

A Defense of Jumpscare

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Abstract

Jumpscare horror games such as *Alien: Isolation*, *Amnesia*, and *Five Nights at Freddy's* are widely popular. In horror game discussions, however, the use of jumpscare is frequently subject to criticism. Jumpscare-critical players seem to agree that jumpscare are “cheap.” Cheapness assumes three things: jumpscare are easy to create, limited in their impact, and unfair to players. This video essay responds by defending jumpscare and arguing against the idea that they are necessarily cheap. I use Celia Pearce’s playframes theory to examine fairness and unfairness in jumpscare horror and compare Winterrowd’s *The Maze* (also known as *Scary Maze Game*) to several contemporary jumpscare games. This comparison demonstrates that many jumpscare horror games intentionally develop fair contexts for jumpscare to occur, and thus players familiar with the genre expect them. When contextualized clearly, jumpscare aren’t mere gimmicks. They deepen a player’s experience by heightening their sense of anxiety and requiring them to endure deep discomfort to progress.

Transcript

Note: this transcript was written by the author, and it was not copy-edited by *The Digital Review* or the Praxis Studio for Comparative Media Studies.

If you read about horror games online, you’ll find that people are often pretty critical of jumpscare. Jumpscare horror games are “unsubtle,” says Lucas Sullivan, writing for GamesRadar,

they “all tend to resort to the same cheap tactic: luring you into a false sense of security with a lengthy silent segment, before throwing a big freaky monster at you and splitting your ears with a loud noise.”¹ According to Sullivan and others online, jumpscare horror is shallow, the fear and anxiety created by it one-note and inorganic: a horror derived purely from being startled. This comment suggests that the context and content of the scare are irrelevant.² Jump out at someone — naturally, they’ll be frightened. In turn, according to these critics, jumpscare-free horror instills a more meaningful terror in its audience. Multiple user reviews praise jumpscare-free horror games for not “relying” on “cheap” jumpscares to fuel their horror – using that particular phrasing: “reliant on” and “cheap.”^{3 4} This suggests that jumpscares are something lesser horror games only ever stoop to using.

Are jumpscares really all that bad? I love and hate being jumpscared. I’m sure there are people who can shrug off jumpscares, but I’m not one of them. What I mean is that I’m a scaredy cat. I play *Amnesia* my muscles are clenched, I’m queasy, I’m sweaty, and I seek the safety of the pause menu frequently. I haven’t even been jumpscared yet, I just know that it will happen. I know how scared I’ll be; I know that I will jump away from my computer and scream. I really, really hate the moment of the jumpscare: the split second when your brain really thinks you’re in danger. It always feels real to me.

¹ Sullivan, “10 horror games that don’t rely on jumpscares,” GamesRadar.

² “Because you’re not scared by what’s actually on screen, you’re just startled by something unexpected...” Reddit, 2020.

³ Hermanson, “REVIEW: Brooding atmosphere and fascinating puzzles > jump scares in *The Tartarus Key*,” Video Games Are Good, 2023.

⁴ Chlazy, “Instead of relying on cheap jump scares Conclude does a very good job...” itch.io, 2018.

Each strange noise and threatening shadow reminds me of what might happen if something gets me. So, I'm an incredibly cautious player. I'll do anything to avoid a jumpscare. Except close the game, I suppose. Yes, its interesting that every moment I spend playing these games is a moment spent actively resisting quitting out of the game completely. Afterwards, I get this exalted feeling, the unique elation of having done something hard and scary, and, like a kid, I want to get back in line for the roller coaster again. That part of RE8, with the baby? I spent the rest of the game wishing I could go back there! When I play a game which I know won't jumpscare me, I experience what I would call "normal gaming levels of relaxation," and don't reach the desperate highs and lows of fulfillment and terror jumpscare horror games create in me, even if the atmosphere and story are particularly scary.

So, from personal experience alone I'm resistant to the idea that jumpscares are cheap. But how are we defining "cheap," here, anyways? Cheapness suggests that jumpscares are low-effort – this is consistent with complaints of "jumpscare-reliant" games. In this definition, jumpscares are an easy way out taken by developers unwilling or unable to create horror through other, high-effort techniques. Cheapness also suggests that jumpscares are low quality. As in the earlier examples, jumpscares were criticized for creating a surface-level, meaningless horror. But, lastly, and most interestingly, I think, cheapness suggests that jumpscares are unfair – they're like cheating. Since jumpscares rely on startling the player, the player can never really agree to be jumpscared, they can only be "tricked" into it.

I want to look at an example of a decidedly cheap jumpscare, one of the original jumpscare horror games, and compare it to some more contemporary examples. By using Celia Pearce's

Playframes theory, we can examine how jumpscare horror games do and don't generate fair agreements with players by indicating that jumpscare are possible within play.⁵ While the unfair jumpscare has a limited effect on the surrounding game, a fairly established jumpscare profoundly changes the game around it. Rather than creating a shallow horror, a player's experience of a horror game intensifies as soon as they are aware jumpscare are possible. Due to their "rules conveyance" practices, especially what Pearce terms "customs,"⁶ most jumpscare horror games deal fairly with their players. This disproves the idea that jumpscare are, in themselves, cheap.

The Maze aka Scary Maze Game is a 2004 flash game by Jeremy Winterrowd. It's a jumpscare game, though it doesn't present itself as one at all. It doesn't even seem to be a horror game. That's the "trick" of The Maze, players are instructed to turn up their volume and focus on completing the maze and in the last level they are startled by an unexpected jumpscare. The Maze gained popularity through gameplay video: reactions filmed by a third party, the one in the know. This is a trick, perhaps a cheap jumpscare like the ones we heard about earlier.

The name for what is happening in The Maze is "fabrication." During fabrication, participants take part in the same activity under different contexts.⁷ One party enters *The Maze* under the pretense that nothing scary will happen, while other parties (those who referred them to the

⁵ Pearce, *Playframes*, 2024.

⁶ Pearce, 51-52.

⁷ Pearce, 37.

game, who observe and film, the developer, the game itself, and gameplay footage viewers, usually) know about the jumpscare. This setup is unfair.

The concept of fabrication comes from Celia Pearce's book *Playframes*. In *Playframes*, Pearce theorizes about the ways games differentiate between “play” and “not play” – that is, how they create a context in which play can happen. According to Pearce, we know when we are playing when we define a set of rules for what is possible within a game and those rules are agreed upon.⁸ Within this playframe, we know both that we are playing and we know what the limits of play are. Pearce says that games have various “modes of rules conveyance” which work to overtly and covertly communicate what is possible and impossible to a player, as well as some way for the player to agree to these terms.⁹ In the case of *The Maze*, an agreement was made under false pretenses for the sake of an especially startling ending. Most jumpscare horror games, however, take the opposite approach – utilizing most of Pearce's mode of rules conveyance to establish jumpscare possibility.

Beginning with the most broad point, all of these games are in the horror genre. This is what Pearce calls the “convention” mode – something which goes without saying.¹⁰ It might go without saying that a convention of the horror genre is that scary things will happen. A game being in the horror genre may imply that jumpscare are possible — *The Maze* didn't mark itself as a

⁸ Pearce, 5.

⁹ Pearce, 47.

¹⁰ Pearce, 52-53

horror game for this reason, you would expect the final jumpscare. However, a horror game being a horror game does not make us absolutely certain that jumpscars will appear. There are many horror games which would still feel unfair if they included a jumpscare: for example, turnbased horror games like *Darkest Dungeon*. The conventions of subgenres like survival horror can key players in to when jumpscars may occur, however. A seasoned jumpscare survival horror player will automatically tense up when forced to backtrack through a previously safe area, as these games frequently use these moments to activate a scripted jumpscare. A long, quiet buildup with creepy ambiance at the beginning of a jumpscare horror game like *Alien Isolation* or *Amnesia* is a frequent convention which establishes jumpscare possibility by building up tension – you feel like something will happen, but not yet — and also builds trust between the player and game. If the initial tension is relieved in a way that feels fair, the player feels they can trust the game to be honest with them about scares. For example, the first few encounters with the Alien in *Alien Isolation* are scripted cutscenes and relatively safe — slowly ramping up the intensity before indicating clearly to the player that the Alien is “loose” and able to scare them.

Objects, characters, and environments in jumpscare horror games often imply what is possible in a game – Pearce calls these “affordances.”¹¹ Enemy weak points are affordances, which says you can hurt the enemy here, as well as yellow paint in a game like *Resident Evil*, which says you can interact here, and the “border” of a top-down game like *Snake*, which tells you you can’t go

¹¹ Pearce, 49.

outside of here. Jumpscare horror games often have similar environments: dark, tight, enclosed spaces, with plenty of places for something to hide. These environments encourage the player to anticipate that something might jump out at them. Jumpscare games also, almost universally, use a first person camera. This camera view makes it unavoidable that whatever scary or threatening thing happens to the player character will happen to the player, too. Darkwood is a top-down game which replicates the affordances of first-person horror games by limiting what the character can see to a cone in front of them, making it possible for them to be jumpscared by enemies.

Jumpscares themselves are affordances, as strange as that sounds. Once you're jumpscared once, you know that it might happen again. In Spooky's Jumpscare Mansion, for example, the first few times the player is jumpscared is by "cutouts" which pop out of the walls – these minimally impactful jumpscares are not too scary as to completely alarm the player, but enough to give them a jump and indicate that, hey, stuff in this vein ahead. Outlast has a scripted jumpscare pretty early on – likely within your first 10 minutes of gameplay. As you enter a room a corpse drops from the ceiling, accompanied by a deafening musical sting. It is alarming, a true jumpscare, unlike the cutouts in Spooky's Jumpscare Mansion. Does this make it a cheap trick. Well, kind of. This jumpscare gives the player a whole lot of information about what the rest of their Outlast playthrough will be like — this game wants to catch you off guard and rattle you with scripted jumpscares. If players don't enjoy this haunted-house approach to horror, then they have a fairly early indicator that Outlast might not be for them.

According to Pearce, games can also explicitly state the rules and limits of play – these direct instructions are called “parameters.”¹² Imagine if *The Maze* told you “warning, this game contains jumpscare!” before the game began. Your experience would certainly be different. Jumpscare horror games like to warn you about difficulty or fear factor, but largely don’t contain direct warnings about the inclusion of jumpscare. One curious example is *Spooky’s Jumpscare Mansion*. By including “jumpscare” in the title, this game negates the need for the other three modes by telling you off the bat what its up to. In this way the title of this game acts as a warning about its content. But, for the most part, parameters are not used to contextualize jumpscare possibility in horror games.

The most powerful technique horror games use to establish jumpscare is possible is through what Pearce calls “customs.” Customs are “informal patterns of social behavior” — “what everybody does”.¹³ An important custom for jumpscare games is jumpscare game content. Following the tradition of *Scary Maze Game* reaction videos, people have been recording themselves being jumpscared for over a decade (Markiplier). Static screenshots of the “jumpscare moment” are frequently used in video thumbnails – indicating immediately that these are jumpscare games. *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* had a powerful online presence because of this type of content. Through content, this game became known as a “jumpscare game” and players entered the game with the knowledge that they might experience these scares. The reception of *Amnesia* would be

¹² Pearce, 50.

¹³ Pearce, 51-52

much different if much of its playerbase wasn't coming from content which forefronted jumpscare, therefore generating a frame where jumpscare are always possible. While *Amnesia* was one of the first, jumpscare games are generally large drivers of content, popular "streamer games" because of the reactions they generate, and people's interest in watching a game that they find too scary to play. Jumpscare game content then constitutes jumpscare games themselves by establishing a context of jumpscare-possibility paratextually. This is the most popular mode because, like parameters, jumpscare game content establishes player expectations more directly than implicit hints in the play environment. Something interesting about this content is that it is somewhat out of the hands of the developers – while other modes are cultivated by the games themselves, content is in the hands of players and creators, whose work goes on to create a space where jumpscare are possible.

All of this rule conveying is important, not only because of concerns about player fairness, but because they allow the jumpscare to impact the game around them. In *The Maze*, the final jumpscare has no impact on the preceding gameplay because the player has no way to anticipate it. The moment of the jumpscare might scare us, but as long as we know it might happen, the minutes before the jumpscare are anxiety-inducing. It is important to distinguish between fear, which is an immediate reaction to something threatening, and anxiety, which is induced as we anticipate a threat, especially an obscure threat.¹⁴ Jumpscare are an obscure, often undefined threat, coming out

¹⁴ Dudek, "A Sense of Fear and Anxiety in Digital Games: An Analysis of Cognitive Stimuli in *Slender -- The Eight Pages*," *Game Studies*, 2021.

of nowhere, moving too quickly to be completely registered by your brain. Even if the jumpscare never happens, our state of anticipating them raises our anxiety, which deepens our experience of the horror game. Also, as long as we know jumpscare are possible in a game, we are constantly agreeing to be subject to them. The player always has the option to quit and end the game, and our experience of a horror game is heightened when we have to move forwards, towards an uncertain threat, while fighting against our instinctive desire to run away.

To conclude, jumpscare are not in themselves cheap tricks. As long as the player knows they are possible, they deepen their experience of the game. Jumpscare horror games use Celia Pearce's modes of rules conveyance – like their genre conventions, dark, enclosed environments, first person cameras, and video content – to establish an agreement between game and player about the presence of jumpscare. If you put yourself through one of these games, you're probably doing it on purpose.

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