

Rhythms of Failure in Playdead's Inside

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ABSTRACT

Cyclic loops of death and restart form regular repetitive rhythms within many video games. The game *Inside* by Playdead (2016) is no exception. This paper asks what types of rhythmic structures are created visually, aurally and kinesthetically for players as they experience the failure states throughout *Inside*. This analysis of rhythmic experience within *Inside* then prompts a discussion of the rhythmic design of checkpoint style failure states in video games.

Keywords

rhythm, rhythmic experience, fail states, failure, transition, momentum, rupture, repetition

INTRODUCTION

Rhythm is the setting up of new tensions by the resolution of former ones (Langer 1953, p.127).

Failure plays a major role in most forms of video game, especially those involving skill-based challenges. In his book *The Art of Failure*, Jesper Juul attributes the different quality of feeling that failure produces in a game to the particular ways that a game designs its “path to success” (2013, p.116). As this suggests, how a game designs its failure states and their resolution contributes to the character of the game and the player experience it then evokes. For instance, some game designs make the player restart the whole game from the beginning when they fail (known as permanent death). Other game designs have checkpoint style failure states, where if the player fails a challenge, the game returns to a checkpoint a short way before that challenge so that the player can try again. Each style will create a different rhythmic experience for the player and influence not only their perception of the micro-rhythms of in-the-moment gameplay but also their perception of the macro-rhythms that pattern a play session or even the whole game.

The game *Inside* (Playdead 2016) is a side-scrolling, horror, puzzle game and an example of a game with checkpoint style failure states. During *Inside*, a failure results in the death of the player's character. Each death involves a transition that takes the player away from the rhythms of active gameplay into a cinematic death sequence and then back to the beginning of the challenge. This paper takes a close phenomenological look at the rhythmic tensions and resolutions a player might experience during these failure states within *Inside*. These rhythms will be experienced visually, aurally and kinesthetically by players, impacting their perception of subsequent gameplay. When a death reoccurs, these

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moments will combine to shape a macro-rhythm that will be specific to each gameplay experience.

In a presentation, *Inside*'s sound designers describe how they worked to "create the illusion of no time passing" during scene transitions (Andersen & Schmid 2016). As they point out, this was particularly important for challenges that involved rhythmic synchrony and timing. Failure transitions in these cases needed to maintain player entrainment with the game rhythms otherwise, the player would die, get out of sync with the rhythm and frustratingly quickly die again. Other failure transitions within *Inside* operate more as opportunities for a reflective pause, giving the player an opportunity to process the reasons for failure and potentially uncover a puzzle's solution. In rhythmic terms then, these two examples of failure transitions are working to either continue rhythmic momentum or to rupture it, each resulting in very different player experience.

This discussion of *Inside*'s rhythms of failure prompts a broader discussion of the design of the rhythms within check-point style failure states.

BIO

Brigid Costello is a lecturer in media production at UNSW Sydney, Australia.

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