Joshua Rigsby

GDD 201

Professor Bertozzi

Due 10/29/19

<u>**An Analysis of *Hotline Miami's* Weapon System**</u>

Most games involve combat of some kind. This can come in a variety of forms, from the traditional man-on-man violence, to more niche forms such as text-based combat. In any case, battles are fought with weapons. Most games include the expected guns and blades, but some go above and beyond. Some games give players a great amount of freedom in how they approach combat and reward them handsomely for getting creative. One such game is *Hotline Miami*. It is my belief that *Hotline Miami's* implementation of weaponry is one of the best. If I were asked to summarize the system in one word, it would be frantic. *Hotline Miami's* combat feels like a drug fueled haze, with things moving so fast and with so much viscera you never take the time to process what's happening until after the fact. Its only in the brief downtime between levels that you really process how much your weapon choice influences how you approach combat. It's This is due to 3 main factors: variety, feedback, and challenge. Each of these improve a certain area of the combat loop, but combined they make *Hotline Miami's* combat system an extremely satisfying and replayable experience.

Before diving into the key components of the combat system, a little context is necessary. In *Hotline Miami* you play as a mysterious figure named "Jacket". At the start of a level, Jacket is left a voicemail on his phone and is given the location where a bunch of bad guys (in this game it's the Russian mob) are located and is told to deal with them. From there the player rolls up to the front door of the level and is given a choice of a mask to wear during a mission. Each mask

provides a different buff, such as insta-kill punches or finding more guns throughout the level. Once a mask is selected, players are left to their own devices to complete the mission as they see fit. Players find weapons of all kinds on the ground and can pick them up to use in clearing a level. After the level

Figure 1- All the masks in Hotline Miami

is complete, players walk back to their car and go home so the cycle can begin anew.

The first factor that makes the weapon system great is the variety and implementation of that variety. According to the *Hotline Miami* wiki, there are 55 weapons in the game, ranging from revolvers to toothbrushes (Community, n.d.). You can be using an assault rifle one time, and a steel pot the next. *Hotline Miami* provides a fantastic range of tools to carry out a mission with, and gives the player the freedom to experiment with them as they see fit. Better yet, all of the weapons function differently to each other. For example, a golf club has a good range, but is swung slowly. On the other hand, a knife can be swung near instantaneously, but its short length means that players have to get extremely close to be effective with it. This creates a risk vs reward situation that allows players to select a preferred approach and tailor how they play to that without punishing them. This makes the combat extremely satisfying because I can play a particular way without getting my hand slapped for doing so. Improvised weapons, such as pots, can also be found in certain levels. These weapons are different than other weapons in that they can only be used once, whereas other melee weapons can be used infinitely. The incentive to use them is that they have unique animations exclusive to these weapons. Since animation is a large part of the combat system in *Hotline Miami*, this becomes quite an enticing reward. The ammo

economy also fosters getting creative and swapping weapons constantly. Guns can be founded littered throughout the level, but only hold a certain amount of ammunition. After this is used, the gun is near useless. It can only

Figure 2- Weapons can be seen lying around to be picked up

be thrown at enemies, which is non-lethal. While this may seem underwhelming until you consider the fact that this opens a window for you to grab another weapon and hop back into the fray. So instead of running empty being the kiss of death it initially seems to be, it becomes a great pacing tool to provide a brief moment to find a new weapon and get back in the flow. The throwing mechanic also extends past the guns as well. Any weapon can be thrown, with varying effects depending on if the weapon is sharp or not. Throwing a knife will in fact be lethal, so it can be used to take enemies out quietly from range. This creates another avenue of play for players. There are some problems with the weapon variety, however. George Weidman, of Super Bunnyhop fame has described the game as "fast and frantic" in his review of *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* (2015). This speed can cause issues with weapon pick-ups. Weapon models tend to be fairly small, so trying to pick one up in the heat of combat can be frustrating to say the least. It's not an uncommon occurrence to be smashing the pickup key without any success. This really wouldn't be an issue until you consider that the gameplay fosters constant weapon switching. When you're constantly dropping and picking up weapons this becomes an increasingly infuriating problem. To fix this I'd expand the collider that prompts picking up weapons to make them still the same size, but don't require pixel perfect picking up. Despite

this, this problem tends to fall by the wayside in the presence of all the other benefits provided by the variety of weapons. Between the large number of weapons, the ammo economy, and the throwing mechanic, the weapon variety becomes a great core factor of *Hotline Miami's* weapon system, even in spite of its issues.

The largest boon granted to the weapon system is the various forms of feedback players receive when using weapons. First up, the audio feedback. Weapons all have different sounds associated with using them. These sounds are fitting for the weapons and provide a meaty noise that make the weapons feel weighty. A big problem in games is that weapons feel weightless, or that they have no impact. A showcase of some of the weapon sounds can be found in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJft94Ox6Q4 (tcmp187, 2012). Another part of the audio feedback is how music feeds into the combat. The music is inspired by 80's synth music, but viewed through the lens of EDM. The beats found in the levels tend to match the flow of gameplay, so gun shots and punches tend to at least be somewhat in line with the BPM of the music. Visual feedback is also an important part of the feedback system. As mentioned previously, animation plays an integral part in the combat system as a whole, but it starts at the weapons. All weapons are perfectly animated for their type. The swing of a baseball bat looks natural while guns produce some small recoil (which is honestly realistic for someone familiar with firearms). Character models are also fantastically animated. There are a variety of death animations for the player, depending on where they died and what killed them. Enemies arguably have an even greater number of death animations following the same parameters. In a game where combat is the main mechanic, it's important that players don't see the same 3 or 4 animations. *Hotline Miami* gets creative with the animations to ensure that players will rarely see a group of identical animations. Some differences as simple as flipping the sprites, which may

sound ineffective but does just enough to not feel like copy and paste. There's also great blood effects. Most games have really weak blood splatters, which ends up with the violence becoming just another tissue in the wind, not really having any meaning or weight. *Hotline Miami* makes your really come to terms with what you are doing. Each weapon will produce a different amount and pattern of blood splatter and with each kill more blood will splatter on the floor to further coat the level. As the player kills more enemies, the floor will fill with more blood and corpses, to the point where it can become hard to see the floor beneath the viscera. Thankfully, the pixel art style helps mitigate how disturbing the scene can become, otherwise most players

probably would have been turned off from playing. As Yahtzee Croshaw, of Zero Punctuation fame, has said so perfectly in his review that "It's lucky this is all stylized, or I might have thought this is a bit f*cked up" (Croshaw, 2013).

Figure 3- An example of blood splatter and corpse buildup

I'd argue, however, that showing the aftermath of your actions is key to making the weapon system work. By showing the incredible amount of damage you cause as a player, it helps sell all the weapons as effective and the player as a dangerous weapon. Text feedback is also key to sell the weapon system. To motivate players to replay levels, score is tallied as the player goes through a level. Score is calculated using the time between kills, number of kills, and how varied you are with your weapons. If you grab a shotgun and make human swiss cheese, you'll get a decent score, but it will be reduced for being boring. On the other hand, if you blast someone

with a shotgun, throw it at their mate, grab a golf club and use said mate as an impromptu driving range, your score will be significantly higher. There are also text popups that get more intricate as your score and combos increase. These systems motivate players to try and get the best score and score readouts, which will likely take numerous runs through a given level. The feedback isn't without flaws, though. As far as audio goes, the music can get a tad annoying when you're trying to focus on executing a level plan. It's never been enough to get me to mute the game, but its problematic enough for me to mention. The visual feedback is more problematic. As I said, as the level progresses more viscera will cover the level. This has the side-effect of levels becoming too visually busy. In a sea of bodies, it can become hard to tell what's an alive enemy and what's a dead one. Weapons can also become a challenge to find in all of the viscera which hurts the otherwise great pacing. The score readouts also play into an overly busy result, as the readouts become longer and take up more screen space. In the end, successful play with the weapons can become detrimental by making things harder to see. Another side effect with the score readouts is headaches. When you get a combo or score bonus, the colors and text flash. This, combined with the neon color scheme the game has, creates a situation where I personally can't go more than an hour without getting a headache. For all of these issues I'd suggest the same solution. Dial it back. Shrink the text, put a cap on the body count, and lower the amount of blood. It all just feels too much at the moment. I truly feel that you could dial everything back 25% and lose next to nothing in terms of the feedback. In spite of all of these issues, I'd still argue that the feedback is the most prominent component that makes the weapon system what it is.

The third key factor in the weapons system is the game's challenge. While not exclusively tied to the weapons, the weapon choice and implementation of the weapons make the

game as challenging as it is. The game follows a one-hit system, meaning that both players and enemies die in one hit. The weapons feed into this in the risk vs reward system I mentioned when discussing the weapon variety. When the chance of dying and having to restart weighs on you, the player really has to think whether they are using the optimal weapon to best ensure their success. The player will likely die again and again before successfully completing a level. As a result, players will get to be creative and

Figure 4- A dead player / Death screen

experiment with different weapons and strategies. To add to this, the weapon pool and locations are randomized with each run. So you may find a shotgun in one run, but it may be gone in the next. This prevents players from developing fully dominant strategies that nullify any other means of play. Granted, players can still develop ideal paths to take through a level, but they can't plan for what weapon to use and when which keeps the game fresh, even after multiple runs. While it helps to keep the game fresh, it also makes it much harder. It is possible to get a bad run with no useful weapons and you end up dying quickly, but the game restarts so fast that at most you lose a few seconds. This is poor design, though. I feel a solution to this would be to have one spot early in a level guaranteed to have a weapon of some kind, so that players aren't left completely stranded without breaking the game's balance. Still, this issue isn't so obnoxious s to turn off players from trying again. The games challenge is an important pillar of the game's

design, and it wouldn't be possible without the weapon system. The challenge enforces weapon variety and becomes vital to the function of the combat system.

All three of these factors play a key role in building up the combat system into the great mechanic that it is. While each can stand alone as fantastic additions to improve the quality of any game's weapon system, the sum of all their parts is needed to make the *Hotline Miami* weapon system. All of these parts are flawed, but none of them are condemning enough to ruin the system, and some design re-works can make these issues irrelevant. When taking into account the boons granted by the weapon variety, the weapon feedback, and the game challenge make the weapon system an incredibly satisfying and rewarding game mechanic.

Works Cited

Community, H. M. (n.d.). *Weapons*. Retrieved from hotlinemaimi.wikia:
    https://hotlinemiami.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Weapon

Croshaw, B. ". (2013, January 23). *BLACK KNIGHT SWORD & HOTLINE MIAMI (Zero Punctuation)*.
    Retrieved from YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y079iJ36H4U

Devolver Digital. (2014, April 08). *Hotline Miami*. Retrieved from WinGameStore:
    https://www.wingamestore.com/product/3267/Hotline-Miami/

Emslie, S. (2012, November 17). *Review: Hotline Miami*. Retrieved from screenshapedeyes.wordpress:
    https://screenshapedeyes.wordpress.com/2012/11/17/review-hotline-miami/

FranChris. (2017). *Hotline Miami (All Masks)*. Retrieved from steamcommunity:
    https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=828191604

gfunk101. (2013, April 09). *Game Review: 'Hotline Miami'*. Retrieved from houseofgeekery:
    https://houseofgeekery.com/2013/04/09/game-review-hotline-miami/

tcmp187. (2012, December 10). *Hotline Miami - Steam Trailer - The Weapons*. Retrieved from YouTube:
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJft94Ox6Q4

Weidman, G. (2015, March 14). *Review: Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number*. Retrieved from YouTube:
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1jInKt688w