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An Analysis of HITMAN's Disguise System

The Hitman series stands as one of the longest running stealth series of all time, alongside the venerable Splinter Cell and Metal Gear Solid (MGS) franchises. With Hitman launching in 2000, MGS being around since 1987, and Splinter Cell sneaking since 2002. What makes Hitman stand apart from those series, however, is in its approach to stealth. While Splinter Cell and MGS focus on stealth-action, staying out of sight and a heavy emphasis on gun use; Hitman has always focused on social stealth. Social stealth emphasizes blending in and hiding in plain sight. This gameplay style is all thanks to Hitman's disguise system. The disguise system has been around since the series' first entry, *Hitman: Codename 47*, released in 2000. Each new entry into the franchise has further improved and innovated upon the system. The system, in brief, allows the player to don the clothes of deceased or unconscious non-player characters (NPCs) and assume their role in the game world. It's then up to the player to pick the right disguises to achieve their goal. *HITMAN*'s season 2 trailer shows off the concept of disguises in action quite well and can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FC8XRxWWUog. While it sounds quite simple on the surface, the disguise system is built around a machine of moving parts that makes up a level in a Hitman game. The 3 key components of the disguise system are: disguise locational relevance, disguise item use, and how the player fits into the game world. For the sake of brevity and relevance, I will be focusing exclusively on the most recent game, *HITMAN* (2016-2019), both seasons 1 and 2. It is my belief that these 3 components make *HITMAN*'s disguise system the most satisfying stealth game of recent years.

To truly understand the importance of the disguise system, we must first come to grips

with how *HITMAN* works. The player is tasked at the start of the mission with assassinating a

target somewhere on the map. These targets roam on scheduled paths throughout certain parts of

the map, allowing the player to tackle their objective in a variety of ways. Unfortunately,

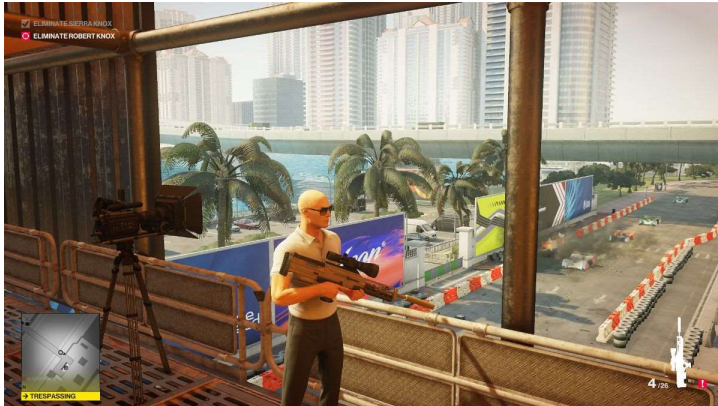however, the target is typically in areas restricted to the player. Without the proper disguise,

players will be marked as a trespasser,
which will result in players being
arrested or killed. This is where the
disguise system really comes into play.
It would be smart to not think of the
disguises as a variety of outfits, but
rather as keys. Each of the costumes

Figure 1- Trespassing Player

act as keys that unlock their respective portions of the map and are relevant to only certain parts

of a level. I will refer to this concept as locational relevance. Locational relevance creates a sort

of scavenger's mentality in the player. Players are constantly scrounging around for the right

disguise to get to the next area. For example, a security guard outfit may allow the player to

move freely around the most areas, but to reach a target, players may need a VIP guard costume.

As a result, the security guard costume becomes irrelevant and must be replaced as the level

progresses. Locational relevance, as presented in this example, is a dynamic system. It functions

on both large-scale areas as a whole and down to individual rooms. It is an idea that players must

constantly keep in mind. This helps to force players to strategize and devise plans, as opposed to

just letting them shoot their way through any situation. They have to plan out what clothes to

wear and how to behave. This state of routinely being locked out of areas also keeps the player

adapting. Players must constantly think of who they are assuming when putting on a disguise and how far that will actually get them, so any plans hey devise are short term only. This need for frequent disguise changes helps keep the player engaged, since waiting for targets can bring the games pace to a snail's crawl. The locational relevance concept is flawed, however, and feeds into one of the few issues I take with *HITMAN*'s disguise system. After a few playthroughs, it becomes too easy to find ideal disguises and negate creativity for the sake of a high score. Youtuber Mark Brown, of "Game Maker's Toolkit" fame, had a discussion with two *HITMAN* developers about how they design their levels in his video *The Making of Hitman 2's Miami Level*. They discussed how elements of the game's pacing had to be sacrificed to allow players to plan a strategy and execute it. I mention this because this is a problem once a player is familiar with a level. I've played the mission "The Showstopper" probably close to 50 times. I know its layout like the back of my hand. I know exactly which disguise I need to assassinate the target in the fastest way possible. As such, I spend a lot of time waiting around for the target to appear after I've gotten my disguise in the starting minutes of the level. This static mission knowledge has led to ideal mission strategies emerging. A YouTuber by the name of "MrFreeze2244" has based his entire channel around showcasing these peak strategies. His channel can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/user/MrFreeze2244. I said that I enjoy the idea of disguises being used as keys, but I don't like the idea of them being used as skeleton keys. Thankfully the season 2 levels have taken actions to prevent overpowered disguises, but all of the season 1 levels suffer from this problem. This is an issue because it kills player engagement while they wait. I think the Achilles heel of the system, at least in this regard, is the high score system. Each action you do in

HITMAN is scored, as is the amount of time spent to complete a level. This score is totaled at the end of a level and the player is rated out of 5 stars. According to the *Harvard Business Review*, evolutionary psychology has programmed us to be driven to maximize our

Figure 2- HITMAN Score Screen

efficiency. This drive leads to these dominant strategies being adopted as the "correct" way to play. *HITMAN* is meant to be about experimentation, not finding one "correct" method of completing a level. I think a possible solution to this would be the ability to turn off the score system. With no fear of being penalized for getting creative, it would motivate the player to explore different disguise combinations and attempt less traditional mission approaches. This would improve player engagement and allow for a wider variety of player strategies, which is truer to the ideals of *HITMAN*.

Item management is a core element of the disguise system within *HITMAN*. There are 2 categories of items found within *HITMAN*, legal and illegal. Objects you can use are legal, and those you cannot are illegal. Weapons are illegal for all but security personnel and this idea extends to all items in *HITMAN*. From crowbars and hammers, to apples and blueberry cupcakes; all items are categorized as one of the two. To use a given item, players must wear a disguise that makes that item legal to use. In

Figure 3- Illegal Item

this way, the analogy of disguises being used as keys extends to them being keys for item use as well. This creates a system where items are only relevant within certain contexts. The concept of item relevance helps to keep players on their toes, since they constantly must make sure that they aren't carrying any illegal objects. This frequent inventory management becomes especially important considering that players typically have to pass frisking tests during any given level. If the player fails, they will be marked as hostile and will likely need to reload a previous save; and this punishment incentivizes only keeping what you need at any given moment. Since *HITMAN* technically doesn't have an inventory limit, the item relevance concept prevents players from becoming walking armories. This is balanced by allowing players to store their gear for later use. For example, if I'm in my normal suit, my pistol is listed as illegal. I can then dump my pistol in a trash bin for later. Once I obtain a guard's disguise, I can safely retrieve my gun and it will now be a legal item. Item relevance adds to player strategy because you can't always hide away your gear like in the example above. While trash bins and similar items are spread throughout the map, they can only hold one item each and are often spread far apart from each other. This forces the player to look for safe places where NPC's won't find their discarded kit. While some may view this restriction as a negative, it would be overpowered for all your gear to be stored in one safe place as then it negates the item relevance concept as a whole and the idea of cutting down your inventory in the first place. The YouTube channel "Writing on Games", in their video *Analysing Every Mission from Hitman 2*, describes the item management as a mental puzzle, with it adding extra tension to a player as they move through the environment with contraband. This is an accurate definition, as it forces players to dissect what exactly is the best tool for a job and develop a plan around that. *HITMAN* is all about planning, and the item relevance directly feeds into this ideal. This system isn't perfect, however. The items allowed with each disguise

can be inconsistent. Items like letter openers will be considered illegal but kitchen knives are a go. This inconsistency breaks the logic built up by the system when it behaves properly. If some things are correct but others are wrong, it creates a divide that yanks players out of the experience. It also hurts the overall presentation because this problem breaks other systems as well. I mentioned before that players are subjected to frisking tests, but what items are and are not allowed can break this system. I've personally seen this issue break the game. In the game, scissors can be found around the map and are a deadly object. They were listed as legal, but my letter opener was not. It should be noted that scissors and letter openers are only different in terms of aesthetics. I was stopped when frisked with my letter opener but was allowed to pass through with my scissors. I should also notify you that I was disguised as a masseuse in this instance, not anyone who would need a pair of scissors. As a result, the level was broken and the outcome the developers sought to avoid (a sharp object assassination), had become my outcome. A potential solution to this would be to restructure how items are classified to be more logical than categorical, as I've noticed that lethal items (knives, letter openers, etc.) tend to be labeled illegal more often than non-lethal objects (hammers, wrenches, etc.) even if it makes just as little, if not less sense for the player to be carrying them. While these inconsistencies aren't frequent, they happen often enough for me to consider them to be problematic.

The final core idea of the disguise system is the way that the player fits in with the world when in disguise. When a player dons a disguise, they inherit more than just their victim's appearance. Disguises allow players to take up the actual occupation of whoever they are imitating. As an example, if I dress as a waiter, I can offer food to partygoers or go work the bar. This helps the player to feel like a part of the world rather than an outsider, which in *HITMAN* is huge. The whole idea of *HITMAN* is that you are someone in a place you don't belong. You are

inherently foreign to the locales you inhabit. This idea extends to the contrast between the

player's design and everyone else around them. The character of Agent 47 is the only purely bald

character in each level.
Author Chris Solarski
from *Interactive Stories
and Video Game Art*
calls this an image
system. This design
conveys info without
narratively stating it.

Figure 4- Enforcer (character to the right with overhead dot)

Agent 47's design makes him feel different from everyone else around him. This makes the

disguise system feel extremely satisfying for the player. To knock out some poor bystander, take

his clothes, and trick all of his friends into thinking that I'm him isn't exactly logical, but it feels

satisfying to pull off. The illogical nature here works to the games advantage because it's

consistent. Put simply, it works as it's supposed to without too many hiccups. And this

unrealistic nature allows players to make progress without hitting an excessive number of

roadblocks to progress. Even though a player acquires a disguise, they are not automatically in

the clear. Sprinkled throughout a level are enforcers, enemies who can see through our disguise.

These enforcers are often placed in areas the player will have to go through to progress. This

throws a wrench in the players plan as they are no longer invisible. Whereas players had

previously walked through restricted areas with impunity, they now have to scan their

surroundings for enforcers. This makes players look like they belong but keeps the mentality that

they are a foreigner. This creates what Solarski calls a dissonance with the level environment,

except in this case it's mental, not physical. The enforcer system can also artificially block

pathways temporarily but rewards proactive players for dealing with enforcers by opening up

previously impassable areas. The enforcer system can create problems of its own though.

Enforcer placement can be overbearing and be confusing to get around. It's possible to encounter

areas where numerous enforcers are placed with very few ways to get around them. To provide

an example of this, in "The Showstopper", there is a staircase that players must use to get to the

next area but is blocked by an enforcer. The room has nothing else in it other than a statue that

players can hide behind. The only reasonable way I've found to get around this enforcer is to

distract him from behind the statue. This can kill the pacing and shoehorn players into using

specific strategies. This goes against what *HITMAN* is and just isn't satisfying. It's good to have

the enforcers to keep the disguises from being overpowered, but when they become an active

barricade to progression, their drawbacks outweigh their benefits. Perhaps some sort of test that

players would have to pass to get through an enforcer would negate this problem since success

would be in the player's hands, but even this is a flawed solution as this would also kill the

pacing as the player stops to answer questions. I believe the best solution to this issue would be a

simple reorganization of enforcer positions to prevent them from being an overbearing element

of a *HITMAN* level.

The 3 components of the *HITMAN* disguise system play important roles in the

functionality of the disguise system as a whole. Each component adds a layer of complexity to

the disguise system that turns a disguise from just an outfit to a strategic part of gameplay. And

while none of them are perfect, they all work correctly on a consistent enough basis to produce

an overall polished finished product. While *HITMAN* has other systems at play, the core of

HITMAN rests in the use of disguises and wouldn't be the same without it. With the boons

granted by the key components of locational relevance, item relevance, and the player interaction

with the game world; *HITMAN* becomes the most satisfying stealth game of recent years.

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