

### Advanced Level Design: Hack n' Slash / Beat em' Up

There is going to be a ton of bias and gushing in this post because I have a massive soft spot for hack n' slashes. These games to me are THE definition of fun. Once I understand how the combat works in these games and I enter the flow state, it is pure bliss. The only other genre that can get me remotely close to this experience is fighting games. I don't have nearly as much experience with beat em' ups so I can't say much about them, though I have played Castle Crashers and Scott Pilgrim.

Hack n' slashes and beat em' ups are primarily focused on their combat and how the player fights enemies. Good games in these genres have to make the combat feel good, have a lot of replayability, and have good enemy design. Games of these genres can generally be played in short bursts and they can be beaten quickly compared to most other genres, ranging from about 6 to 13 hours on average. The levels in these games can be short, but they shouldn't be frustrating to play through. If the gameplay and level design are done well, as well as the difficulty balance with the enemies, players would want to replay them over and over again, providing these games their longevity.

The Devil May Cry series is my absolute favorite series of hack n' slashes, especially 3, 4, and 5. Most of the joy in these games comes from the feel, the depth, and the spectacle. DMC games have a reputation for being more difficult than their contemporaries because they have a higher skill floor. However, once you learn the basics of the combat, a whole world of possibilities opens up to you. Now you can come up with creative ways to combo enemies and the best ways to counter the enemies' attacks. There is so much depth in these games that you could play through them multiple times on every difficulty and still learn new ways to play them every time.

Aside from the combat and its depth, the other biggest factor of enjoyment in these games comes from the style ranking system. To me, this system is the sole reason why I like improving in and replaying these games so much. The style ranking grades you based on how well you're fighting. It's not a simple combo indicator where the more hits you land the higher rank you get. That's how it works in the first two games and the reboot. Instead, the style ranking system rewards variety. Spamming the same move over and over again nets you less style points and in some cases can even lower your style rank, so you're encouraged to constantly switch up your gameplay. When you do play stylishly and you reach the higher ranks, the game rewards you more points, red orbs (these games' currency), and sometimes health. In DMC5 specifically, the music will even skip to specific parts depending on your style rank so the music always synchronizes with how well you're playing. This further heightens the feel-good factor of playing the game because now the player is guaranteed to time amazing moments with "that part of the song".

To me, Vergil in DMC5 is the epitome of everything that is great about these games, and playing as him is the most fun that a video game can possibly get. He has a ton of depth for those that want to fully utilize his kit, myself included, Bury the Light is an amazing song that blasts in your ears when you get high style rankings, and he is extraordinarily satisfying to play as. He is

so unbelievably fun in fact that he lowers my enjoyment of other hack n' slashes and even other characters in DMC5. It's addicting and I can't get enough of it.

Another hack n' slash that I deeply enjoy playing is Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance. While it doesn't have DMC's level of depth, it makes up for it with pure spectacle. Killing enemies with the game's signature Zandatsu mechanic is super satisfying because it replenishes your health and energy and the sound design gives you a rush of adrenaline and dopamine when you do it. The music is also spectacular and it gets you pumped up for fights instantly. The boss fights are especially great in this regard. This game also has some of the most hilariously awesome quick-time events ever seen in a video game, next to Asura's Wrath.

I would also like to quickly talk about Warriors games like Hyrule Warriors. These are borderline button mashers compared to these other games, but the point of these games is to take the player on a power trip and let them plow through literal armies. It feels satisfying performing special moves, because you see a ton of enemies fly away from you and you get to see a huge number indicating how many enemies you took out with that attack. The real difficulty of these games, funnily enough, is making sure that you follow the objective and that you don't blind yourself with your overwhelming power. It's an interesting take on the hack n' slash genre and I like it.

Speaking of Asura's Wrath, I think it's an example of a bad hack n' slash. The cutscenes and the quick-time events are some of the best I've ever seen in a video game, but the gameplay itself is painfully plain and boring. It has the same level of button mashing as Warriors games, but you don't get to fight armies. Instead, you're mainly fighting small waves of enemies and singular bosses, like in DMC and MGR. The worst part is that they're on the same level of difficulty as Warriors games too, which makes them unsatisfying to fight. It's better to describe Asura's Wrath as an interactive movie rather than a fully-fledged video game.

TL;DR: A good hack n' slash is defined by how satisfying its combat is, how nonintrusive the levels are, and its replayability. Devil May Cry 3-5, Metal Gear Rising, and Warriors games are good hack n' slashes. Asura's Wrath is a bad hack n' slash, but it has its merits.