FAILURE IS A PROJECT[1]

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An independent, diamond open-access journal redefining failure.[2]

This is the tagline of the *Journal of Trial & Error (JOTE)*, a journal set up and run by graduate students in the two-year master's program History and Philosophy of Science at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. *JOTE* publishes short empirical articles that zoom in on the question 'what went wrong?' in research projects across the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities and in interdisciplinary settings. 'Empirical' here is broadly conceived as the articles are meant to conceptualize 'empirical and experimental studies which have produced null, unexpected, negative, or mixed results', 'incomplete findings', or findings that cannot be brought to 'a closed, cohesive narrative'.[3]

The journal then invites senior researchers to comment on the disciplinary aspects of the research that is reported on as well as inviting scholars from science and technology studies (STS), sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), and history and philosophy of science (HPS) to reflect practically and/or fundamentally on the structure of situated experimentation and on the sources of concrete cases of 'error.' *JOTE* itself is an example of the third type of articles that the journal publishes: meta-research articles that reflect the tradition of the research of academic research. Here, one may think of the science of team science (SciTS). Additionally, the journal publishes rejected grant applications and peer-reviews so as to — in the tradition of STS — open the black box of scholarly work and academic functioning even further. Grant applications are published for three reasons:

> First, they are valuable in and of themselves as pieces of preliminary research. Second, they contain metadata that catalogue the ideas, hypotheses, and theoretical perspectives within an academic field. Third, they offer historians insight into the non-linear development of scientific ideas and can therefore be used as metadata on the trends and biases in the process of awarding grants.[4]

What is interesting about the last-mentioned category specifically and about *JOTE* in general is the attitude as it comes across. The online journal breathes youthfulness or 'science in the making',[5] which is to say that things like the 'replication crisis' in science, the demands of the Open Science movement, or the folding of preliminary research (past) into industrial and tech applications (present) and/or the funding of future research are taken up confidently as defining features of 21st-century scholarship and academic life.

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1   This is an extended version of the entry 'Failure' in our book: Iris van der Tuin and Nanna Verhoeff, *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022.

2   *Journal of Trial and Error* https://archive.jtrialerror.com.

3   *Journal of Trial and Error* https://archive.jtrialerror.com/faq.

4   *Journal of Trial and Error* https://archive.jtrialerror.com/faq.

5   Bruno Latour, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, trans Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1993] 1996.

By affirming that the metadata of research must be captured for historians and brought into circulation today as well as that science develops non-linearly, *JOTE* consciously situates itself in the 'algorithmic condition'.[6] After all, today's science is being conditioned by and adds to the computational procedures that drive the workings of the internet as the global and dynamic externalized collective brain that stores, makes accessible, and transmits knowledge, information, data, and, indeed, affects.

In the contemporary world in which both *JOTE* and scholarly research in general are situated, and within which we, as scholars, peer-reviewers, and, quite simply, individuals live our professional and private lives, change is the new stability. This characteristic aspect of the algorithmic condition renews the academic, artistic, and activist interest in failure as paradox. Failures are both obstacles and sites of movement. They are blockages as well as a generative force. This being the case, the negative connotation of failure itself (failure vs. success) needs adjusting.[7] This is precisely what the students behind *JOTE* are teaching us when they write that they are concerned about 'the publication pressures that researchers face — especially junior investigators — in their pursuit of a career in science'.[8] According to their second tagline, '[t]here is a gap between what is researched and what is published. *JOTE* aims to close that gap'.[9] What gets published usually goes accompanied by an air of linearity, success, and grandeur, whereas the latter features are not the features of science as it is daily done. The students write:

> Publicly, science is thought of as an unambiguous set of operations that gleans truth from chaos. By applying a set of specialized methodologies in a well-delineated process, the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' of experience can be quantified, categorized, and systematized. But in practice, science is quite messy. Experiments rarely work on the first try or as expected, results rarely falsify hypotheses directly, and knowledge is gained in small, incremental steps instead of great leaps. This process of fine-tuning is at odds with the public image of science as an enterprise designed for consistent large-scale discovery.[10]

In the reality of science in the making, failure is, quite simply, daily practice. Only when the public image of science — an image that also features in university lecture halls and in popular news media — is projected back onto the everyday reality of lab scientists and desk and archival researchers do their experiences with 'chaos,' 'confusion,' 'mess,' 'incrementality,' and 'fine-tuning' come to carry negative connotations of failure. When the starting point is practice, a symmetrical approach of alternating successes and failures comes within reach. This approach seems to drive *JOTE,* as well as the algorithmic condition per se.

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6   Felicity Colman, Vera Bühlmann, Aislinn O'Donnell, and Iris van der Tuin, *Ethics of Coding: A Report on the Algorithmic Condition [EoC]*, Brussels: European Commission, 2018.

7   Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

8   *Journal of Trial and Error* https://archive.jtrialerror.com/faq.

9   *Journal of Trial and Error* https://archive.jtrialerror.com/.

10   Sean Devine, Max Bautista Perpinyà, Valentine Delrue, Stefan Gaillard, Thomas F. K. Jorna, Martijn van der Meer, Lottricia Millett, Chelsea Pozzebon, and Jobke Visser, 'Science Fails. Let's Publish,' *Journal of Trial & Error* 1.1 (2020): n.p. *https://doi.org/10.36850/ed1*.

The field of science and technology studies has long been interested in research and development failures. Research and development failures form an excellent entry point for a symmetrical anthropology that does not want to import assumptions about binaries such as old-new, true-false, and good-bad into its analyses, refraining from imposing value on the networks studied. In *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, anthropologist of science Bruno Latour discusses the innovative public transport system, Aramis, that was prepared for use in Paris from the late 1960s until it was suddenly abandoned in the early 1980s. Latour assembles as many voices about this sociotechnological failure as possible. Failures linger in the space between 'started' and 'finished,' and as such they remain projects. 'About technological *projects*', Latour argues, 'one can only be subjective. Only those projects that turn into objects, institutions, allow for objectivity. [...] Projects drift; that's why they're called research projects'.[11] The well-functioning transport innovation died a premature death because of a lacking number of sustained linkages between, and crossings of, social and technical systems. The innovation ended up not being networked enough and it is only possible to retroactively pinpoint why Aramis had to fail by combining as many test reports as possible. For one thing, Latour's multivoiced systemic functional analysis into who killed Aramis demonstrates that the project has indeed produced a lot of viewpoints.

'Projects drift; that's why they're called research projects', wrote Latour. And this is precisely what the students behind *JOTE* want to embrace. They write '"trial and error" is an inherent and fundamentally collaborative mechanism of the scientific process, whereby scientists share knowledge of both successes and failures to inform future endeavors. To know what is, we must know what is not'.[12] What graduate student Sean Devine and his peers write is, indeed, refreshing, but it is also conceptually precise and, in the algorithmic condition, incredibly up to date. Distinct from failure as lack (a deficiency) that is at risk of getting essentialized and taken for granted as a trait, failure as a verb (an act of failing) refers to unexpected moves, glitches, or hiccups in bodies, interactions, or relations with often productive consequences for those humans and nonhumans involved. Owing to such unforeseen happenings and unlooked for results, 'failures' are characterized by change and transition rather than stability.

Given that glitches often occur today in all-pervasive human-computer systems interaction, change is the new stability indeed. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and media theorist Neta Alexander define 'habitual failure' as 'that which changes nothing: the non-event or the rapidly dismissed encounter with the helplessness of users and consumers'.[13] Appadurai and Alexander do acknowledge that, in the contexts of digital and financial systems specifically, acts of failing have an impact on today's user or consumer subject who gets positioned as 'a perennial tester, a reporter on failures'.[14]

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11   Latour, *Aramis*, 75, 91, emphasis in original.
12   Devine et al., 'Science Fails. Let's Publish'.
13   Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander, *Failure,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020, 9-10.
14   Appadurai and Alexander, *Failure,*12

Acts of failure are temporary defeats or final failures that nevertheless perform in unexpected ways. Returning to such acts ('glitches') in digital systems, writer and curator Legacy Russell argues:

> Herein lies a paradox: glitch moves, but glitch also blocks. It incites movement while simultaneously creating an obstacle. Glitch prompts and glitch prevents. With this, glitch becomes a catalyst, opening up new pathways, allowing us to seize on new directions [...] glitch is something that extends beyond the most literal technological mechanics: it helps us to celebrate failure as a generative force, a new way to take on the world.[15]

What Russell demonstrates here is that in acts of failing on the internet, for instance, oppressive regimes of power go hand in hand with positive identity transformations. Acts of failing must be analyzed as such: symmetrically between oppression and transformation. And the paradoxes can be mobilized for activist art and other projects that work toward designing for social and ecological change. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, queer theorist Jack Halberstam demonstrates that mundane happenings in everyday (queer) life can have the same potential, provided that we leave the binary between successful and failed life behind, a binary that heteronormative, capitalist societies want us to use as a yardstick in evaluating the lives of ourselves and others. With financial markets collapsing and divorce rates skyrocketing, Halberstam demonstrates that we must change our measures of success in order to be able to see 'more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world'.[16]

What, then, could be a 'final failure'?

What would it mean for a failure to be even more than a temporary research, artistic, or design result that deserves publication or installation so as to do justice to the science as it was practiced in the past, just so that present-day and future researchers and 'researchers of research' or 'researchers of making' can make good use of it on empirical, anthropological, or foundational registers? Here, indeed, the creative fields of arts and design come in. In design contexts, for example, it is very well possible that a failure is final or that, at least, it has more than temporary value and comes to be part of the urban fabric. In their 2013 reflective essay 'Final Draft: Designing Architecture's Endgame', architects Gretchen Wilkins and Andrew Burrows ask the following question: 'Isn't keeping things unfinished the most open and the best way of getting things done?'[17] The answer to their own question: '[...] this all depends on what is meant by "done", and the reasons to stay undone are changing'.[18]

In their essay, 'final draft' is a concept. This concept allows us to think of 'done' and 'undone' as the two sides of one and the same coin. The concept introduces the possibility of working

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15   Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, London: Verso, 2020, 30.
16   Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3.
17   Gretchen Wilkins and Andrew Burrows, 'Final Draft: Designing Architecture's Endgame,' *Architectural Design* 83.1 (2013): 98-105, 98.
18   Wilkins and Burrows, 'Final Draft', 98.

in an out-of-control key: is multi-directional 'drafting' the primary process that 'completion' necessarily reduces to univocality and unambiguousness? In order not to reduce, Wilkins and Burrows stay with drafting, so that even a completed product remains 'open.' Why do they go through such pains? Because they have the goal of persistently stimulating innovation (in design), creation (in art), and creativity (across all cultural domains at once (and for all)). This brings us back to the impetus of the *Journal of Trial & Error*; a journal that situates itself right in the middle of the making of scientific truths as well as untruths that have truth-value in that they rule out certain things that once had great potential.

The non-reductive and complex work of Wilkins and Burrows affirms that every creative product, scholarly or design — their text, this short chapter, this collection, their architectural projects, *all* architecture even when it has won some important prizes — is a final draft. They conceptualize that final drafts are, firstly, material. They consist of raw or movable material; they are located in, and as, places that allow for many things to happen there. Secondly, final drafts are representational. They will have to be finished, one day, or they will have to be interpreted academically or aesthetically. It is possible for people not to come to an agreement on the meaning — historically, aesthetically, communally, etc. — of such unfinished objects or places. Thirdly, final drafts are material-discursive projects.[19] Examples are functional designs that are looking for a function, or open-source software requesting to be adopted for use. In other words, final drafts are 'creatively incomplete'.[20] And remember, pushing Latour to the extreme, for Wilkins and Burrows, *all* objects, text, images, and places are creatively incomplete projects!

Whereas the two architects take an ontological standpoint about the unfixity of the seemingly fixed, they also have an eye for how final drafts are developed in practice. They affirm that in collaborative (and) design processes, we can differentiate two paradoxical movements or forces.[21] On the one hand, there is the process that hopefully leads to the bringing about of meaning. This is a process that abounds in ambiguity and is fundamentally conversational. On the other hand, Wilkins and Burrows acknowledge that collaborative (and) design processes are intended to come to a conclusion, a model, or a plan. As such, the processes are fraught with ambition and the urge to control. In our times of economical, ecological, and social crises, it is all the more important to embrace the inherent tensions in the design process as a *project*.

Ultimately, they suggest for us to 'do as Detroit', which is to say: 'assert [your] "draft" state as "final" in order to perpetuate continued innovation'.[22] They suggest for us to try to search for the unfinished, even in seemingly finished contexts, so as to be able to constantly mobilize the 'frays' for innovation, creation, creativity, and, eventually, change. Wholly in line with *JOTE*, they want us to embrace an attitude of 'construction-as-research'.[23]

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19   Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988): 575-599.
20   Wilkins and Burrows, 'Final Draft', 100.
21   Wilkins and Burrows, 'Final Draft', 101, 105.
22   Wilkins and Burrows, 'Final Draft', 101.
23   Wilkins and Burrows, 'Final Draft', 103.

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