



Please cite the Published Version

Latham, Gemma  and Brock, Tom  (2019) Failure in videogames: similarities and differences to textile craft. In: 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix, 06 August 2019 - 10 August 2019, Kyoto, Japan.

Publisher: Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA)

Version: Published Version

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Failure in Videogames: Similarities and Differences to Textile Craft

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies Juul's (2013) account of failure in videogames to an analysis of hand knitting to argue that there are similarities and differences between videogame play and textile craft practice, specifically through a case study of *Unravel (Coldwood Interactive 2016)* and *Unravel Two (Coldwood Interactive 2018)*.

Keywords

Failure, Videogames, Craft, Textiles, Knitting, Embodiment

INTRODUCTION

In *The Art of Failure*, Jesper Juul (2013) suggests that there is a 'paradox' to how videogame players make sense of and experience videogames. 'Why do we play video games even though they make us unhappy?', Juul asks, recognising that videogames, whilst fun and pleasurable, often frustrate players as they fail to progress. This paper argues that a similar paradox exists in textile craft practices, specifically hand knitting, where learning how to form 'stitches' involves trial and error. This is important because it furthers our understanding of player labour in videogames and the (paradoxical) ways in which videogaming taps into key 'autotelic' needs to succeed and feel competent whilst overcoming anxieties of inadequacy (Sennett 2009; Juul 2013). It also elaborates on Ash's (2013; 2015) account of 'bodily attunement' and videogame play by suggesting the knitter and player fine-tune movements of the fingers and hands in the development of somatic knowledge of tool and material.

Hand Knitting

Hand knitting is a practice through which yarn is manipulated by hand-held needles to create a knitted fabric, often resulting in the creation of wearable garments. In creating the knit fabric, loops of yarn are transferred from one needle to another with additional yarn added, in what are referred to as 'stitches'. As loops pass from needle to needle, a row of knit is completed with each row of stitches interlinking with the previous through each new stitch that is made. By acquiring the knowledge of how to combine a variety of stitch types and how to shape a piece of knitting, by increasing (adding in loops) and decreasing stitches (knitting loops together), the knitter is able to create knitted objects from the yarn.

Errors in hand knitting generally occur when an incorrect stitch or combination of stitches is used creating 'physical failures' (Robins 2017), or flaws. Once discovered

these can be corrected by ‘ripping’ or ‘frogging’, unravelling the fabric back to the point of the mistake before reknitting. This somewhat painful process poses the risk of unravelling too much of the fabric. Some knitters will try to reduce this risk (Pye 1968) by adding ‘lifelines’ during knitting, providing stable positions to unravel to at intervals in the fabric. Another example of failure in knitting, is when the knitter ‘drops a stitch’ and a loop of yarn slips off the needle during knitting, resulting in a hole in the fabric. A single or small number of dropped stitches, if caught in time, can be carefully recovered but in extreme cases, the knitting has the potential to fall off the needles and the entire piece be at risk of becoming unravelled back into a single length of yarn.

Failure in Videogames and Craft Practice

Juul argues that we can understand failure in games by considering the ways ‘a game can set up players for success and failure’ (Juul 2013, p.72). In particular, he identifies three paths, two of which are relevant to our analysis of knitting; skill and time invested (or ‘labour’). We will evidence the similarities and differences between failure in games and textile practice through a case study of *Unravel* (Coldwood Interactive 2016) and *Unravel Two* (Coldwood Interactive 2018), a puzzle based platform adventure game in which the player takes on the role of a small being made of yarn that unravels into a single thread to be used for swinging and creating ‘bridges’. The game is available across several platforms including; PC, PS4 and Xbox One – in local co-op (*Unravel Two*) or single player (all versions). In this case study we will consider failure within the PC version of the game and apply it to hand knitting through autoethnographic observations of game play and amateur knitting practice over a period of 3 months.

Juul argues that failing through lack of skill in games gives us the opportunity to ‘reconsider our strategies’ and ‘expand our skillset’ (2013, p.74). Through knitting and playing *Unravel* satisfaction is experienced when completing a particular project or game level. When knitting this may be in ‘casting off’ a jumper or through mastering a new stitch. We argue that this sense of achievement is similar when playing *Unravel*, completing a level or collecting ‘secrets’. Juul (2013) aligns ‘skill’ with personal improvement. We argue that as both knitter and the player we strive to reduce visible failures by improving our ability to knit a particular stitch consistently or by increasing our ability to ‘swing’ without falling in game.

In this paper we observe how the yarn of knitting and the rules of the game afford similar experiences through which *catastrophic failure* of the kind that Keogh (2018) recalls in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) is unlikely. Rather, the process of ‘unravelling’ the yarn and recovering a previous stitch provides insight into the ways that raw materials, like game rules, ‘attune’ (Ash, 2013, p.2015) our bodies to experience failure in particular ways.

Finally, we consider the ‘labour’ of playing *Unravel* and its relationship to the labour of knitting by hand. In particular, we argue that, to experience progress, both activities require a significant time investment. Player and knitter alike must perform hand-eye actions repetitively to learn the basic rule-set of the game and the stitch. This is important for identifying the ‘completionist’ in both knitters and videogame players. As Juul argues, experiences of failure comes through a lack of completion, i.e. ‘not-having-succeeded-yet’ (2013, p.79). We argue that knitting provokes a similar compulsion to complete and derive pleasure from investing time into the practice of ‘undoing mistakes’ (see Keogh, 2018, p.138). This paradox is what makes knitting similar to *Unravel* (and vice versa): we are drawn to the ambiguity of their puzzles and derive purpose from the labour and embodied mastery that follows.

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