Examining Jank as Design Through Challenge Runs

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ABSTRACT

M.D. Schmalzer's definition of jank is "a player's perception that a videogame does not behave in the ways that it should" (Schmalzer, n.d.). Schmalzer also outlines how jank is most often experienced when a game either does not adhere to commonly held literacies and/or the player's personal prior literacies. This definition is excellent for identifying how/when a player would come to know they are experiencing jank, but not necessarily how jank will influence their gameplay experience. Their definition of jank overlaps heavily with "glitch" and does not provide a method for differentiating the two.

Further, a glitch is not necessarily janky; a glitch occurs as a result of the system working as defined, but not as expected or intended. Glitch artists often develop methods for discovering new glitches through hardware and/or software modifications. The end result of glitch discovery is not janky, but the process of developing a methodology for discovering a glitch is. If a glitch or a bug causes a player to spontaneously recontextualize the game they are playing within the system, that is janky. For instance, in *ULTRAKILL* (New Blood Entertainment, 2020), players discovered early on in development that the shotgun weapon spawned a bullet extremely close to the player character, and as a result they were able to parry it as if it were an enemy bullet. In *ULTRAKILL*, parrying a bullet reflects it as an explosive project with massively increased damage, which made the shotgun an incredibly powerful weapon. This damaging method became so popular with the community that the developer, Hakita, opted to make parrying the shotgun more consistent and permanently recontextualized the use of the weapon. The act of experiencing jank has many parallels to iterative game design, where a player will be forced to reevaluate the game they are playing, make adjustments to their playstyle, and assess how successful the new game is.

Khaled's Questions Over Answers: Reflective Game Design outlines a methodology for designing games that spark reflection in players, rather than a methodology for capturing the reflective process it inspires. She posits that the games designed with the intention of inspiring reflection should allow for a multitude of solutions, be clear in its design, be disruptive, and encourage self-reflection over immersion. In particular, they state that "games are highly appropriate vehicles for triggering and supporting reflection. Games support the representation of situations, problems and belief systems. When playing a game, we expect perplexity and surprise" (Khaled,

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2018). This understanding of the affordances of games is very similar to the advantages of researching jank outlined in this paper - "perplexity and surprise" triggers the feeling of experiencing jank, and jank immediately prompts reflection.

That is to say that jank is often a spontaneous opportunity for a player to engage in reflective game design. By being pulled out of the gameplay circuit via jank, the player is extended an opportunity to recontextualize the game they are playing within the system, and their role shifts from player to co-designer. By noting these moments, players are able to further iterate on those games, creating new experiences within systems allowed by but not intended by the system in which they are designing. Some methodologies for critical play interrogate unexpected moments in gameplay, but are often followed with methods for correcting these moments: "In making anything, however, there tends to be a gap between what was intended and what actually is created. Here, a critical play perspective engages a diverse audience of testers to ensure that the particular aspects of the project that are informed by conceptual, thematic, and technological factors continue to “say the same thing” once the project is finished." (Flanagan, 2009)

One of the main sources of jank this paper will analyze is the gameplay and resultant rule-shifts of challenge runs. In online entertainment spaces, there exists a subset of content creators that participate in iterative game design through designing and playing so-called “challenge runs”, yet many of these creators would not describe themselves as game designers. A challenge run is a game within an existing, rigid system, designed by a player with the intention of changing the context of existing systems to challenge oneself and discover roadblocks that would otherwise not affect a normal playthrough. The creation of a challenge run often requires a janking of the original system, external feedback/motivation, and/or a discovery of jank within a system.

The design of a challenge run shares many parallels with iterative game design. Content creators must adjust to the needs of their players and audience in order to refine their ruleset and continue to make the challenge run entertaining. As such, the audience has a substantial responsibility to the design of the ruleset – if the game is not enjoyable to watch, then the audience has a responsibility to interject their feedback and suggestions for improvement. This collaboration between the content creator, their players, and their audience who would likely not consider themselves as game designers take on extremely similar roles to those working in the industry in order to ensure a viable product.

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