

Unlearning in Games: Deconstructing Failure in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Premeet Sidhu

The University of Sydney
Camperdown, NSW, 2006
Australia

psid2912@uni.sydney.edu.au

Marcus Carter, Jen Scott Curwood

The University of Sydney
Camperdown, NSW, 2006
Australia

marcus.carter@sydney.edu.au, js.curwood@sydney.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

“There’s no winning and losing in the Dungeons & Dragons game—at least, not the way those terms are usually understood.” – 5th Edition D&D Player’s Handbook (WOTC, 2014, p. 5)

Learning experiences in games are commonly discussed on their potential as educational and pedagogical tools. Though instrumental applications of games are important, this edification overlooks other ways that learning in and from games can be valued—particularly through subversive experiences like unlearning or relearning. Over the last six years the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* [D&D] (Arneson & Gygax, 1974) has experienced a resurgence in prominence and popularity, with a broadening of its player demographic (Sidhu & Carter, 2020a, 2020b). An emergent theme from our 2020 study of play experiences in D&D suggests that failure is a pivotal part of players learning experiences. Of most interest is the predilection of responses framing failure in D&D subversively to experiences of failure in other games and real-life. In this presentation, we aim to regenerate critical discussion and reconsideration of how learning in games is currently designed and experienced.

UNLEARNING FAILURE THROUGH *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

In game studies literature there is a substantive body of work that gives impetus to the success and value of games being derived from their ability to facilitate play experiences leading to positive pedagogical outcomes or change in players (e.g., Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Gee, 2003; Harrington & O’Connell, 2016; McFarland, 2020; McGonigal, 2011). Though discussion exists outside of this (e.g., Juul, 2013; Matei; 2015), much literature focuses heavily on positively inclined play experiences within educational contexts, which neglects the clear presence, value, and proclivity of transgressive learning or unlearning experiences that go beyond explicitly educational or serious purposes (Stenros, 2019).

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Using qualitative data collected from three focus group discussions (14 participants, aged 24-55) which informed the design of a subsequent online survey (354 participants, aged 18-63), we argue that experiences with failure in D&D allowed players to unlearn and reframe their perceptions of failure in opposition to their prior experiences in other games and real-life. We contend that this exemplifies how experiences of (un)learning can be organically situated, navigated, and valued in games without the need for intentional pedagogical design and application.

In both data collection methods, we posed the broad question “In your opinion, what is the most important thing to learn or experience through D&D play?” All participants in our focus groups discussed in some way the significance of failure as a pivotal learning experience in D&D, with similar sentiments being expressed by many survey participants.

Responses noted the critical difference between experiences of failure in D&D in comparison to other games or real-life. One focus group participant established the negative connotations associated with failure in real-life, stating that “I don’t know why we’re taught that failure is final.” Extending this argument, another focus group participant noted that:

because it is entirely team and cooperative based in D&D, there is some fascinating unlearning to do. In D&D...you can all do anything. It is almost impossible for any action that you take to lead to a permanent failed state. There’s always this forward momentum, which is especially gratifying ... rather than it being viewed as a negative.

Similar opinions of positive unlearning were present within survey responses. This indicated that though the design and intention of D&D play was not concerned with opportunities for educational or personal development, natural engagement with the game facilitated (un)learning experiences that were significant for players regardless. One survey participant highlighted that “even if something goes wrong or you ‘fail’ a challenge, it still moves things forwards. Failure makes the game more interesting.” Additionally, another survey participant explained that in D&D “you don’t make a mistake and then go back and correct it. You make a mistake and then you move forward.” The implicit focus of responses on players’ transformative experiences with failure is a key part of D&D’s appeal in a competitive media landscape, and further highlights the value of games before additional pedagogical application, gamification, or objectification.

Games, play, and learning have been inextricably linked for many years and have produced significant research outputs in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Gee, 2003; Huizinga, 1955; Plass et al., 2020; Squire, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). As the global community strives towards providing educational experiences that are more considerate of the continually evolving sociocultural and technological landscapes (Kim & Maloney, 2020; Macgilchrist et al., 2020), building a renewed understanding of the natural interaction between games, play, and learning, is necessary. Diverging from contemporary literature, we argue that the value of learning in and from games extends beyond measurable outcomes achieved for explicit educational intentions or within educational contexts. Through our investigation of failure in D&D, we hope to influence future literature to reframe the objectification and educative potential of games, encouraging further investigation into similar learning and unlearning experiences already nascent within games.

BIO

Premeet Sidhu is a PhD student at The University of Sydney. Her PhD focuses on understanding the modern resurgence and appeal of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Her current research interests include investigating how meaningful player experiences in both digital and non-digital games can be applied and considered in wider areas of game studies, education, and media.

Marcus Carter is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures at The University of Sydney where he conducts research into player experience at the intersection of Human Computer Interaction and Game Studies research.

Jen Scott Curwood is an Associate Professor of English Education and Media Studies in the Sydney School of Education and Social Work at The University of Sydney. Her research explores the intersections of literacy, creativity, and technology.

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