

Foreword

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Do you remember when night fell and the monsters got you? Or that time you lost one of your lives? How about when your little sister died of dysentery? These are some of our fondest collective childhood memories. Games do that. The paradox of games is that they turn what is typically considered a painful circumstance into pleasure. They make failure fun.

Do you remember getting called on when you were daydreaming? Failing that important test? Getting sent to the principal's office? These are some of our least fond collective childhood memories. School isn't usually associated with fun and games—in fact, even when games are involved, one of the most vividly painful memories from school is being the last person picked for the dodgeball team (unfortunately I speak from experience). The paradox of school is that it has a knack for making the pleasure of learning painful, making failure ... not fun.

Of course, not all our learning experiences in school are painful, and not all our game-playing experiences are pleasurable. But failure in a game encourages us to try again and ultimately learn new strategies. Video games in particular rely on failure to teach us how the game world works—no wonder we have multiple lives and save points. Failure is essential in video games, but failure in school is usually something to avoid. Rather than teach us how things work, failure often teaches us what we haven't learned—and on that big test, we don't get a chance to restart the level and try again. As an educator and game designer straddling both worlds, I'd rather adopt the forgiving measurement of success that Samuel Beckett proposes: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."¹

When we play, we're open to failure—we're trying something out. If it doesn't work the way we thought it would, that's ok, we'll try something else—we'll "fail better." We're hardwired to learn through play, but

we don't need to turn learning into a game for it to be fun. As the authors of this book point out, learning is *already* fun. The challenge in education is to “find the fun” in a subject—not to try to “make it fun.” Because the whole reason we even have math, physics, philosophy, history, mortuary sciences, and more is because someone, somewhere, at some point in time, found it fun.

“Find the fun” is a phrase I borrow from Sid Meier, the game designer for *Civilization*. He and his team found the fun—they just happened to find it in world history.² While educators might try to find the fun in a subject to make it more meaningful to students, for game designers, it's a matter of a game's life or death. That's where the work of the Education Arcade comes in. They are super-double fun finders. They find the fun in an educational topic—the fun that's already there—and translate that fun into a game, finding the fun again through play. This is resonant game design—the vibration between topics, systems, problems, and players who become learners. Sound easy? I can say from experience that it's not.

To illustrate why, I'd like to ask you to join me in traveling back to 2010. Notice that elephant in the conference room at Parsons School of Design, where I teach? None of the playtesters sitting around the table really wanted to say it, but the game they'd just played was ... not fun.

Well, this was embarrassing.

I was the director of a new research lab (PETLab), and our latest endeavor was an alternate reality game set in 1600s Manhattan. To play, you walked around the city with your phone—a portal to early Manhattan—collecting the flora and fauna that used to be there before it was taken over by taxicabs and tourists. The project was based on years of research done by passionate scientists. The game had a talented design team and was using some really cool technology. But despite all that, the proof was in the playtest: the game just wasn't fun.

I won't go into all the reasons, but suffice it to say we got distracted by the technology and the details of the data we were using in the game. We forgot to translate into the game the fun that the scientists had experienced discovering Manhattan's early ecology. My background is in art and design, so I was no stranger to a bad critique. My colleague Eric Zimmerman says that learning to take negative feedback is like developing a taste for spicy food. I had developed the taste for spicy criticism over many years of presenting creative work. But this critique was particularly hard to swallow because

PETLab was the new kid on the block and we were hoping to impress the playtesters we had gathered: respected designers and researchers in the field of games and learning. Some of them I was meeting for the first time, like Eric Klopfer and Louisa Rosenheck, two of this book's authors. If you had told me then that I would be given the opportunity to write this foreword, I would have stared at you, blinking incredulously.

That was almost ten years ago. The field was fledgling, and to fail was not unusual—in fact, looking back on this time, it was part of the fun. Failure drove educational game makers to make sense of what works by also sharing with each other what doesn't work, and why. Because to make something new, to bridge disciplines, and to find the fun in both involves plenty of failure at first. As the years progressed, we learned lessons together, sharing stories of our failures (and at times, successes) at conferences and in books.³

The team at the Education Arcade has been designing truly fun learning games for many years now, and what you'll find in the pages that follow draws from real hands-on experiences working with designers, educators, and learners. The principles of resonant games bring the best of games and learning together through real examples and true stories—forged through failure and out to the other side, success—so that you can build on them. And find your own unique ways to fail in your forays in games and learning. And hopefully, someday, succeed. Or shall we say, “fail better”?

Notes

1. From *Worstward Ho* (p. 7), by S. Beckett, 1983, New York: Grove Press.
2. Even though *Civilization* was not designed to be an educational game, it has been known to spark interest in world history, and now development of an educational edition, *CivilizationEDU*, is under way.
3. Two years after this failed playtest, Eric Klopfer and Jason Haas cowrote *The More We Know: NBC News, Educational Innovation, and Learning from Failure*. It's a refreshing and humbling story of failure told through a real example—and the lessons to be learned from it.

