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Spatialising Failure in Video Games: A Novel Approach to Agency and Enjoyment

Abstract

This paper proposes a novel framework that examines failure at the intersection of space, agency, and enjoyment; we argue that failure is a form of agentic, spatialised play rather than a mere negative outcome, and is routinely shared as a community-building practice. Using the survival game *The Long Dark* as a primary case study, we analyse developer interviews to demonstrate how game environments function as containers for meaningful struggle. The research illustrates why players may find enjoyment in "doing badly", and how this relationship functions reciprocally; as developers release episodic updates, they recontextualise game spaces in response to player feedback and the community's desire for challenging, "vulnerability-driven" experiences. The paper closes by contributing the framework for failure as an opportunity for future empirical research on games where struggle and loss are an integral design choice.

Keywords: failure, loss, space, agency, enjoyment

1 Introduction

‘Trial and error’ is not a new concept, but an intrinsic part of social development; it was originally outlined by Morgan (1903) as a key approach to learning. Considerably more recently, in *The Spirit Level*, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) identified the relationship between anxiety and failure as a ‘social evaluative threat’, whereby a shift to increased individualism and narcissism means ‘we crave positive feedback’ and mitigate where possible any perceived failings that might impact our social standing (p.43). But what about when failure is conceptualised as inherently socially productive, where a binary distinction between positive and negative experiences is less-than-helpful?

The evolution of the gaming industry has seen a paradigm shift initially based on the business success of niche markets like amusement arcades, before moving to the more financially lucrative home console market in the 1980s (Zackariasson and Wilson, 2010). This well documented transition from public play in arcades to private play at home changed the dynamic of failure from one that was witnessed with and by others, often strangers, to one that was experienced largely alone; whilst online play has arguably reintroduced performative failure in both an individualist and collective sense (see Zheng et.al., 2014), learning-through-failure in private is still a normative experience for many gamers and in single player games in particular something of interest. Our previous work (see, for example, Spokes, 2018) has already established how traumatic experiences in single player games can be communally shared post hoc, so how might experiences of failure in particular be impacted, or how might they change over time in games that have different types of longevity, or use an episodic release structure, for instance?

In this paper our aim is to understand failure in the context of an evolving game, where the spaces in which failure takes place are routinely updated with new mechanics by developers in dialogue with players. To this end, we start by unpacking literature on different practical and theoretical perspectives on failing in games: by problematizing failure as a concept, we propose a novel approach that uses both Bodi (2023) and Spokes (2020) readings of agency in conjunction with Lefebvre's (2014) concept of 'jouissance' to *spatialise failure as enjoyment*.

To illustrate the value of this approach, we use developer diaries and interviews with the creative director of the episodic survival game *The Long Dark* to explore ongoing game development and how this is perceived and addressed by the developer in the context of players wanting increasingly impossible play experiences in specific locations. Our aim is to highlight how failure in gaming can be better understood in relation to spaces of play space and a nuanced reading of enjoyment, and that this has practical applications to games where failing is a primary design choice. We contribute a framework for failure as an opportunity for future empirical research on games where struggle and loss are an integral design choice

2 Literature Review

Games studies literature has conceptualised failure both in philosophical terms as social, apophatic, or existential, which are often countered by or operationalised through procedural terms - for example, as a binary mechanic where poor performance is met with a negative outcome. Beginning with philosophical approaches, Brock's (2017) work on apophasis acknowledges that a conceptualization of failure needs to be nuanced because, although failure leads to an acknowledgement that we have performed sub-optimally within the delimited space of the game, we still continue because of the promise of transcending failure through redemption; we also continue because the space[s] we occupy is illusory, a fiction where blame for failure can be attributed to individual performance, collective performance or even game design (pp. 172-4). Discussing *Dark Souls*, Brock explores failure in a productive sense. Rather than exacerbating nihilistic feelings:

'...it becomes a means of confronting it and bringing it into check. Through fear, anger and sadness, the player comes to disclose a truth to himself: that mistakes are not moments for mortification and self-flagellation but rather are an important, constructive and necessary aspect of the human condition' (pp. 175)

Whilst this adds colour to the concept of failure, it still functions to reinforce a binary: apophasis is, in essence, defining something by what it is not, and is therefore still reliant on an opposite to function. Brock encapsulates this by likening videogame consumption to a series of binaries including 'cataphatic and apophatic, affirmation and denial, winning and losing, pleasure and pain, sadness and laughter, control and letting go' (pp. 180-181).

Failure is often framed as the ‘compulsion to repeat’ (Matheson, 2015), akin to Freud’s extensive work on similar philosophical binaries in the death drive and the pleasure principle. This can be seen both in play, or, in replay – for example, Obreja’s (2023) work about kill-cams, often slow-motion repetitive and cinematic repeats of deaths in first person shooter games – which are presented as a ‘paradox of failure’. Obreja (pp. 268) argues that the ‘killed player is put in the situation to interpret and analyse its own death’ via a shift in perspective to the enemy’s virtual body, and, that this contributes to a compulsion to want to rectify feelings of inadequacy or seek retribution.

Juul’s seminal work on *The Art of Failure* (2013) provides a useful way to connect the philosophical with the procedural. At the most immediate level, failure in video games is facilitated by mechanics, such as goals and objectives which attribute value to player outcomes (Juul 2013). Yet, in thinking through failure in relation to game design, Juul explains that value systems within games do not function as an artificial way of measuring the performance or success of a player, but that goals create value through the ways in which outcomes are attributed to actions: typically, he argues, players ‘tend to pick the path of least resistance’ (pp. 121), which might imply that resistance engenders purely negative outcomes, highlighting the binary scale of feelings of achievement as good (least resistance) and bad (most resistance). However, Juul discusses how the possibility of this failure is central to the attraction of the medium of gaming. Failure makes players reconsider their strategy, engage in introspective thought, and adapt their cognitive process for the challenge ahead. In this approach, failure does not signify a purely or absolutely negative state (despite often being presented in game mechanics as such a binary) but rather gives the players’ actions weight. Failure is the thing that reinforces the feeling that the virtual world is dynamic and reactive to player. Through Juul, it is visible how apparently binary separations of success versus failure serve a more complex existential outcome.

Following on from Juul, Ruberg discusses failure existentially as counter-normative queer play. Ruberg challenges the ‘tyranny of fun’ (in *No Fun* 2015) where ‘fun’ is used to justify heteronormativity in gaming and standardised notions of positive feedback and negative reinforcement are prioritised. On games that are ‘no fun’, Ruberg acknowledges the queer potential for games to annoy you on purpose, anger you, and disappoint you. Games that refuse to provide uncritical pleasure allow players to find gratification in discomfort. Ruberg furthers this analysis in *Playing to Lose* (2017), seeing failure as the subversion of patriarchal systems and linear or binary capitalist demands of success.

The procedural devices that these outcomes are achieved through have been discussed in the literature to a greater extent. On a practical level, game developers have a nuanced relationship with ‘failure’. Indeed, ‘challenge’ and subsequent mastery, is a core device for fostering (re)playability in games design (Anderson, Campbell & Steinkuehler, 2019), which can foreshadow positive failure strategies through persistence. Frommel, Klarkowski and Mandryk (2021) in their aptly named work ‘the struggle is spiel’, find that for many players, failure is an integral part of enjoyment.

In designing game narratives, failure is recognised as a device to frame a linear story (Bello, 2024), where failure presents challenge, progresses in the story, may at some point be returned to, and

could lead to a different version of future success. There is a significant body of work on the educational value of failure in gaming, sometimes referred to as ‘failing up’ (Anderson et al., 2018) – because ‘moments of impasse that encourage players to think deeply about the content in which they are engaged’ (pp. 142) can be some of the most rewarding elements of play. This is a dynamic earlier alluded to in the work of Lee (2003) in their *I Lose, Therefore I Think* - where games that lack an explicit singular goal are discussed, as well as games that one cannot win and are oriented instead around socio-political critique. These critical games are ‘meant to morph the player from an in-gaming loser into an off-gaming thinker’ - reorienting away from the simplistic notion of fun towards something achieved through pain.

Failure in gameplay does not then just mean to lose, or to die. Anderson (2020), conducting interviews about failure with players who engaged with a particularly difficult shooting game, categorised other forms of let-down. For example, struggling to pass through a section of game that has been completed in the past (indicating a weakening of performance against a previous standard), struggling to progress to a different area of the map, or being surprised by something they ‘should have seen coming’ (pp. 6).

Then, there are games which preface the need for failure in the successful completion of the narrative. Cicholewski (2025) draws our attention to two examples – *80 Days* and *South of the Circle*, where the players fail at polar exploration. In these examples, success (as the opposite of failure) can be found in reaching goals through cooperation with indigenous peoples and re-writing the western ‘success’ stories of exploration: to succeed, one must fail, and experience a potentially disquieting or existentially challenging lesson about life and history – and failure is character building.

In Kozyra’s (2020) model on rethinking failure, failure is discussed as containing opportunity or serving a function in defining said narrative; for instance, in *NieR: Automata*, where the player can unlock new missions via failure or is required to fail in order to progress the story. Or in *Demon’s Souls* where players might strategically choose when to die in order to avoid enhanced enemy damage (2026). In both texts Kozyra discusses the collective dynamic of failure, where failure might benefit other players (or the player might benefit from others’ failure) by finding dead bodies which allude to dangerous places (2020), or where failure might summon another player to briefly assist, temporarily turning a solo objective into a co-op (2026), reframing failure not as an end point but as a collaborative starting point where players actively support one another through shared struggle. This leads Kozyra (2020 p2) to conclude that ‘in many cases the failure can lead to positive outcomes, such as finding hidden objects, building connections with other players or revealing additional features of the game’.

Robinson (et al 2023) also found community makes a difference in perception of failure – failure is perceived differently when there is an audience. In online ‘affinity spaces’ (Gee, 2005), such as the forum Reddit, ‘visiting the focal thread and seeing other community members reckoning with the game’s mechanically induced affective difficulty helped the user manage their emotions’ (Robinson et al., 2023, pp. 11) – and argued that difficulty (and therefore failure) played a role in community

building, in contrast to a fair amount of games studies literature which positions high-performance as causal of a positive experience (see Peng & Hsieh, 2012; Trepte & Reinecke, 2011). In this way, failure can be a collective pursuit, the fate of a team, or a performative aspect of gaming to enjoy and ‘meme’ or avoid in solitude. Ruch (2009, pp. 8), writing about the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, points out that ‘failures are more intense when observed by an audience [because] competition occurs between human agents, rather than only between human and computer.’

Wilson (2011, drawing from Eichberg, 2010), argues that games which are deliberately broken or unfinished can foster a sense of community or collaborative play, in a similar sense that one might laugh at themselves when they, their body or their actions are imperfect. Such a dynamic is discussed as kinaesthetic failure by Kozyra (2020) (when the player’s android avatar becomes infected with a virus and harder to control), and is often used in less serious or ‘impossible games’ to achieve a comedic enjoyment. This brings to mind games like *I Am Bread*, and *Octodad*, two titles in which the storied premise is simple (embody some bread and try, frustratingly, to wiggle your way towards a toaster, or masquerade convincingly as a human dad whilst overcoming the obstacle of being invertebrate) – but the input controls feel near impossible – and ‘success’ as a player feels as much about laughing at one’s own graceless failure as it does becoming deliciously toasted.

When viewed through this lens, finding enjoyment in ‘doing badly’ or embracing a ‘vulnerability fantasy’ is a radical reappropriation of play. This theoretical intervention aligns with Lefebvre’s (2014) concept of *jouissance*, an intense, disruptive enjoyment where pleasure and pain are inextricably intertwined. Game Studies gains an essential analytical tool here by shifting the focus from mechanical ‘winning’ to the affective pleasures of losing, so we can examine how players find profound meaning in vulnerability, precarity, and systemic resistance.

3 Space, time and agency

To build on the above, and understand failure in the context of perpetual or episodic games, we need to situate it in relation to the spatiotemporal experience of play (where does the failure take place, and when), what impact might it have (do you enjoy playing the game) and what does play mean in terms of agency within these designed spaces.

There is a long history of the ‘where’ of game spaces and how this might impact agency, indeed the pivot towards the spatiotemporal can be seen as a shift away from earlier Game Studies arguments about narrative/ludology. Landmark early work such as Aarseth can be seen as reducing the spatial in games to allegory, predicated on ‘the effectiveness of its user interface design’ (2001, pp. 153) which makes them ‘quite different from real space’ (ibid, pp. 169). Similarly, Aarseth also argues (2008, pp. 119) that perpetual game spaces such as *World of Warcraft*’s are little more than theme parks, which – whilst also detailing the value of sociality in such spaces – simultaneously undermines the deep connection people have with both the real and the representational, even if his ire is reserved for Activision’s business model in making the world inert. As Flynn attests (2011), space is routinely

simplified, with the significance of social relations neglected (after Massey, 2013) rather than seeing space as constructing and maintaining cultural and political modes of thought and lived experience by players: as social scientists, we echo this approach in terms of the multifaceted nature of space(s), and take heart from Meinel's assertion that games as a medium are 'inherently characterized by [...] various modes of spatial production' (2022, pp. 1).

Bodi (2023, pp. 45), drawing on Schröter and Thon's (2014) terminology, states that spaces in games can be understood in three senses, linked to representation: contributing towards representation in the storyworld; as localised examples of divergence from the storyworld; as defined by abstract, ludic qualities. What these definitions share is an emphasis on the role of agency in both a spatial and explorative sense. Whilst it is reductive to suggest binary distinctions in terms of something as complex as agency, spatial agency aligns with the ludic, designed-in environmental restrictions developers place on the avatar, the latter with representational space. Spatial-explorative agency, Bodi argues, is active and experienced rather than a static framework, a way of understanding the interrelationship between story, local representation and ludic qualities of a game akin to Flynn's assertion that player agency is a facet of space 'which can be examined as processes of active negotiation between agency, representation and the player's perception of the poetics of the gameworld' (2011, pp. 56).

Failure alerts us to the dislocation between subject and object, where the player's cognitive experience and sense of controlling the space comes into tension with the developers' game mechanics and rules (Spokes, 2020). Failure and agency should be read through Deleuze's repetition and difference, where rather than simply alerting the player to their habitual inadequacy – 'you didn't hit the buttons right or in time' – or 'passive synthesis', failure is a form of 'active synthesis' where play is 'a new confluence made of connections, actions, systems, chances, signs and signals (pp. 135)'. Failing and trying again is therefore not simply a compulsion to repeat with added learning as Matheson argues (2015), but is instead 'repeating with change, each change elicits difference, facilitates adaptation and manipulates control' (ibid, pp. 136): these repetitions are necessarily spatially mediated.

In addition to space and agency, Flynn outlines the relationship between space and enjoyment, in this case through pleasure, where our 'encounter with transforming geography [...] provides the basis for a particular type of spatial pleasure [...] grounded in immersive aesthetics, maps, tours, modes of navigation and geometric landscapes' (pp. 54). Elsewhere we have argued (Denham and Spokes, 2021) that pleasure in gaming needs to be situated in relation to an expanded definition of enjoyment, which when read through Lefebvre's concept of *jouissance* (2014) considers pleasure and pain as two sides of the same coin.

In a similar sense to the way that failure is a spatial experience, enjoyment for Lefebvre is also spatially mediated. It is not reducible to a pleasure/pain binary but 'escapes anxiety through imagery and symbolism [...] It is bound up with encounters, accidents, fantasies. It takes place during the unfolding of imaginary scenarios' (2014, pp. 111). In a game space, imaginary scenarios and symbolism can be thought of as the representational storyworld, with encounters and accidents conforming to the

sort of divergence – through player agency – that Bodi highlights. The ludic aspect here is the ‘lightning flash of profoundly pure pleasure’ (ibid) that engagement with different aspects of the play experience engenders. That enjoyment, Lefebvre tells us, is necessitated through immediacy, where enjoyment (which includes pain) happens in ‘space (or a space)’ (pp. 115).

Enjoyment is complex, in the same sense that failure is. It is something which includes both pleasure and pain and the oscillating ambiguity between them. Alongside this, we are proposing that failure can be understood as a response to the interaction between space, enjoyment and agency, and that this corresponds to Sicart’s contextual framework of an ‘ecology of play’; disruptive in context, creative in outcomes, autotelic in its direction (2014, pp. 15-17). As agency unfolds in game spaces, this presents us with the question of what enjoyment offers in rethinking failure: if failure is conceptualized as the interrelationship between agency, space and enjoyment how might this play out practically, and how might this change over time, particularly in episodic games?

A note on methodology: a case study approach, as has been utilised in this paper, corresponds to Johansson’s framework, with *The Long Dark* representing a ‘complex functioning unit’ investigated in its own contemporary context (Johansson, 2007, pp. 49) with the case study the object rather than the method of enquiry (see Stake, 1998). It is not the intention of this paper to forward a particular methodological stance – and the authors are cognisant of both Meyer (2001) and Tasci, Wei and Milman’s (2020) concerns about the ways in which case study research are designed. Rather, the aim is to forward an initial exemplar that can subsequently be refined in future empirical study.

4 *The Long Dark*

The Long Dark is a single player first-person, open-world survival video game developed by Canadian indie studio Hinterland. It challenges players to endure the unforgiving wilderness of a remote Northern Canadian setting – Great Bear Island and surrounding environs - in the aftermath of a catastrophic geomagnetic disaster that has rendered all modern technology useless: ultimately, you are alone with the elements, wildlife, and your wits to survive. Raphael van Lierop, the Creative Director at Hinterland, was inspired to make the game following his frustration at playing *Fallout 3*, where he wanted to remove enemy NPCs and make the environment itself the challenge (/noclip 2019): the emphasis was on the vulnerability of the player, and the character the player is inhabiting’ (ibid).

The Long Dark offers several distinct styles of play including ‘survival mode’, a freeform sandbox experience where surviving in the face of scant resources, hunger, cold and fatigue are a constant threat. There are shorter challenge modes and levels of scalable difficulty. Together these modes provide both long-term survival replayability and a narrative arc for players who want a more guided experience: following launch in 2017, *The Long Dark* has had millions of people play the game, and continue to play the game, through the five additional episodes that van Lierop has worked on.

The Long Dark was selected as a case study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it corresponds to the criteria of the conceptual map being posited in this paper: temporal longevity as an episodic game

(the game has been in rolling development for a decade, with the final episode due in March 2026); a spatially diverse storyworld (the game is an open-world survival sim) that still maintains ‘spatial legibility’ for players to navigate over time (see Alvarez and Duarte, 2017); with failure as a key element of play through ‘positive discomfort’ (Jørgensen, 2016, pp.1) and ‘playing to lose’ (Ruberg, 2017). Secondly, the creative developer of the game offers a variety of data in terms of developer diaries, interviews and developer masterclasses that show the development of the game over time including how and why particular decisions about the difficulty level of the game were made. Thirdly, the data demonstrate that the experiences of players in the context of spatial-agentic-enjoyment operate as a feedback loop to further development, which itself comes with challenges but points to the potential for future empirical work.

4.1 Spatial-explorative agency

In terms of the storyworld that players interact with, rather than telling a straightforward narrative the space is designed such that the arrangement of objects in specific locations (the mountain town of Milton) reveals the story: ‘through its aesthetic and feel as a “virtual space” – to communicate the nuances of Great Bear Island’s history, the post-crash present, and also some hint of what the player may encounter in the future’ (van Lierop, 2020, pp. 159). The developer’s intention is to engender a feeling that combines excitement, at the underlying mystery of the game space, the role the player has in moving through and manipulating the snow-bound environs of the island, and trepidation at ‘the scars that human exploitation leaves behind on their landscapes’ (ibid). For those with more interest in narrative, the Wintermute episodes push the story on in relation to the rescue of Astrid Greenwood. Alternatively, for those who are more interested in the difficulties of survival, the ‘Survival Mode’ operates as a sandbox incorporating new mechanics and challenges through the Tales from the Far Territory add-on (‘no hand holding’ the website says).

The game is intentionally hard. van Lierop (2016), interviewed around the time of the initial release, characterises its underlying logic as ‘putting you into a scenario where you know you’re going to fail; you know you’re going to die. How can you prolong that and make good choices that will sustain you as long as possible? Can you face that mortality?’ Contemporary reviews reinforce this perception from a player perspective, with Lavoy (2011) highlighting that the game ‘forces you to contemplate why you work so hard [as] Great Bear Island doesn’t care if you survive.’ Here we see the antithesis of Juul’s position, where ‘failure forces us to reconsider what we are doing, to learn’ (2013, pp. 122). Rather than players being able to assert their personal connection to the world, where failure ‘proves that [...] the world does not simply continue regardless of our actions’, *The Long Dark* provides a representational and ludic design where your survival is apparently of little interest.

To offer two examples of associated game mechanics, both non-replenishing items and encounters with animals emphasize the commitment to helping players fail. For the former, under different difficulty settings when you have depleted an area of items – many of which tell their own

implicit story about the space (a hatchet, a hunting knife, a Prybar, flares, a sewing kit, bandages, antiseptic) – they’re gone¹. Many games automatically repopulate items after a fixed time, but there is a conscious decision here to mitigate that in favour of careful inventory management. For the latter, you might shoot a wolf that is attacking you with an arrow, but it can take up to two hours for the wolf to bleed out before you can retrieve that arrow. In that time, you might be attacked, or you might lose the trail of blood if it starts snowing. In both these examples, restricting types of agency impacts failure, and the tension in that operates productively in line with constructive potential of confrontation (see Brock, 2017)

In practical terms, spatial-explorative agency oscillates between control – as shown above – and freedom depending on which aspects of the game world the developer wants to highlight. An example of freedom can be seen in the initial vagueness of the world map, and the apparent vastness of the island². There is considerable agency in becoming lost in an environment this hostile, something which van Lierop outlines as a key thematic line through the game and its subsequent episodes:

‘That feeling of being lost and that panic that you get from that experience is extremely rewarding in a strange way? Like, it reminds you of how vulnerable you are, and I guess I’ve always felt proud of the fact that *The Long Dark* kind of embraces this idea of being a vulnerability fantasy’ (/noclip, 2019)

This indicates both the extremities of the space and the challenges therein, whereby players are rewarded for their vulnerability and, at times, inability. This is facilitated through spatial-explorative agency, and player engagement is where enjoyment is situated. As Lefebvre argues, enjoyment cannot exist as ‘a building, an assembly or rooms, places determined by their functions [...] which have been repurposed to a certain extent’, so not purely the mechanics, representational storyworld, or the sort of tangible items mentioned above in isolation, but as ‘a genuine space, one of moments, encounters [...] the unknown, the known, struggle, play’ (Lefebvre, 2014, pp. 152).

4.2 Difficulty, enjoyment, duration

The level of difficulty in the game, and the propensity to fail, is something routinely highlighted by players, for example Larkin’s review (2020) states ‘It is meant to beat you; and if it’s not, then you haven’t amped up the difficulty enough yet’. *The Long Dark* was initially released with three difficulty levels (pilgrim, voyageur and stalker) with ‘interloper’ added during early access to offer a more extreme survival challenge. In 2024, 10 years after early access release, the ‘misery’ difficulty level

¹ A full list of non-respawning items can be found [here](#)

² SurvivorMike (2023) explores routes to glitchy off-map locations as a way of demonstrating the programmed limits of the space.

was added, which the game describes as ‘a punishing end-of-days experience³’. van Lierop (2024), in his release notes, details the introduction of a new silent predator – the cougar – alongside players developing scurvy and ‘over fixed intervals [...] a series of six entirely new and incredibly punishing afflictions’. Misery was added following feedback from the online community, akin to a direct ask for more opportunities to fail. Requesting pain implies *jouissance* through the anomalous, the unexpected, and the dissolution of the familiar (Lefebvre, 2014); by this stage in development, players clamouring for something different as a form of disruption reintroduces the tension tied up in ‘encounters, accidents, fantasies’ (ibid, pp. 111) offering a ‘true’ experience akin to Larkin’s suggestion. It also shows the significance of duration, that the interrelationship between developer and player co-creates options to fail, to be pushed to the limit.

Changes to the game are spatialized by the developer into horizontal and vertical updates. Horizontal updates afford the player the chance to recontextualize their experience by adding a new space or apply their skills in a different context, thereby prolonging the experience (GameCamp, 2025). Vertical updates recontextualize everything, so a new mechanic in-game which impacts how all previous systems function. This can lead to a disparity between the aims of the developer and the experience of the player. For example, Larkin asks

‘How can I see my way out of this building at night before I starve? Light a match. These are the basics, but they are unintuitive and unforgivable, because to fail them just means your first few playthroughs are just quick deaths with little learned’ (2020)

Hinterland’s design approach is to address what they term ‘common pain points’ – bugs that spoil the experience – and make bigger changes to drive long term behavioural change (such as spatial dynamics) (GameCamp 2025). van Lierop explains that ‘you [can] make a big change to the game but it’s a tiny tweak that people are excited about’ (ibid).

As in both the examples above, excitement can be seen in parallel to frustration, again mirroring a nuanced reading of enjoyment. The addition of new difficulty settings at the players’ behest has been described by van Lierop as a double-edged sword, that the team ‘underestimated how autonomous and in some cases actively hostile certain corners of [the] community might become’ (GameCamp, 2025) when not consulted, or when the consultation does not result in expected outcomes. Earlier we argued that failure is a tension between control and loss of control that operates as a dialogue between player and developer: in the case of *The Long Dark*, this is a direct conversation as well, outside of the game. Here the social aspect of a single player game is constructed through sharing experiences with an online community, through channels on Steam, subreddits on Reddit and the developer’s own Hinterland

³ Given how difficult, there are a good number of support threads on the developer Hinterland’s forum: see <https://hinterlandforums.com/forums/topic/45194-misery-mode/>

forum, and mirrors earlier work (Spokes, 2018) where experiences were shared extrinsically by online groups. This shows external agency beyond the game space but also challenges to development.

Over such a long period of time, to maintain a sizeable player bases suggests the developer is doing something right; the tension and balance between control and freedom, mediated by increased difficulty means that failure is still common, but that that failure is enjoyable. As Lefebvre remind us, *jouissance* is found in resistance where ‘the formation of spaces of joy, or enjoyment, are a misuse [...] of ‘hostile space’’ (2014, pp.113). The environmentally hostile nature of the game space is one way of reading this, but similarly the external tensions between player and developer can also be understood as painfully productive. In part this relates back to research conducted by Robinson et. al (2013) which found that shared experiences of failure can be different, but ultimately it goes back further still, to the shift from public embarrassment in the arcade to (semi) private experience in the home: episodic games such as *The Long Dark* suggest that the duration and durability of failure is supported by spatialised enjoyment and player agency when shared

4.3 Permadeath and the Phenomenology of Absolute Loss

To fully comprehend the spatiotemporal architecture of failure in *The Long Dark*, it is important to examine, as an illustrative example, the absolutist mechanic that governs its survival sandbox: permadeath. While traditional game environments routinely offer consequence-free failure, allowing players to instantly reload recent checkpoints and treat death as a temporary mechanical inconvenience, *The Long Dark* imposes a system of irreversible loss: upon dying, the player’s single save file is immediately and permanently deleted, erasing hours, or even hundreds of hours, of survival progress. This systemic choice fundamentally alters the player’s phenomenology of space. Under the constant threat of complete erasure, the virtual environment of Great Bear Island shifts from a consequence-free spatial playground into an authentic container for existential anxiety. The knowledge that a single misstep can wipe out their entire history forces a radical shift in how players interact with the game’s spatiotemporal parameters, imbuing every geographic transition and resource-gathering excursion with genuine gravity.

This dynamic of permanent loss can be productively analyzed using Bódi’s (2023) concept of spatial-explorative agency. Bódi argues that player agency in video games is not a static framework but an active, experienced process of negotiation with the environmental restrictions designed into the game world. In games without permadeath, or in the more vanilla settings of *The Long Dark*, spatial-explorative agency can be characterized by reckless and speculative traversal; the player is incentivized to treat the space as a laboratory for trial-and-error experimentation, knowing they can resurrect without penalty if they succumb to hypothermia or fall from a cliff. Conversely, in the permadeath environs of Great Bear Island, spatial-explorative agency is radically disciplined. Traversal becomes meticulous, methodical, deeply analytical. Rather than viewing a mountain range or a frozen river as an inviting site

for casual exploration, the player must cautiously evaluate the terrain's 'poetics of danger' (to adapt Flynn, 2011, pp.56) by judging wind direction, anticipating wind chill, and mapping potential shelters along the path. Here, Bódi's process of active negotiation is amplified to an extreme degree: the environmental constraints (severe weather, steep terrain, decaying infrastructure) cease to be abstract rules and instead become hostile antagonists that must be continuously appeased. Agency is therefore negotiated not through dominant mastery, but through a structured, highly vulnerable subjection to the virtual landscape's terms.

Disciplined spatial practice directly illustrates van Lierop's intentional design of *The Long Dark* as a 'vulnerability fantasy' (/noclip, 2019). The satisfying 'panic' of being lost in a blizzard, which van Lierop identifies as a uniquely rewarding aspect of the game, is only possible because the stakes are absolute. If a player can simply reload a quick save to escape a blinding snowstorm, the experience would dissolve into minor administrative friction. With the permadeath mechanic, however, the panic becomes phenomenologically real, as becoming lost represents a literal existential threat to the player's historical labour in the game space. The spatial pleasure described by Flynn (2011), which is grounded in navigation, maps, and geometric landscapes, is both subverted and enriched as a result. The pleasure of finding one's way is directly contingent upon the very real threat of being permanently lost. The map of Great Bear Island is not merely a tool for navigation, but a thin, precarious barrier separating the player's avatar from oblivion.

Lefebvre's concept of *jouissance* (2014) is illustrative in thinking through this tight coupling of extreme vulnerability, spatial traversal, and irreversible loss. In a permadeath-driven game, pain is not an obstacle to enjoyment; it is its foundational condition. The agonizing choices forced upon the player, including deciding whether to abandon a warm, resource-depleted cabin in Milton during a mild clearing, or stay and risk starving in a subsequent blizzard, are painful to execute because of the finality of their consequences. Yet, when the player successfully navigates these hazards, reaching an abandoned forestry lookout or far-away lighthouse with single-digit warmth and fatigue meters, the relief and satisfaction are profoundly heightened. This represents Lefebvre's 'lightning flash of profoundly pure pleasure' (2014, pp. 111), which is structurally dependent on a preceding, agonizing period of vulnerability. The enjoyment of *The Long Dark* is therefore autotelic, found not in the arrival at a traditional 'victory' or narrative resolution, but in the highly charged, spatiotemporal struggle to postpone mortality in a world that 'doesn't care if you survive' (Lavoy, 2011).

Ultimately, van Lierop's inclusion of permadeath ensures that failure in *The Long Dark* is never trivial. It reframes the act of losing not as a frustrating design failure, but as the concluding punctuation mark of the spatial narrative. By stripping the player of the ability to rewrite history through replaying save files, the game demands a level of focus that few checkpoint-based games can replicate. As the player's run inevitably concludes, perhaps resulting in an unexpected animal attack, a sudden drop in temperature, or a simple navigational error in the dark, the permanent loss of their save file serves to

cement the authenticity of their struggle, demonstrating that their agency within the hostile spaces of Great Bear Island was beautifully and painfully real.

5 Discussion & conclusion

The novel contribution of this paper is to offer a framework for understanding failure as a process facilitated by the interplay between space, agency and enjoyment (specifically, *jouissance*). This approach to understanding the multifaceted nature of failure synthesises a number of perspectives in pre-existing research. Conceptually, the spatialising of failure in relation to player agency and enjoyment builds firstly on Juul's notion of the paradox of failure - that players need the tension of failing but not to the extent they give up completely (2013) - but also Brock's (2017) reading of affirmative and negatory experience (the cataphatic and apophatic) by offering additional refinement through the interplay between space, agency and enjoyment. This aligns with Klarkowski and Mandryk's (2021) observation that 'the struggle is *spiel*': for many players, failure is an integral part of enjoyment. Alongside this, we detailed the adaptation of space and agency in the work of Bodi (2023).

Whilst it could be argued, through Lefebvre, that game spaces such as Great Bear Island correspond to what he calls (2014, pp.16) 'monotonously reproduced habitats, with miniscule variations presented as if they were profound differences whose appearance is [...] monotony, boredom, combinations of repetitive elements', the role of player agency in engaging, manipulating and sometimes breaking the space over a considerable duration (as an episodic game) offers a dynamic opportunity to experience transformative enjoyment through challenge and failure, 'found in flashes, in ambiguity, where content has impact over form (ibid, pp. 151)'

Using *The Long Dark* as a case study, we see that the representational storyworld is flawed (as in Bello, 2024; Ramsay, 2020) but so too is the game in a mechno-ludic sense, with Hinterland providing multiple horizontal and vertical updates to tweak the space as required (Wilson, 2011; Martens, 2022); the aim of the developers is to foster a sense of unease in the environment, an intentional vulnerability where failure is enjoyed as a form of 'positive discomfort' (Jørgensen, 2016, pp. 1). They are also seeking to shape aspects of player agency, balancing tension and frustration in a productive sense.

This framework - combining spatio-explorative agency and Lefebvre's nuanced interpretation of enjoyment - adds to existing literature on failure as discussed in section 2, but also suggests future-facing empirical work to further clarify and test the approach in addition to the case study here. We opened by highlighting the shift from public failure to private failure, and with single player titles like *The Long Dark* a case for failure being experienced in isolation could be made. However, as Robinson et al. have identified (2023, pp. 11) online spaces such as Reddit enable players to reckon with 'a games' mechanically induced affective difficulty' as a community-building exercise. Hinterland made demonstrable changes to *The Long Dark* as a result of engagement with these communities, and future

research into the spatialized nature of failure-as-enjoyment can therefore centre on the co-production of challenging play dynamics between developers and player communities.

In a wider sense, it also responds to an important shift in gaming more broadly, where international titles are more aligned with the enjoyment that comes from struggle. Wischert-Zielke has recently argued that there is a distinction between indie games and triple A games in terms of the latter relying on a ‘tyranny of fun’, whereby major publishers will only back ‘safe’. They describe ToF as ‘the exclusive emphasis on positive emotions as a disciplinary, cultural and commercial regime’ (2025, pp. 5), so that publishers will prioritize that which sells over games which are more challenging and uncomfortable. Without wishing to stoke the fire of ‘what is indie’ – a game with millions of players over a decade is somewhat stretching the definition – we would take issue with the idea that ‘fun’ can be read as the opposite of not fun. In the same way that we have argued that enjoyment is necessarily contradictory, embodied and complicated, we would turn to Crawford and Brock’s (2024, pp. 13) contention that players ‘gain different pleasures from gaming, [...] finding delight in failure, or seeking to subvert gaming norms’.

Instead, major developers and multinational publishers are routinely pushing titles that are both challenging conceptually (*Death Stranding 2* for example) or use punishing mechanics and storyworlds to offer seemingly impossible challenges (Wilson, 2011); one only has to take the recent example of *Elden Ring*, where we see a major developer (FromSoftware) and major publisher (Bandai Namco) releasing a blockbuster game, that is both popular and critically-lauded, where failure is an intrinsic expectation in the same way that it is in *The Long Dark*.

What our framework offers then is both nuanced and testable against this trend, and further empirical study is required to consider how the interrelationship between space-agency-enjoyment and failure operates in the context of a developer-player community reciprocity, realigning virtual space not just as a representation, but as a socio-cultural site of co-production (Massey, 2013; Flynn, 2011).

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