

Game Report

by Ellie Saunders

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Individual Academic Report (Game Analysis/Review)

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Introduction

Hotline Miami [1] is a top-down indie shooter game that was released on the 23rd of October in 2012, designed and developed by Dennaton games. The game was initially released on Steam and later was released on other platforms such as MacOS, Linux, PlayStation 3 and PlayStation Vita in 2013. Then in 2014 the game was released for PlayStation 4 and in 2019 it was re-released as part of a bundle on the Nintendo Switch, in 2020 it released on the Xbox One and Stadia, and finally in 2023 the game was brought to both the PlayStation 5 and the Xbox Series X/S [2]. The game did very well in terms of success. On Steam alone the game has 119,083 reviews which overall has come out as overwhelmingly positive over the years [3]. On Metacritic the reviews show the same results, the overall rating that it has been given is 85/100 and based on 2,607 reviews the outcome was 8.5/10 with reviews dating all the way back to the release date [4]. The story follows a man named Jacket as he carries out a series of violent attacks throughout the city of Miami on behalf of the phone calls, he receives throughout the game. The player will follow the character kill his way through dangerous missions and watch as he slowly loses touch with reality and his sense of reason.

Genre

Hotline Miami is an indie look-down action game which requires the player to follow a character called Jacket who receives jobs over the phone that usually requires him to use violent methods to complete the goals set. The game requires sharp reflexes along with strategic planning to successfully complete missions as the enemies have random movement patterns. The player is able to kill enemies using a variety of weapons, weapons will be randomised each time with the exception of enemies drops. Players can also use environmental features such as doors to their advantage for things such as cover and a weapon. Both the player and enemies can be wiped out with a singular hit which encourages both planning and quick reflexes. The game itself is high risk high reward with the gameplay being very quick, since both you and enemies are one-hit the gameplay requires a lot of strategy despite its unpredictable nature.

Visual Style and Feedback

Hotline Miami is a very stylised 8-bit game, with colourful visuals that leans heavily into the retro wave aesthetic. The visuals tend to change quite rapidly from bright to dark to fit with the theme of the game and scene. For example, the floors of the buildings are dark with bright, neon-coloured carpets or furniture to lean into the chaotic side of the game, however when the player is reading through story the rooms get darker with the topic shift and focus.

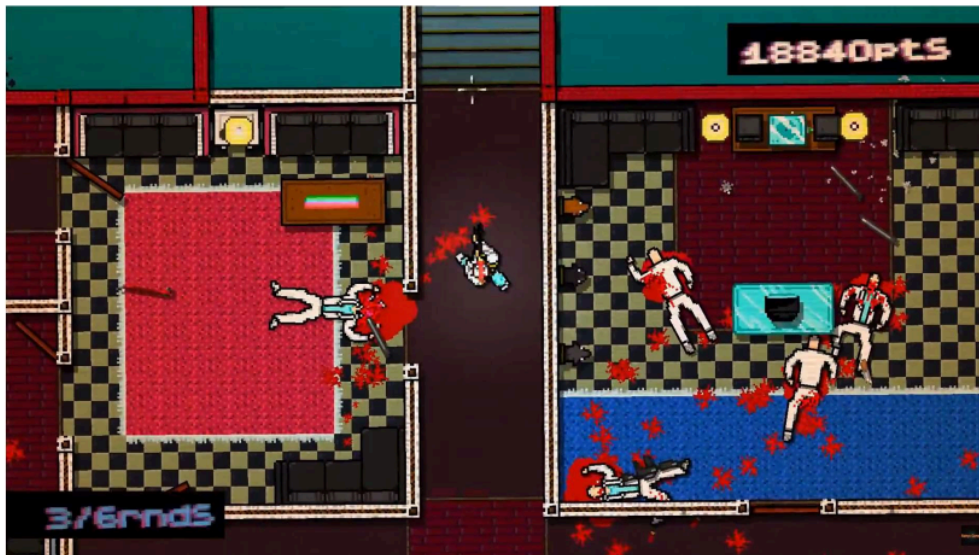


Image from Chapter 5 Full House floor 1. [5]

The game also uses its visuals for feedback, whenever the player dies or kills an enemy the background will flash as a visual indicator that something has died. The background of the screen will always flash a bright red which is believed to induce motor excitation and can

influence motor activity [6], doing this encourages the player to make impulsive decisions which is often needed within it's fast paced gameplay and keeps player engagement.

The visuals for the characters within the game are often very simplistic 8-bit models. Enemies' designs are slim and mostly brightly coloured with the main enemy being dressed in white and cyan, this increases their visibility to the player. The only difference in enemy models is with dogs which come later in the game and bosses; they are darker and visibly bigger.



Image from Chapter 10 Hot and Heavy room 4 [7]

With character models being so simple, the player is forced to focus on the gameplay. However, when story and dialogue are added the visuals change to add faces to the characters to invest the player into the story.

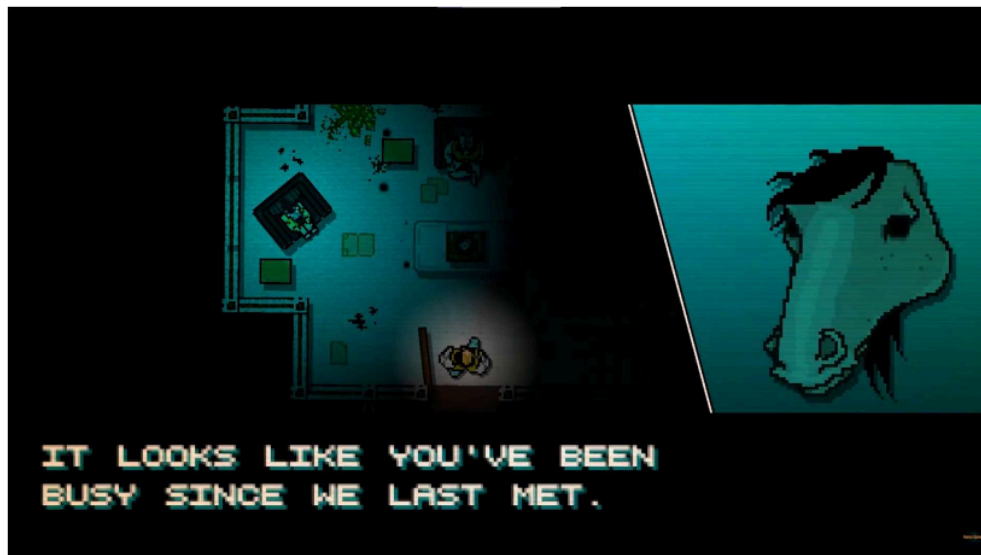


Image from Part 2 Questions [8]

Intended demographic

The game mostly targets a young adults and older people considering the graphic aggression and the subjects that it covers, such as drugs and violence. Due to the fast-paced flow of the game, it suggests that that it is not meant for beginners and made for gamers who have played this genre before. On Gamefaqs there have been multiple reviews on the difficulty level, and the answer is consistent throughout most of the platforms with the answer being tough [9]. This further proves that some previous knowledge and skill is needed to play the game and enjoy it. The game itself is difficult due to its unpredictable nature and fast paced gameplay; however, it does have “a simple but compelling narrative” [10] to pair with it. This brings in people that enjoy story that goes well with gameplay, along with vibrant 8-bit visuals and highly stylised retro music to pair with the look and play of the game. With the unpredictable movements and difficulty spikes, the game keeps its audience playing with constant rewards dropped by enemies and story progression.

Audio

The audio, like the visuals, was made to be very striking throughout the game. It is often identified as quick paced and high energy to match the gameplay. Most of the game's music takes a synthwave, techno aesthetic to mix in with the visuals as well as encourage the player to act quickly. In the same way as the game's visuals, it is very striking and takes some of the player's attention. The music does however change throughout the game, during moments where the player is expected to sit and read or information about the characters is being revealed the music slows significantly. The music of the game changes the aesthetic of the scenes quite drastically; it makes it obvious how the player should be feeling and adds to the whole theme of the game, this links to the book *The art of game design : a book of lenses* as it suggests that the game audio is only half the aesthetic and without it a game can feel very empty [11].

Game Structure

The game is made up of 19 different chapters, all with a linear structure that requires the player to go through each level clearing them out completely before being able to move on. Between each level the player goes somewhere and builds up the story either by giving the player some insight into Jacket or it gives him more layers as a character, before moving on home where the player is given another mission over the phone. The game has very limited freedom for the player as the only impactful choices made are how each level is played and what abilities Jacket has; story wise everything is set and cannot be changed.

Challenges

The game is seen as quite challenging proven by countless reviews reporting the game as tough [4]. The gameplay is fast-paces and with only being able to get hit once paired with inconsistent enemy movement patterns leaves little room for error which is very unforgiving towards new players. There is also a difficulty spike within the game around chapter 2 as the number of enemies dramatically increases. These challenges are made to encourage the player to focus more on impulse rather than full strategies, this also forces the player to give the game its complete attention. Like it says in the book *Game design workshop : a playcentric approach to creating innovative games*: "When all of a person's relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity." [12]

Game Flow

The pace of the game is very fast and leaves little room for error with its unforgiving nature and unpredictable movements, players either move on quickly between levels or are quickly reset back to their last checkpoint. With this pacing players are expected to move quickly and rapidly without much thought on intricacies while still being as precise as possible. This is further shown by the game's respawn system, which is almost immediate, allowing the player to try again without breaking the immersion making deaths within the game almost expected as it allows the player to reset positioning of enemies and have the chance to get better weapons to start with. The flow of game is also dependant on the challenge it provides, because the game requires impulse and quick thinking it forces the players to immerse themselves so they can be completely focused. This links to the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who suggests that challenge forces a person to focus so hard on one thing so much so that they enter a flow state which is balanced between ability and difficulty and greatly impacts the player's concentration and immersion. [12]

Replay Value

Hotline Miami has multiple features that contributes to its replay value. Due to the randomness of the weapons that spawn on each level the player has the opportunity to test out different methods of combat, in the same way as the player continues through the story and levels, they unlock masks which gives the player certain abilities when the level begins. Because of this the player can have more unique levels outside of the regular differences. An added feature in the game is achievements and ratings for each level; this encourages the player to fully complete the game and complete it again as many times as it takes to 100% the game which directly contributes to the replay value for those who need that accomplishment. There are some parts about the game that goes against its replay value such as its repetitiveness in gameplay, although the developers have found ways around it the repetitive nature of levels can become boring for players if they are not fully invested.

Conclusion

To conclude I have looked at all aspects including genre, visual style and feedback, audio, target demographic, game structure, challenges, game flow, and it's replay value. Overall, this game is good in each area, the audio and visual style matches well with the theme and makes the player feel uneasy throughout the game while keeping them engaged in the story and fast gameplay. The structure and flow of the game do well at both immersing the player while keeping the chaotic structure and constant feeling of not being in control. Despite the game having so many strengths it also has its weaknesses, for example the difficulty spikes so early on in the game increases the risk of many players giving up. In the same way, being as unpredictable and fast-paced as it is, players may feel overwhelmed with the lack of structure and feel as though it is impossible without the ability to create a set strategy. While the game has challenges, it also has ways in which it overcomes them. For example, the fast, unpredictable gameplay which may drive players away is countered with little downtime between respawns which encourages players to stay within the flow state and keep trying. It also combats the issue of repetitive gameplay with features such as unpredictable enemy movement and rotating weapons upon death. Despite everything, Hotline Miami is rated highly on almost every platform and is widely enjoyed and praised by a lot of demographics despite its issues.

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Game Report

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

71 / 100

GENERAL COMMENTS

This report provides a strong and well-rounded analysis of 'Hotline Miami', demonstrating clear understanding of how visual style, audio, challenge, and pacing combine to shape a distinctive player experience.

The discussion of colour, feedback, difficulty, and flow is particularly effective, with good use of supporting sources to justify claims. The work shows confident engagement with game design concepts and consistently links mechanics to player behaviour.

At times the writing becomes explanatory rather than evaluative, and the analysis would benefit from slightly tighter synthesis of theory across sections, but overall this is a focused and well-argued submission that meets the brief very effectively.

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