

Jank Accounts: We Should Study ‘Broken’ Games

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ABSTRACT

We argue that HCI games research can benefit by understanding experiences of “jank”. Jank is a gaming vernacular term for game-elements that are somehow “off”: sloppy, glitchy, or clumsy. Examples include frustrating control schemes, primitive visuals, absurd physics errors, and NPCs with wooden, alienating behaviour. Importantly, ‘jank’ is no straightforward term of abuse: players use the term appreciatively, even with affection. Attention to the “paradox” of jank-appreciation can help us understand the limits of usability in understanding player experience. It can clarify conditions which foster reflection and appreciation of adversity, and shed light on games as aesthetic experiences.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **HCI theory, concepts and models.**

KEYWORDS

games, hci, breakdown, jank, seamless, aesthetics, art, theory, player experience, reflection

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When AAA games exhibit poor usability, or elements that seem clumsy, or rough, the complaints come fast and loud. Accordingly, HCI games research attaches high value to usability and polish. If games have intuitive controls, consistent behaviours, and slick presentation, we expect this to go some way towards improving player experience (PX) [19, 24]. Complicating this, however, is the growing popular discourse around ‘jank’: frustrating control schemes, ugly primitive graphics, and absurd NPC behaviour. While associated with friction, frustration and faults, ‘jank’ is no straightforward term of abuse [25]. Players describe jank games as “endearing” [10] and even “awesome” [8], major game journalism sites list players’ favourite janky games [10], and developers have engaged in serious discussion of jank as an intentional design element [9].

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Though jank appreciation is a fascinating and confounding phenomenon in PX, it has received little attention in HCI games research. We argue this is a meaningful gap: jank appreciation complicates some common assumptions about what supports positive player experience in HCI games research. It can help us see where conventional playability assumptions hit limits. Jank also offers interesting clues about how some games function as aesthetic experiences.

1 BEYOND FLUIDITY AND COMPETENCE SUPPORT

While jank-appreciation is clearly not a factor in every positive play experience, nor is it merely a special case, or fringe aberration. Jank can be seen as continuous with other, better studied, aspects of PX which complicate our common focus on positive emotions, fluidity of play, and the player’s sense of competence.

It is now well accepted that players appreciate adversity in games: from competence-frustrating challenge in punishing Soulslikes, to the depressing and emotionally challenging compromises of *Papers Please!* [3, 6, 23]. Jank may contribute to PX in ways that are analogous to this. Player accounts indicate that jank-factors such as friction, broken immersion, and visual dissonance can sometimes come to mould and even enrich experiences. Meanwhile research shows that breakdowns in play can support learning and felt responsibility [12].

Given its prevalence in gaming vernacular, and its potential role in PX, we suggest there is value in understanding how, when, and why players come to tolerate — and even enjoy — janky elements such as frustrating controls, jarring graphics, and immersion-breaking NPC behaviour. One path forward here can focus on the way jank elements draw the player’s attention to the *materiality* and *conditions* of game play: something which has been noted in popular game discourse [4, 18]. Does jank serve to raise awareness of the pixels that make up the screen, the software routines that move NPCs around the world; the (broken or exaggerated) game conventions, and the (all-too-human) labour and craft of game developers [15]? What are the consequences of such perceptual and conceptual shifts in player experience and behaviour.

This link to player awareness connects jank to a long-established body of research in HCI that investigates the way that breakdown and friction in interaction can support awareness, learning and reflection. In 1986 Winograd and Flores argued that malfunctions and friction in interaction could make background assumptions and structures visible, supporting critique and creativity [26, p. 37]. Subsequent research has investigated how breakdowns and “seams” in interaction can be generative, prompting technology-appropriation and learning [13]. Recently, Bennett et al. found empirical evidence of increased awareness during technology malfunction, linking

this to identifiable signatures in control input [2]. Such work can provide theory and method to guide HCI games research on jank experience, and may also shed light on a range of non-jank play experiences, related to reflection.

2 UNDERSTANDING GAMES AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

Discussion of “breakdown” brings us to another reason for HCI Games researchers to care about jank: it can help us understand how games function as aesthetic experiences, and how game experiences relate to aesthetic experiences in other media.

For at least the last two centuries, artists have leveraged breakdown, failure, and ugliness to provoke audiences into taking new perspectives. In theatre, Bertold Brecht alienated audiences from his characters to provoke reflection on the socio-economic structures which determined their lives. In music, John Cage silenced the piano to open ears to everyday sounds. More recently, comedians Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim have used comedic failure, banality, and low quality tv-production tropes to foreground human inadequacy and the deadening aspects of mass culture [11]. Golin has argued that such artistic breakdowns can serve to elevate the interpretive agency and active sensemaking of the audience [11]. Alvar Noë, a philosopher of cognition, goes further: arguing that such breakdowns are basic to how art works [22]. For Noë art objects are best conceptualised as artfully malfunctioning *strange tools*; ‘tools’ whose usual functioning has been broken in order to open up a space for reflection on human nature and practice [22, p. 30].

Jank seems resonant with these ideas. Like these *strange tools*, janky games often short-circuit ordinary forms of engagement, or even “break immersion and remind us we’re playing a game” [17]. Furthermore, jank is increasingly deployed *intentionally* by game designers for such purposes. *Getting Over it With Bennett Foddy* is perhaps the most celebrated example of this, pairing a frustratingly janky movement mechanic with a philosophical monologue on the nature of games. The player’s frustration and struggle are bought to consciousness, prompting an explicit reflection on the expectations and habits of game-play [7].

Foddy’s game is funny, as well as reflective: a common aspect of appreciated jank. Multiplayer jank games such as *Regular Human Basketball* [16] often court laughter with impossible, mastery-thwarting control schemes. These seem to break the standard game norm of competition and instead shift attention to shared social laughter at frustration and the conditions of shared participation. Darker and more ambiguous examples of jank can also be found. In his discussion of the plague-themed RPG *Pathologic*, Harris Brewis argued that the game’s grim and hopeless message is intensified by its frustrating mechanics, and alienating, artificial, dialogue, creating a thematically apt feeling of claustrophobia and dislocation [4].

These examples show how *intentional* jank can recall artistic strategies in other media. However, jank appreciation points beyond intentional design, and it raises questions which are specific to videogames as a medium. First: online discussion makes clear that players can appreciate and find meaning in jank even where it is *unintentional*: caused by errors, accidents and glitches [8, 10,

17]. This raises the question: are intentional and unintentional jank rationalised and received differently. What, in the absence of authorial intent, separates good jank from bad *junk*? What factors influence the appreciation or rejection of janky games?

Second: games have been called “the art form of agency” [21]. They are marked out from other media by their focus on agency [21], and agency’s opposite, *patience* — the experience of being constrained or acted upon [20]. It thus is notable (and consistent with Noë’s ideas about how artworks break familiar modes of functioning [22]) that jank elements in games often act upon players, or constrain their agency. Some player accounts have attributed a surprising emotional resonance to this experience of jank constraint, relating it to reflection and interpretation [4, 14]. Recent work has argued that agency experience in technology interaction involves different scales and aspects [1]. In appreciated jank, it often seems that a reduction in local *control* agency coincides with broader increase in *interpretive* or *reflective* agency (see also [5]). We see value for both researchers and designers in exploring jank via these perspectives on agency and *patience*.

3 CONCLUSION

Jank has been overlooked in HCI research, yet there are meaningful reasons to study it. It brings to light factors which contribute to PX despite breaking conventional playability. It can deepen our understanding of what is distinctive about games as aesthetic experiences. Finally it can shed light on factors which promote reflection and contextual awareness — suggesting ramifications not only for games research, but for technology use more widely.

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