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Lights Off - Critique

From Team "Meaw", Lights Off is a side scrolling adventure puzzle game set in a haunted house. The player plays as a young boy, reminiscent of Limbo (2010), armed with a flashlight who must explore the house and solve its puzzles. Lights Off is a game suffering from what I believe is a lack of focus. The game doesn't know what it wants to evoke in the player, whether it be fear, excitement, discovery, or skillfulness. As a result, there are a few elements at play which prevent the player from experiencing any of them. I've hesitated in trying to provide the team feedback for the game so late in development, as the design seems flawed right to the core of the gameplay. To elaborate my point, I will attempt to critique the game based on the potential types of fun it is targeting, and why it doesn't reach the mark.

The game presents the player with platform-based puzzles, which give the player a task to solve before they can proceed. In most games, puzzles are used to make the player feel smart, and give them a satisfying reward for taking their time to solve a puzzle. Many action games such as Half-Life 2 (2004) use puzzles as a pacing device, to get the player to slow down from the frantic action. Other games use puzzles as their core gameplay, but vary the challenge by giving the player a toolset, or some type of limitation. Lights Off touts the flashlight given to the player as its main mechanic, however, functionally it behaves no different from a mouse cursor. The flashlight is pointed at objects to interact with them, such as growing plants which can be used as platforms. Because the flashlight has no limitations, and does not require the player to make any decisions during gameplay, ultimately, the player can never achieve a sense of satisfaction from using the flashlight since it adds almost nothing to the level of player agency. What's left to work with in terms of puzzle mechanics becomes the moving of boxes in the level. So, when it comes to making the player feel clever, Lights Off misses a huge opportunity right in the core mechanics of the game.

The flashlight, while not meaningful gameplay, is also used as the main weapon of the game, used to fight off ghosts which appear randomly from the sides of the screen. These ghosts, upon touching the player, will kill him/her instantly, causing them to have to restart the level. The flashlight will kill these ghosts if hovered over them for an amount of time measured in seconds. This is really where types of fun begin to conflict in Lights Off. Typically, instant-death is seen in games that fall in line with "trial and error" gameplay. These types of games have a building intensity, as the player attempts the perfect run to achieve victory. Games such as Hotline Miami (2012) or Super Meat Boy (2010) are prime examples. Lights Off is using this mechanic to add difficulty and intensity to the game, but during what's supposed to be slow paced, cerebral puzzle gameplay. So while you are trying to solve puzzles, you are constantly harassed by ghosts which unrelentingly move straight towards you. It's like an acoustic thrash metal band; the two don't jive - at least not at the same time.

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Lights Off also attempts to be an atmospheric horror game. However, this attempt seems to be somewhat of an afterthought, since the beta build of the game had no audio whatsoever. Audio is an extremely important aspect of horror games - especially those set in the dark. But even if it did have audio, the game would merely look and sound like a horror game. It wouldn't feel like one. The horror genre in films, television, books, and video games is entirely based around the concept of mounting suspense. As the prospect of something scary happening beings to linger, the audience begins to feel anxiety, and tension is created. Lights Off has no means of creating this tension, as the designers have no control over the threats to the player. Ghosts spawn at a reliable rate offscreen, and not at key moments or locations. In addition, with instant-death mechanics being closely tied with "trial and error" gameplay, it seems misguided to combine them with any kind of horror, since the player cannot feel suspense on something they will attempt multiple times.

Gameplay aside, Lights Off does have some good quality artwork. However, the overall visual landscape is very dark. The first level is the darkest, with foreground and background hardly discernable, but the later levels have improved visibility. While I understand there is probably a lack of the technical ability to have the flashlight actually light the scene, I think that should have been something discovered during prototyping and solved by either not doing the dark environment or somehow finding a way to light the scene. The game's visuals would have also benefited from player and ghost animations.

Since the game is so far along, the team is limited in what they can do to improve the game before the final showcase. The first thing I would recommend is find a way to make the flashlight have meaningful gameplay. This would mean adding some limitations to it, possibly a recharge time or battery consumption. If using the flashlight feels like more than simply moving a cursor over things, I think the gameplay will drastically improve. The second thing I would recommend is to remove the instant-death gameplay, and strategically place the ghosts in the level. Players should not be harassed and punished while trying to figure out a puzzle. If the ghosts are placed in the level by the designers, they will be able to create a gameplay flow between slow paced puzzling and fast paced ghost hunting. The ghost A.I. could be much improved by giving them attack patterns, or having them hide from the player at times. With the ghosts flying straight towards the player, the entire encounter comes down to a reaction-time check dependent on the relative speed of the player against the ghost. If these ghost encounters are meant to make the player feel skillful, they need to put up more of a fair fight. The player would also feel more satisfied with the combat if the flashlight was able to knock the enemies back. Finally, I recommend trying to add more experimental mechanics. The focus of our projects was meant to be experimental games, so Lights Off needs to attempt something that hasn't been done before. What if the ghosts had interactions with the puzzles? They could act as poltergeists - moving furniture while the player isn't looking. Whatever the team does, it needs to be focused. The ultimate failing of Lights Off is its lack of focus on a particular type of fun.