart and Wilson (2010) in a paper about forms of design that are directly aimed at subverting the expectations of the audience by employing unconventional methods that the two scholars defined as «abusive»[2]. This discourse implies at least the acknowledgement that the player-centric design paradigm is not an innocent assumption of game

2 It is important to notice that abusive game design is framed by the two scholars as a form of conversation between game designers and players. This keeps players at the center of the experience. Players are the target of a communicative act of the designer, so following their view, they are even more central than usual.

design, and that game design can be employed as a «means of consciousness raising» (Frasca [2001]) rather than simply as a template to fulfil players expectations of entertainment.

In the last twenty years game scholars have investigated the variety and complexity of the forms of engagement that can be achieved in a video game beyond flow state immersion and player centric design. These approaches consider how video games can use strategies such as ambiguity, incompleteness, and unpredictability to foster critical reflection and nuanced forms of engagement. The most important voices focusing on more sophisticated engagement forms tend to assign a key role to the metacommunicative and self-referential characteristics of video games.

The literature on the metacommunicative potential of videogames tends to explore the variety of ways in which this potential can be used to design forms of engagement that are based on «*emersive* effects», as Kubinski (2014) called them. The work of Frasca is foundational in explaining the various ways in which videogames can be used as means of «consciousness raising» (Frasca [2001]) in general terms. Tulloch (2010) and Fassone (2015; 2017) developed the idea of videogames rules and boundaries as examples of digital bureaucracy and digital authority and explored the possibility of developing videogames as a reflection about their own conventions, and rule-based nature. Gualeni (2016; 2019) and Potzsch (2019) expanded the idea, first presented in Frasca (2001), that strategies typically employed in literary texts to alienate the readers could be used to better frame some strategies employed by game designers, such as defamiliarization and estrangement.

Finally, Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer (2021) developed a strong theory to frame deceptive game design as a form of design which uses deceit and misleading communication to foster asethetically meaningful effects *in the interest of the players*[3].

The implicit take of this kind of literature is that videogames can shape experiences in which critical thinking is not dulled, by drawing attention to the nature of play itself in a self-reflexive manner. This is achieved through techniques such as estrangement, deception, humor (Giappone [2015]) and breaking of the fourth wall (Van de Mosselaer [2022]). This array of expressive possibilities enables *emersive* experiences that encourage players to reflect on their actions in a more critical, detached and ironic way.

The games analyzed in this type of literature can be read as metagames (Waszkiewicz [2024]): games that offer, thanks to their interactive specificity, com-

3 Gualeni (2025) introduced antagonistic design, which is a form of design in which implied designers works as antagonistic players against actual players. This idea seems to go toward the direction I am outlining in this article: practices that are commonly framed as emersive that are used to streghten the believability of the game.

mentaries about their very nature. Games such as *OneShot* (FutureCat [2016]), *Papers Please* (Lucas Pope [2013]), *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café [2013]) and *Undertale* (Tobey Fox [2015]) are a staple in discussion about self-referentiality and the metacommunicative potential of interaction[4].

3. *The threat of failure*

As we have seen, emersion has been traditionally associated with distance and critical thinking. However, in this article I propose to explore its paradoxical potential to *reinforce* immersion through the design of failure. In this, I expand on Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer (2021) thesis that deception can be used not only to abuse players but also to *serve* them in counterintuitive ways: by leveraging deception to mislead players in making wrong assumptions about game's functioning, the game does not simply aim to penalize the players in a self-satisfied manner but to enrich their aesthetic experience in unconventional ways.

Since my aim is to understand the possible extension of engagement either beyond the classical ways of sustaining it (the creation of flow states) and beyond the disruption of it (the self-reflexive critical stance allowed by emersive mechanisms), I believe that the *mechanics of failure* offer a particularly insightful lens through which this discussion can be explored. This is because failure invariably poses a threat to immersion: it offers a moment of respite from the practical demands of the game and makes the players reflect on their mistakes, or even simply causes them to harbour unreflective resentment. Either way, it is a potential problem that every game designer must solve if they want to maintain players engaged.

According to widely accepted theories of Koster (2013) and Gee (2005) we can frame failure as an intrinsic element of the learning process in videogames which leads to immersive experiences. Within this approach the value of failure lies in its ability to stimulate the learning process by presenting players with situations that have not yet been fully mastered. This phenomenon does not impede immersion but rather serves as a catalyst for it, enabling the player to realise the potential for enjoyment. However, this model explains how engagement is achieved typically *after* the failure states and assumes that the idea of a continuous immersion in the game is not possible. This is because failures interrupt the flow state: even though failure serves to reinforce the flow state in later phases, the flow theory cannot reabsorb the failure states in a continuous of pleasurable experience for the players. Juul (2009) tried to go beyond the issues of integrating flow theory with failure, claiming that failure constitutes not only an integral

4 For a discussion of meta-proceduralism see Fest (2016).

component of the gameplay loop, but also a meaningful experience for players from an emotional point of view. Emotionality creates a powerful link between failure and active player engagement, a link that does not depend on recognizing the learning value of failure from a critical and detached perspective (as in Gee and Koster's accounts).

A particularly illuminating example of this integration of failure into the fabric of play is *Katana Zero* (Askiisoft [2019]). In this game, failure does not take the form of a disruptive game over, nor is it experienced as a rupture in the play loop; instead, it is narrativized as if the course of action that led to a failure was a plan gone wrong. After a failure occurs, the game allows the player to «rewind» the sequence, as if the player-character were reassessing the situation and devising a different strategy to beat the level. Failure thus becomes a diegetic and functional component of the experience – an element that does not expel the player from the loop but rather reinforces it by embedding trial-and-error into the player-character's gameplay process and narrative reasons. This kind of failure is not just an enabler of a future immersion but maintain the immersion as a continuous.

To sum up: on the one hand failure has been categorized as the enabler of the flow state. This raises issues about the very moment of failure which cannot be reabsorbed into the flow state. On the other hand, Juul defended the idea that failure is meaningful not as a means to an end (enabling the flow states), but as a moment in itself.

In this article I will start from the assumption that failure can hold value without being a precondition for flow states. At the same time, I will also explore the idea that failure can actually use the suspension of the immersion and I will argue that these two ideas can be unified in some cases of what I will define *out-of-flow failures*.

4. *Emersive deception*

As we have seen, failure can be read as a mechanism for guiding players to adjust their actions to achieve the goals proposed by the game and the flow state immersion. In this regard it plays a fundamental role in shaping the hedonistic loop and in the immersive flow paradigm. In order to be effective in reinforcing the experience of immersion, it is fundamental for failure to be properly communicated to the players so that they can learn from it through feedback loops.

However, there are cases in which failure is *not* foreseen (or even foreseeable) as a possible outcome. Scholars who explore the expressive possibilities of games apart from flow acritical experiences have focused on a particular characteristic of failure: its anticipation. For example, in their article about deceptive game design and ludic unreliability Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer (2021) pro-

pose several situations in which players are confronted with the delusion of their expectations. They propose the example of *Undertale*, an indie RPG game. After what may seem a classical adventure in a fantasy world populated by strange NPCs, a turn-based combat system and exploration, at the end of the game the players discover that the «EXP points» they have gained throughout the experience are not the common «experience points» which are needed to advance in levels, a common trope of RPG games, but they are «Execution Points», a metrics of the cruelty of the player during the playthrough. The game denounces the use of violence and the acritical assumption that killing is a means to advance in games. This is a typical example of metareferentiality, emersion and deception. They also propose an example from *Dark Souls* (From Software [2011]) in which players can find chests containing valuable items in a common fantasy genre fashion. From one point onward in the game, however, players will also find mimic, fake chests: monsters disguised as chests. If players try to open them, they will be devoured. These are examples of games that create certain expectations, only to later disrupt them.

This example hints to the fact that in videogames failures can be categorized upon their *degree of predictability*, which heavily influence their rhetoric effect on the players. Failures that result from a lack of player skill are, in principle, evitable, as they can be avoided through mastery of the game's mechanics. In contrast, unpredictable failures arise when the game offers clues that are misleading or insufficient to anticipate the failure state. This kind of failures are used to propose forms of design that does *not* align with the dominant immersive flow paradigm and foster critical reflection, disrupting the pact of reliability with the players.

5. *Immersive deception*

In line with the literature on emersive mechanisms and self-referential capacities of games, this paper emphasizes that unpredictable failures are sometimes deliberately designed to question the ludic pact of reliability. However, in contrast with existing literature on emersive mechanisms, I also claim that unforeseeable failures do not necessarily equate with a moment of critical emersion: I claim that when a game confronts players with unforeseeable errors and failures, it can actually enhance immersion. In such cases the game becomes more immersive not in spite of, but because of, an emersive mechanism. In this, failures can serve the *interest of players* in immersing them in the game.

It is important to specify that this line of reasoning suggests the need to reconsider the very definition of immersion. If immersive experiences can incorporate emersive moments that recalibrate rather than interrupt engagement, immersion

can no longer be understood as a punctual, homogeneous state. Instead, it must be conceived as a dynamic process unfolding over time, composed of heterogeneous stages, some of which may take the form of brief suspensions, deviations, or destabilizations. These emersive moments are not anomalies external to immersion: they are integral components of a layered experiential continuum, whose coherence derives precisely from its oscillations between absorption and emersion[5].

My claim is that certain types of unpredictable failures can reinforce immersion in a specific way: reinforcing the coherence of the game world. The examples I will analyze have this in common: they are games in which mechanics and narrative works together to create a strong beliavable world.

For example, *Hollow Knight: Silksong* (Team Cherry [2025]) is a game full of threats and challenges: the game teaches players to advance in an attentive manner to anticipate attacks, menaces and traps the game world is filled with. During the gameplay, players will come across benches, a typical resting site in the game where they can recover life points and adjust their abilities to the specific challenge they are confronting with. However, while exploring an area of the game called Hunter's March, players will find a bench and after sitting on it, it will reveal itself to be a trap. In this case, there is no metacommunicative discourse whatsoever that the designer wants to engage in with the player, as Sicart and Wilson (2010) argue when they talk about «abusive game design». Nor there is a kind of disruption of the reliability pact with the end to point out the conventions of the game in a self-reflexive manner. *Hollow Knight: Silksong* is not a game about the nature of digital bureaucracy. I think the case is much simpler. Simply put, that trap logically follows within the space of possibilities of the game's rules of believability[6]. In a threatening world full of traps, finding a trap does not destroy immersion, nor does it call into question a special type of relationship between player and designer regarding the nature of the game. It simply reinforces the believability of the game world – precisely by using a means usually employed to destroy that believability and foster emersion.

Although we are discussing examples of *deceptive* design, not all unpredictable failures fall into the same category. I argue that they should be differentiated based on their *effect*s on the player, rather than solely on the means they employ. While in the example of *Undertale* deception serves a self-referential purpose to cast a critical light on the practice of uncritically following the rules and conventions imposed by the game designers, I believe that the goal of the example of mimic chests in *Dark Souls* (so similar to the *Silksong* example) is of a different nature. In *Dark Souls*, there is no critical and self-referential intent to denounce

5 I owe Alexadre Declos an illuminating comment on the idea of immersion as a process rather than a moment.

6 The possibility space which follows from the explicit and implicit laws of the game world.

the conventional and made-up nature of the game, but rather the opposite: an intent to *reinforce* the illusion of believability of the game world using the means of deception. The worlds of *Dark Souls* and *Hollow Knight: Silksong* derive their believability from the fact that they are a threatening, hostile, and mysterious worlds. These features are achieved by not conforming to the player's desires and expectations. This does not result in the disruption of the suspension of disbelief. Rather here deception and going against the player's expectations reinforces the believability of the game world. The *inertia* of the game's world reinforces the illusion of a plausible world, one in which not everything will be controlled and in which mystery can prevail over mastery (Vella [2015]). When something exceeds our ability to predict or control it, we are more likely to experience it as alive (even if it isn't), because unpredictability and autonomy are essential cues that our minds use to detect agency and independence.

6. *Failure and bad design*

To explain the rhetorical potential of failure and the apparent paradox of deriving enjoyment from failure in the context of flow theory, Smith and Aytemiz (2020) distinguish between two types of failure: «in-loop» failure and «out-of-loop» failure. In-loop failures are integrated into the game mechanics as explicit communicative tools, anticipated by both designers and players as part of the natural process of learning-by-failing. These failures are typically tied to the player's skill and can be overcome through mastery of the game's mechanics.

In contrast, out-of-loop failures are unexpected disruptions in which players do not foresee the possibility of failure, resulting in jarring breaks from the immersive experience. As Smith and Aytemiz (2020) explain «out-of-loop failures are those in which the player does not expect uncertainty. They do not foresee a potential of failure, and they are jarred if failure does occur». These failures are not rooted in a lack of player skill but rather in the game's deliberate withholding of sufficient clues to predict and avoid failure. For this reason, this kind of failure is often criticized by players and critics. For example, video essayist Lextorias, in his video called «The Underrated Art of Video Game Failure», notes that:

> a lot of games don't just trigger failure states when you die. It's actually become an increasingly common trope for a game over screen to pop up even when you just do something the developers don't like. You want to shoot your teammates: game over; go out of bounds: game over; you got too close to the target in one of those dump trailing missions: game over. The screen that pops up is the same as if you had died but now the failure state is just a punishment for doing something you're not supposed to and while some of these, like going out of bounds or throwing a flashbang at a baby, are pretty obvious why they'd instantly fail a mission, most of the time it just feels like your agency is being taken away. (Lextorias [2022])

The cases Lextorias is talking about would be defined as out-of-loop failures by Aytemiz and Smith, and they are commonly recognizable as bad design features. However, as I argue, in some cases an unpredictable failure, resulting from the withholding of information or even from deliberate communication of deceptive information, can result in *engaging* situations that deepens the effect of believability of the game world and concur to build the overall atmosphere of the game.

7. *Out-of-flow failures*

Although they can be a sign of bad game design that does not give players sufficient indications to properly interact with the game, out-of-loop failures that create a loss of control for the player can be intentionally employed to provoke immersive experiences when they are tied with the other parts of the game narrative and mechanics. I maintain that this kind of failure can be used in a smart way to enlarge the array of the designers' strategies so as to create a layered gaming experience not necessarily aimed at disrupting the immersion in a self-reflexive way. The game's pact of trust can be broken either to suggest a meta-reflective stance that destroys immersion, or to reinforce immersion by creating consistency and believability through the *illusion* that the game follows rules that are independent and unfathomable to the player.

It is important to note, however, that the impression that a game «follows rules that are independent and unfathomable to the player» must be carefully negotiated by designers rather than simply imposed. If the rules of the world become too opaque, the player loses any practical grip on the environment; if they become too transparent, the world risks appearing tailored to the player's desires rather than existing independently of them. Many games therefore cultivate a subtle balance between mystery and usability, maintaining a sense of a world not built to accommodate the player while still providing the minimal interpretative footholds necessary for meaningful action[7].

This negotiation can be seen clearly in *Dark Souls*. The mimic chest exemplifies a form of deception that is, in principle, readable: subtle visual cues differentiate mimics from ordinary chests, though never in a way that makes the distinction trivial or immediately obvious. The world thus feels dangerous and indifferent to the player, yet the player is not entirely powerless; through careful attention and learned vigilance, they can gradually acquire partial mastery over

7 This balance has been explored through the lenses of what has been called «ludic sublime» by Vella (2015).

its logic. Here, the designer's calibration allows the world to appear hostile and autonomous while still being decipherable to a certain degree.

A different calibration is at play in the trapped bench in *Hollow Knight: Silksong*. In this case, the design provides virtually no way for the player to anticipate the deception. The effect is more overtly estranging: it foregrounds the indifference of the world to player expectations and momentarily denies usability almost entirely. Yet this opacity remains thematically coherent with the game's broader portrayal of a treacherous environment.

An even more radical version of this negotiation appears in *Rain World* (Videocult [2017]) where NPCs are governed by complex AI systems that follow their own behavioural patterns, ecological niches, and predator-prey relationships (see Andriano, Caracciolo [2025]). These entities do not respond to the player as the central point of reference but act according to internal logics that often remain inaccessible. The resulting world can feel harsh and unaccommodating, but it also gains a powerful sense of autonomy and ecological depth. Here, the balance tilts heavily toward mystery and unpredictability, yet without abandoning usability altogether: the player can still learn to read partial regularities in the ecosystem, even though the system ultimately exceeds their control.

Across these examples, what emerges is not a dichotomy between transparent and unfathomable rules, but a spectrum of degrees of opacity.

Between the two extremes of a game that perfectly conforms to the players' expectations by immersing them in flow states, and a game that deceptively contradicts them to reveal the conventions of game design, there is an uninvestigated middle ground that uses the expressive forms of deception to reinforce the beliavability of the game world through paradoxical coherence between worldbuilding, narrative assumptions and gameplay. For this reason, the case I am analyzing is especially evident in particularly difficult games with strong narrative elements and coherent mechanics.

Since my claim is that out-of-loop failures do not necessarily result in a decrease of the immersion in the game but on the contrary they can *increase* the immersive engagement with the game system, I will use the expression *out-of-flow* (rather than out-of-loop) *failure* to distinguish between the type of in-loop failure that aims to flow and is based on the practical clarity of objectives and the out-of-flow failures that fall outside the flow experience as classically understood, but are nonetheless immersive. I need to introduce the concept of «out-of-flow» because my aim is to describe an experience that does *not* equate to «out-of-loop» experiences. A course of action can be out-of-flow but still being integrated in an engaging interaction with a game when it feels justified and cohesive with the rest of the game. As a final example consider the videogame *Outer Wilds* (Mobius Digital [2019]). In this indie

videogame, the player controls an alien wandering in his solar system with a spaceship and can visit a number of planets. The game does not state a clear goal and there is no intended path to finish the game. Thanks to the ambiguity in the communication of the final goal, the designers of the game managed to create an atmosphere of mystery and freedom: the players can explore the various planets following their desire in any order. However, the exploration is not without risks: the planets are complex living systems which will catch players off guard. On one planet, for example, a perpetual storm rages and a tornado can easily destroy the spaceship, putting an end to exploration and decreeing the death of the player character. On another planet, sand tides occur at regular intervals, completely changing the geography and accessibility of areas. On yet another, enormous beings live that attract players with lights and then swallow them up. The point is that none of these dynamics are explained to the player beforehand, who finds themselves experiencing real space exploration, in which they must use cunning and caution to survive. Finally, every 22 minutes, the star of the solar system explodes, ending our journey by default, which must start again with a new exploration cycle each time. This time limit is totally unpredictable the first time around. All these elements in *Outer Wilds* function as failures that the player interprets as unpredictable. However, in the context of the game, which is space exploration and the sense of precariousness and threat of alien worlds, these failures are perfectly justified. They are out-of-loop because they end the exploration, but they are not self-referential. On the contrary, they reinforce the referential solidity of the game world.

We can therefore create a *tripartition*: (i) in-loop failures that are completely reabsorbed by the game's intended dynamics; (ii) out-of-loop failures that are not reabsorbed by the dynamics and suspend immersion; and finally, (iii) a class of failures in the middle that, while estranging the player by proposing unexpected and unpredictable failures, nonetheless increase engagement and immersion in a believable world without invoking self-reflexivity. In other words, out-of-flow failures I am introducing are unforeseeable, not metacommunicative and yet immersive.

Conclusion

In this article I argued that certain types of failures can be used to reinforce the sense of plausibility of the game world, proposing the illusion of a world that cannot be fully controlled and predicted. By creating an interplay between immersion and emersion, games can create a framework in which taking the agency away from players becomes a powerful rhetorical tool that is accepted by the players for the sake of the experience (Caracciolo [2024]: 83). This perspective

opens new ways of understanding the expressive potential of video games by moving beyond the immersion/emersion dichotomy.

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