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Hotline Miami Perspective Usability Analysis

Player Perspective is one of the most important elements of a game's presentation. The perspective determines how the player will see the product and can determine how they play. Without the proper perspective, the game can become either hard to play or unappealing to play. A good example of this would be the newly released *Ghost Recon Breakpoint*. The camera is far too close to the player and makes it hard to survey one's surroundings. An example of a perfect perspective would be *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*. The camera position varies based on what the player is doing to ensure players have the best possible view at any given time. A game that is not god-awful, but deeply flawed, is *Hotline Miami*. While I believe that *Hotline Miami* is a fantastic and deeply compelling game, it's top-down perspective can cause some severe problems that hamper gameplay and player progress. Primarily, the visual density and viewport limits are the main problems. Neither of these are irredeemable, however, and with some proper adjustments, these problems could be solved.

First and foremost, the visual density within the viewport can become overbearing as play progresses. This isn't so much an issue at first, when the level is clean and fresh, but as the player kills more enemies and uses more weapons, the level becomes more and more busy to the point where it becomes hard for the player to tell what's what. Since its top-down, the player can't get any sense of height, so in a pile of dead enemies, a living enemy can unintentionally hide among dead enemies and kill the player. This issue is exacerbated because all enemies wear the same white suit, so it becomes even harder to tell whether an enemy is living or dead. Chris

Solarski, author of *Interactive Stories and Video Game Art*, discusses the idea of dissonance.

Dissonance is used to differentiate game objects from each other. The enemies wear the white suit to make themselves visually different from the player. Unfortunately, its equally important to make enemies stand out from each other. Aside from the larger issue at hand, I'd suggest that

Figure 1- With all the blood and bodies, it's hard to see the player/guns/living enemies

there should be some different enemy designs. Even if its just changing the suit color, any variety would reduce the chance of losing track of enemies in the level. Guns suffer a similar problem. As players use and switch between more weapons, the level becomes cluttered with weapons everywhere, with no indicator on whether it is empty or not. This creates a situation where the player is frantically looking for a usable gun with enemies in hot pursuit and often ending with the player's death. In situations like this, you'd be hard pressed to find a player who thought that it was their fault. When a player thinks that the game is stacked against them, it's hard for them to get invested in the gameplay, which is a shame as the gameplay is more fun than a childhood party at Chuck E. Cheese. After much contemplation, I've developed 2 possible solutions to fix this issue. Firstly, dead enemies and empty guns become semi-transparent. This would help the still active game objects to come into focus and prevent the player from getting caught off guard by unseen enemies or by picking up a useless gun. My second proposed solution would be to put a cap on the amount of blood effects, enemy corpses, and empty weapons in a level at any given time. This would decrease the visual density within a level and provide players with a clearer

view to complete a level with. With either or both of these fixes implemented, I believe that the top-down perspective implemented by the game could become far more functional.

The second, and arguably larger issue, is the fact that enemy AI is still active when outside of the player's view. This is extremely problematic in particular due to the twitchy nature of *Hotline Miami*. Its an extremely frustrating experience to walk into a building and have your lower extremities decorate the floor because an enemy across the hall, outside your view, shot you. At that point, the game isn't challenging, its
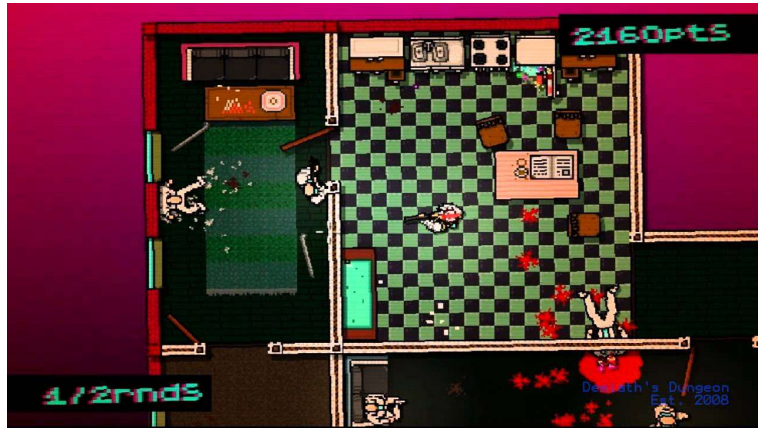

Figure 2- This is as far as the player can see, but the hallway to the left holds more enemies

just difficult. Challenge implies fairness, that if you put in the effort you can overcome a problem. Difficult just messes with you arbitrarily to make you fail. I'm not the only one who takes issue with this, however. Reddit user Potholder14 posted a thread asking for an FOV slider to resolve the issue. While I think the FOV is fine, and the issue resides more with enemy detection, his thread shows that other people have taken issue with the limited viewport. Their thread can be found here:

https://www.reddit.com/r/HotlineMiami/comments/2zuqzq/why_not_add_a_fov_slider/. This is also a problem due to the concept of flow that can be seen all over the game. The whole appeal is going through a level killing all the enemies without taking a single hit. When the game decides to kill you randomly, it ruins the flow and, to an extent, de-motivates players to continue. If the game can't respect the player, why should they continue to play? Some enemies, primarily dogs, roam around the level at any given time. These enemies seem especially sensitive to player

presence and seem more prone to attacking you from off-screen. I can't say for sure as I can't pull the detection radius from the game's files, but after testing it myself in 15 runs of a mission, roaming enemies attacked the player from off-screen twice while non-roaming enemies did not attack once. It should be noted that this data is very limited and should not be held as representative for the entire game. The game has tried to implement a solution for this issue, with disappointing effect. The game allows players to hold shift to look farther out, but this is still a less than satisfactory solution. The extended view still has a limit as to how far the player can look out. Especially in the case of roaming enemies, this can still fail to reveal them to the player if the enemy is roaming outside of the extended view's range. Because the extended view may not reveal all enemies, the extended view can end up making the problem worse, as it lures

Figure 3- A dog enemy after lunging and catching the player by surprise

the player into a false sense of security only to punish them. I have thought of a potential solution to fix this problem. Since the issue is that enemy AI is active outside player view, I think the obvious solution should be to disable enemy AI when not seen. This solution is not perfect as is, however, and requires a list of conditions to solidify it. First and foremost, gunshots should still activate AI. A player shouldn't be able to shoot an enemy off-screen without all other off-screen enemies in that area being alerted to their presence. The second condition needed would be to still allow roaming enemies to move around the map, but just disable their detection capabilities until they are on screen. This solution would still keep the game balanced by preventing abuse by the player to kill all enemies before they appear on screen while keeping the player from getting frustrated from getting killed off-screen.

The top-down perspective may give *Hotline Miami* a unique visual identity, but its flawed implementation hurts not only that identity, but the quality of the game as a whole. As I said earlier, the perspective is one of the most important parts of a game's presentation. As *Hotline Miami* fumbles this a bit, the enjoyment one can derive can only go so far. With these fixes implemented, however, the amount of fun can go much farther and make the game better for it.

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