

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0t7WFzJRV4ZZr9TjvsKtJ5Ct2tuDtp6w>

Playlist containing video content that I captured for this thesis. Video content is substantial therefore playing videos at higher speeds is recommending if time is of issue.

<https://characteractiongenreblog.wordpress.com/>

Blog version of thesis content.

The Evolution of Stylish Action Video Games

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### **Abstract**

This thesis analyses the influence of *Devil May Cry* on the stylish action sub-genre of 3D action games and if its influence can still be recognised today. Prior to the game's existence combat in 3D action games was a means to an end, part of the overall experience but *Devil May Cry* presented players with a game where combat was the focus. Incorporating evidence from reviews, articles, personal correspondence, and analysis of 23 stylish action games, this thesis demonstrates the influence of *Devil May Cry* on the stylish action sub-genre. The analysis shows that whilst there are mechanical similarities between stylish action games that can be attributed to *Devil May Cry*, its notion of 'style' and getting the player to feel like the playable character was widely executed in a variety of different ways. The influence of *Devil May Cry* is an impactful one and it is still present in stylish action games today.

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## Introduction

*Devil May Cry (DMC)* (Capcom, 2001) is a 3D action game in which the player fights hordes of demons controlling Dante who uses weapons and firearms in stylised combat that incentivises the player to act stylishly with a grading system that ranks their performance. In less than a year *DMC* sold 2 million copies (IGN, 2002), the game's stylish attitude captivated audiences around the world. The success of *DMC* also caught the attention of developers and publishers which saw many other 3D action games attempt to replicate the game's success in varying ways. *DMC* and its sub-genre contemporaries that came after created a sub-genre of 3D action games that goes by a variety of names and for the purposes of this thesis will be called 'stylish action games'. This thesis aims to determine the influence of *DMC* on stylish action games, if the game had an impact on those that followed and in what ways, and if said influence can still be felt in modern stylish action games.

The structure of this thesis analyses existing literature on stylish action games before discussing the research approach and results. The research results are split into five sections that each contain 'micro case studies' of stylish action games relevant to the section's topic which is almost entirely chronological. Throughout each micro case study are videos that have been created from personal gameplay to demonstrate various aspects of each game, a playlist that contains every video created (in order of appearance) can be found on the cover sheet.

## Literature Review

*DMC* arguably created the stylish action sub-genre of 3D action games. Despite this, there has been little scholarship regarding this sub-genre, and almost nothing on the design and gameplay experiences of these games. Typically, scholarship focuses on story, visuals, external influences, or other elements of these games. *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009) is where this is most obvious; for well over a decade gaming audiences, critics, and academics have formed discussions surrounding the titular character's body, the nature of empowerment, and intent for the audience.

Indeed, “there have been few video game characters as divisive, hotly contested, or controversial as *Bayonetta*” (Harper, 2015, p. 1), a discussion that has only become more complex as the series has continued. Concepts like these are certainly valid discussions, but they often supersede the game itself.

When examining the current academic context and how stylish actions games are dealt with, an issue of genre naming and identification persists where, frequently, when stylish action games are discussed the classification for the sub-genre is very broad. For example, in an article titled *Action video game play facilitates “learning to learn”* (Zhang et al., 2021) the cited action games are from the Call of Duty and Half-Life series which are certainly action-focused, but more people would sooner describe them as first-person shooters (FPS) as opposed to stylish action games. Another article, *Attentional modulation as a mechanism for enhanced facial emotion discrimination: The case of action video game players* also primarily uses FPS games in the discussion of action games, as it analyses the difference “between action (First Person Shooter (FPS)) and nonaction (Role Playing Game (RPG)) players” (Ciobanu et al., 2023, p. 277). The article continues to use action as opposed to FPS when mentioned, which is perhaps a mistake since the skillset of FPS games compared to action games is entirely different and would require a different examination. Oversimplifying the stylish action sub-genre in this way undermines why genre terms are used because their purpose is both to utilise “terminological shortcuts, allowing for the discussion of games with-out constantly describing the contents of each game”, and “to provide aid to game developers, publishers, and players” (Bateman & Richard, 2006, p. 224). Labelling a large variety of games under a single term undermines just how different stylish action games inspired by *DMC* are from anything else that can be labelled as an action game.

Another instance of misunderstanding a term relating to this sub-genre is in *A Conceptual Framework of Game Feel: an Evolutionary Approach* (Carter, 2021). Here it focuses on games in the character action sub-genre and, although made in good faith, seems to be unaware that character action is a name people associate with a certain type of action game. Carter’s thesis uses the term in reference to various series including Donkey Kong and Sonic the Hedgehog; the only game analysed that has any relation to popular interpretations of character action is *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2005). Carter (2021) is accurate in its description, stating that “the term character action game has been applied in varying contexts; however, it has no formally agreed

definition.” (p. 52) Yet, the description Carter uses that describes character action as “a specific type of game in which the player controls the main game character from a third-person perspective within a virtual environment, which the game’s mechanics and audio-visual representations are designed to support” (p. 52) is extremely vague, not accurate to some of the games they selected, and not reflective of how people often use the term ‘character action’.

This issue of genre naming and identification does not apply to just an academic context either because the name for the sub-genre that *DMC* inspired is widely debated, with the sub-genre still lacking a definitive title. ‘Hack and slash’, ‘character action’, ‘stylish action’, and ‘spectacle fighter’ appear to be the most common terms; ‘hack and slash’ and ‘character action’ especially are prominently used in reference to *DMC* and its affiliates. Again, however, these run into the issues of being vague and broad because they can be used to describe a variety of games, as seen in *An Operational Study of Video Games’ Genres* (Qaffas, 2020) which describes the ‘hack and slash’ genre as being “based on hand-to-hand combat between the player and many non-player characters.” (p. 176) The term ‘hack and slash’ itself originates from *Dungeons and Dragons*, which is about as far away from stylish action as one could get. Successful games labelled as ‘hack and slash’ are mostly expected but also includes some examples from the *Super Smash Bros.* and *Diablo* series, other examples are games inspired by *DMC* but surprisingly not *DMC* itself. This is a contentious topic with some who claim, “I have no idea why we started using the term ‘character action’ to describe this subgenre because it sounds so generic but here we are” (Hovermale, 2019).

There is also a significant amount of research about the psychological impact and response of action games but not the design of games themselves. Articles such as *Learning, Attentional Control, and Action Video Games* (Green & Bavelier, 2012), *Do enhanced states exist? Boosting cognitive capacities through an action video-game* (Kozhevnikov et al., 2018) and *Increasing Speed of Processing With Action Video Games* (Dye et al., 2009) all focus on the potential cognitive effects of action video games. Action games are popular in this context because they are distinguished by “the speed of the games ... high perceptual, cognitive, and motor loads ... an emphasis on peripheral visual field processing and divided attention” (Green & Bavelier, 2012, p. 201). Like scholarship written about concepts relating to certain action games as opposed to discussion on the games themselves, this is certainly a worthwhile aspect to explore for games in

general, not just action games. However, it continues to highlight that in terms of analysing the stylish action sub-genre, its history, influences, and evolution, existing scholarship is lacking.

Despite these issues related to stylish action games and those inspired by *DMC*, a few scholars within academic fields have identified *DMC* as an important game in the evolution of stylish action and if one thing is certain, the series is looked upon as the standard of quality action throughout scholarship. In Roeder's (2012) discussion of the beat-em-up genre they mention that "instead of forcing the Beat Em Up into the 3d world, it would mold, reforge, and modernize the genre" and that the game in fact "heralded a new genre that can be seen as one of the spiritual successors to The Beat Em Up. The '3d action' / '3d hack and slash' genre would go on to spawn many great games in the new millennium." (p. 24) Epstein (2021) comes to the same conclusion, stating that "the original *DMC* would go on to inspire a myriad of successful games ... going so far as to even inspire a new sub-genre of action games: stylish action or character action." (p. 41) Others have also been able to accurately identify the difference in feel that *DMC* and the sub-genre have compared to other action games because stylish action games are "unique in capturing the player's attention and mood during gameplay especially while controlling the character Dante." (Yusof et al., 2015, p. 33)

These instances of *DMC*'s influence described throughout scholarship suggests that despite being unexplored thoroughly there is merit to the notion of *DMC*'s impact. Perhaps the best suggestion of *DMC*'s influence is within *21<sup>st</sup> Century Game Design* (Bateman & Richard, 2006) in which there is a chapter discussing genre and classification. Within said chapter is a substantial list of game genres and what classifies a specific game genre, one of which positions *DMC* as the 'nucleating' game for what they assert is the 'extreme combat' genre. What is especially interesting about Bateman & Richard's claim regarding their 'extreme combat' genre is that because this is an older piece of writing, they state that at the time of writing the genre was in its infancy and could possibly become a prominent genre (Bateman & Richard, 2006). This proves that, despite *DMC* already being in existence for five years, it was easy to tell that *DMC* and its stylish action game contemporaries could influence the way stylish action games were designed.

More broadly, this shows that the concept of style is what separated *DMC* and stylish action games from other 3D action games. Scoring systems are some of the most prominent mechanics that stylish action games typically feature to establish and reinforce the concept of style to players.

Scoring systems encourage players to think about their approach to combat differently (depending on the context of individual stylish action games) and rewards gameplay that would otherwise be sub-optimal or more challenging, as Hovermale (2019) says “using difficult or unusual techniques [give] bonuses to encourage creative playstyles over simple and safe ones.” This creates gameplay scenarios where players are encouraged to experiment and develop their own playstyles in accordance with the scoring system. Typically, scoring systems encourage stylish expression from players with an extrinsic reward (such as currency to upgrade the playable character) alongside the intrinsic reward felt for acting stylishly. An intrinsic reward is when the player gains nothing tangible but still feels a sense of accomplishment, while an extrinsic reward gives the player something in the game as a reward for doing certain actions.

In the context of stylish action games, style can be defined as the unique player agency and expression granted to players that defines the experience of the sub-genre. The agency given to players by the sub-genre allows them to express themselves and the playable character’s distinct personality through gameplay in unique ways that the sub-genre excels at compared to other action games where combat is not the focus. As will be shown later, for this sub-genre, *DMC* established the possibilities for style and how that can create a different gameplay experience. Stylish action games that came after *DMC* recognised this and created their own stylistic sensibilities using *DMC* as a foundation.

Style is also separate from the concept of spectacle that the sub-genre also utilises. Spectacle provides grand, elaborate set pieces but often sacrifices player control and agency to achieve such results. The experience created by spectacle is also largely the same for all players. After cinematics, one of the most common examples of spectacle within the sub-genre that this thesis will return to is genre shifts. Genre shifts occur when a game transitions from what would be considered standard gameplay to an entirely different genre, typically with a new perspective and controls for the sake of spectacle.

This contrasts with the concept of style which, although encouraged by the game, is largely controlled by players and can naturally arise from regular gameplay. The benefit of spectacle within a stylish action game is that it potentially reinforces the game's stylistic sensibilities and conveys to the player what their character is capable of. However, when used in excess, spectacle can kill the sense of agency granted by stylish action.

These academic perspectives on *DMC* align with many popular opinions on the game because when *DMC* was released it was described as a game that “successfully captured the twitch-based, relentlessly free-flowing gameplay style of so many classic 2D action games.” (Ahmed, 2001) The series is also a frequent point of comparison for many other stylish action titles such as *God of War*, which a review described as “*Devil May Cry* evolved.” (Sulic, 2004)

As game studies has become more relevant and widely discussed, one of the core concepts relating to game analysis is the notion of interactivity. It is not surprising this is the case because, arguably, the most immediate difference between video games and other mediums is that there is “an immediately plausible sense in which videogames are more interactive than some traditional artistic media ... players may adopt the role of a character such as Darth Vader through which they can act in the fictional world of the game.” (Goldblatt, 2017, p. 415) To not repeat what has been said regarding the topic and for brevity’s sake, the innate interactivity of the medium enhances the experience of a game and thus makes the experience of play more valuable than to passively analyse a game. Beyond the notion of interactivity, games are often considered through various lenses; two of the most popular throughout academic fields are the theories of narratology and ludology. Narratology suggests that the most important aspect of a video game is its narrative, and many narratologists believe that video games are “perfectly capable of, and even uniquely suited to, the presentation of narrative experiences” (Holmquest, 2013, p. 11). Ludology, by comparison, is essentially the opposite of narratology and maintains that either the narrative focus of games is secondary or that gameplay and narrative are fundamentally opposed to each other. By utilising aspects of play, “ludologists see games first and foremost as games, with rule-sets and gameplay mechanics taking the place of stories and narrative structure as the primary purpose of video games” (Holmquest, 2013, p. 17). Because these theories are well documented it is understandable why both approaches are so frequently used. However, both these theories present a very binary approach to game analysis and undermine the fact that “narrative, aesthetic character design, and rule systems are frequently constructed in a cooperative fashion with one ultimate goal in mind.” (Holmquest, 2013, p. 26) Examining gameplay in a vacuum through ludology potentially denies the notion that specific aspects of gameplay can be constructed to convey narrative and character, and that narrative does not have an impact on how the player feels about the playable character or their synergy with them. An approach purely based on narratology would not work either, for the same reason: that narrative can be constructed through gameplay, character design, and mechanics.

This binary nature presents issues for games in general because the experience of play is more than the sum of these two theories. This is especially relevant for stylish action games because much of their design and appeal is constructed through a combination of both gameplay and narrative. Narrative especially raises concerns because stylish action games are often light on perceived narrative and many of the games that have been analysed for the present research do not consider narrative a priority, and instead utilise character design and gameplay to express story and character.

To showcase this cooperation between gameplay and narrative, Holmquest (2013, p. 27) very accurately describes the intent and appeal of *DMC* stating that the game's "character design, narrative, and the rules of gameplay all work in tandem to present the 'stylish action' that the game became known for". Using an example from another genre to illustrate how important a character's design is in conjunction with gameplay, the fighting game *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* (Capcom, 2017) tremendously disappointed fans of the series because it excluded iconic characters, specifically the X-Men. The official response to the disappointment fans felt was "these characters are just functions. They're just doing things. Magneto, case and point, is a favourite because he has eight-way dash and he's really fast, right? ... It's just the function that people are associating with the character" (Hussain, 2017). This response was likely not the real reason for the exclusion of X-Men and although the exact reason remains unknown, it may have been a concerted effort by Disney to limit the appearances of said characters in preparation for the acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox. Regardless, this response clearly misses the point of why players enjoy playing as certain characters, and the legacy they hold. Players did not just want to play as Magneto because of his mechanics but because he is Magneto, an incredibly popular character that people have grown attached to. Relaying this back to stylish action games shows that characters are more than just their gameplay. This is an important concept that allows many of the characters present throughout stylish action games to become some of the most recognisable and beloved characters in gaming.

## **Research Approach**

When it comes to analysing games there have been many attempts to create a method or toolset to dissect and analysis games in the same way close reading or viewing techniques can be applied to

literature or film. Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) detail many academics who have attempted to contextualise theories and techniques for game and new media studies, stating that:

Game and New Media studies have long drawn on interpretive and critical techniques from humanities scholarship, under the guises of textual analysis, structural analysis, autoethnography, and many other names. Aarseth drew on the vocabulary and techniques of literary theory for some of his early work on nonlinear texts (Aarseth, 1994), which in turn led to his seminal work on ergodic literature in *Cybertext* (Aarseth, 1997). Aarseth evaluated how traditional literary notions broke down when confronted with procedural and nonlinear texts, and proposed extending literary theory in ways that allowed it to account for new media texts. Van Looy and Baetens collected a number of close readings that analyzed various forms of electronic literature (Van Looy & Baetens, 2003). These readings address challenges of the mutable and multilinear text that also apply in the close reading of electronic games. James Gee turned to “New Literacy Studies” as part of his argument on games and learning, drawing on theories of reading and context to explicate gameplay experiences (Gee, 2007). Janet Murray drew on literary theory to construct her theoretical framework for participatory narratives in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Murray, 1997), and Brenda Laurel situated her work on interactive narrative in a context of dramatic theory in *Computers as Theatre* (Laurel, 1993). More recently, Ian Bogost proposed a theory of “unit operations” for games grounded in a convergence of literary theory and object-oriented programming theory (Bogost, 2006). (p. 290)

Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum make the point that games studies have drawn on the humanities to contextualise close play as both borrowing from the literary technique of close reading and as something specifically adapted to the study of games. ‘Close play’ is a broad concept, that is one of the many ways that those invested in games studies have attempted to analysis games, the purpose of which is to “reveal insights into the design of games, and also into the variety of pleasures afforded by game experience, such as imagination, emotion, kinesthetic engagement, narrative immersion, and ludic flow.” (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 289) Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum suggest that once a playthrough has been completed, to best understand a game one must sift through data to “unriddle the salient facts and insights that best inform a deeper understanding of the game. In effect the close reading now becomes a process of using the

experience to reverse-engineer the mechanisms and dynamics of the design” (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 305). Therefore, the method used for this research process was to a large degree informed by the ideas of close play suggested by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum. My approach was to play through the selected games in chronological order to obtain a clearer feeling and understanding of how the sub-genre changed. While playing through each game I would take notes highlighting various aspects throughout gameplay, paying attention to gameplay, narrative, presentation, visual, sound design, music, and so on. After completing an initial playthrough I would study my notes to determine which aspects of the game were particularly interesting, and then begin to record gameplay, making sure to capture the important aspects of the game. Occasionally, additional notes would be taken if something new was found. Once I finished a recording session, I would review the captured footage to ensure I recorded everything I wanted, and there were no errors, before editing the footage to create the best examples to support the research. Because ‘close play’ is a methodology based on direct observation and experience it does not require a stance on objective truth.

I consider it vital to interact with every selected game and spend a decent amount of time with them because interaction with the selected games gives a deeper understanding of what they are attempting to accomplish, and how successful they are. To passively observe a game through others’ play is fundamentally different from a first-hand experience. This is especially true for stylish action games because the feel is vital for this sub-genre; choosing not to play them for myself would create a dishonest perspective. The experience of playing a game is individual, while the content that creates the experience is not. It is at the intersection of observation and experience that enables the most thorough examination of video games.

Examining a wide variety of stylish action games was also important because it gives a clearer understanding of this sub-genre’s identity, how style can be constructed in different ways, the influence of *DMC*, and how it has evolved over time. If this method focused solely on only a handful of extremely influential games, it would be difficult to actively feel and determine whether they were influential. Therefore, it is also important to acknowledge ‘bad’ games in this discussion because there is a certain “fond affection for the bad aesthetics of videogames in terms of their Camp appeal” (Enevold & MacCallum-Stewart, 2015, p. 262). There is also a difference between the camp appeal of ‘bad’ games that enjoyment can still be derived and ‘bad’ games that struggle

to engage because they are plain boring or mediocre. Examining ‘bad’ action games also puts into perspective what others succeed at and how difficult it is to execute correctly. It is for this reason that discussing older games besides those with significant importance is also valuable because they enhance our perception of modern titles and have “paved the way to our current gaming culture and participated in today’s new game mechanics.” (Pelurson, 2022, p. 23) However, much like other mediums, old games should be considered valuable in their own right. Games studies tend to lean toward recent releases and most gaming audiences today look back at older games as either genre and medium defining titles, or outdated works that have aged poorly. This attitude most likely arises from the interactive nature of the medium. Compared to older films, to experience the limitations of the time is a much more tangible feel for games, whether it is the “the wobbliness of PSX graphics” or “the limited sounds of the Nintendo 64” (Pelurson, 2022, p. 23). The truth is that most games, especially before games could be easily patched, have not aged poorly, rather our perception of their mechanics and visuals change based on modern perceptions of these concepts.

Taking all this into account, my approach is therefore informed by ‘close play’ and considers multiple, if not every, aspect of a game together to create its desired goals, and also the history that surrounds each game.

## **Research Results**

### **The Early Years**

#### **Devil May Cry “Let’s Rock Baby”**

*Devil May Cry (DMC)* is centred on the demon hunter Dante who uses his business, Devil May Cry, to hunt down demons. After a woman named Trish visits his store, Dante sets out to Mallet Island with her to defeat the demon lord Mundus, who is responsible for the deaths of Dante’s mother and brother. A well-known fact about *DMC* is that the game started its life as *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005), to be directed by *Resident Evil 2* (Capcom, 1998) creator Hideki Kamiya. But eventually the game strayed so far from its Resident Evil (RE) roots, opting to focus on style and action, that RE series creator Shinji Mikami proposed the idea to shift the game into its own game;

after much convincing, Mikami was successful and Kamiya's *Resident Evil 4* became *DMC*. This unconventional origin gives *DMC* a unique identity: its roots in survival horror contrasts with that of stylish action. What is especially important to understand about *DMC* in the context of this present research is that, unlike every other 3D action game before it, *DMC* asked players to engage with combat in stylish ways and to see enemies as more than just an obstacle. Therefore, much of this analysis will be framed around the game's notion of style, where it succeeds and where it fails.

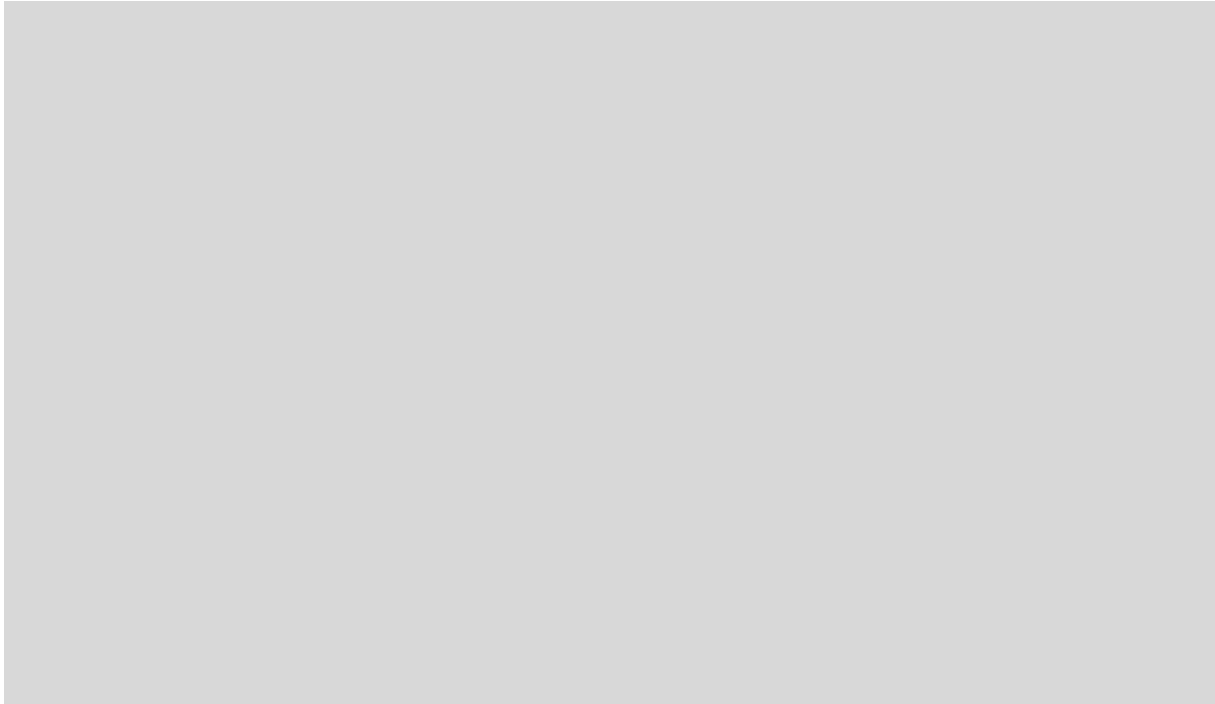
Dante's initial move set consists of three basic ground combos with his sword, one that knocks enemies down and away, a series of rapid thrusts that is achieved by delaying the third attack input, and, thirdly, a powerful five-hit combo executed the same way as the thrusts but with more precise timing. Combos that require the player to delay their input are colloquially called 'pause combos'; the latter of these is Dante's strongest sword attack, and therefore rewards precision on the input. One of *DMC*'s most distinct and stylish mechanics is tied to Dante's last sword attack in his initial move set, High Time. By locking onto an enemy, holding back on the left analogue stick, and then attacking, Dante will launch an enemy into the air. By holding the attack button Dante will rise with the enemy; both let the player juggle enemies. Juggling is not a concept that originates from *DMC*; it can be found in many of its influences, for example 2D beat-em-ups and fighting games. Juggling is the action of keeping an enemy airborne for an extended period of time. However, its ease of execution and emphasis on combat is possibly why the concept is so strongly tied to *DMC*, despite not originating from it. Juggling creates a variety of unique and stylish ways to toy with the enemy, the most obvious of which is keeping them airborne to prevent them from retaliating. Alongside melee attacks, Dante can also shoot his twin handguns, Ebony and Ivory (and other firearms) at enemies. On their own, guns do not do much damage and enemies barely react to being shot but they serve as a complement to Dante's melee attacks and are a crucial aspect of constructing Dante's style through gameplay.

[DMC Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Guns inflict minimal damage to enemies, in order to communicate both that they are secondary and how they are impractical for fighting demons; their damage output can, however, be slightly increased by holding the button to charge the shot. But they are mostly useful as a way to build style. Their function in game also informs the player about Dante's personality and work ethic - he uses them simply because he likes them, not for their effectiveness. The first cutscene establishes this attitude as Trish mocks Dante for not using a sword, before laughing it off and pulling out Ebony and Ivory.

### [DMC Guns](#)



This attitude from Dante in the cutscene also lets the player know they should use guns in a similar manner, for style purposes. Eventually Dante will gain a second melee weapon in Ifrit, which focuses on powerful punches and kicks that can be charged for major damage. Ifrit adds variety to Dante's move set and presents an entirely new way to engage with enemies, showing Dante as more than just a sword master.

[DMC Ifrit](#)



Being half-demon, Dante can tap into his demonic power to activate what the game calls Devil Trigger (DT), which empowers all his attacks and enables some new ones alongside regenerating health: this makes the player feel unstoppable. To balance out the power of DT it cannot simply be activated at any time. Entering DT consumes one rune, (runes are gained by attacking enemies) and exiting before all the runes are depleted consumes an additional rune, this encourages the player to use DT carefully to maximise the power it offers. Finally, to firmly sell Dante's personality he can cheekily taunt enemies which restores a small amount of DT and increases the style gauge. Taunting on its own reinforces Dante's carefree attitude but it also encourages the player to think stylishly as they receive rewards from taunting.

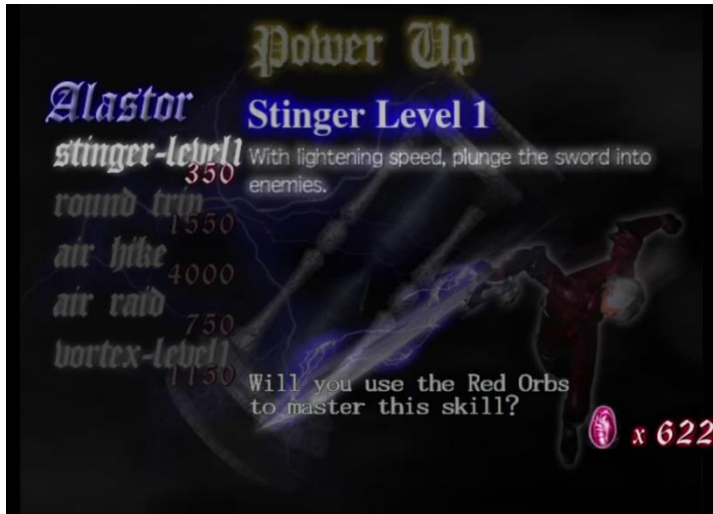
As outlined in the literature review, this emphasis on style is what set *DMC* apart from other 3D action games that came before, where combat was more a means to an end rather than the game's focus. What makes *DMC's* combat so compelling is not just that the combat system is great on its own but also how it creates an incredibly powerful sense of style. *DMC* accomplishes this with its style gauge, which increases as the player performs moves, constructs combos, and taunts enemies; getting hit will result in the style gauge being reset. At the end of a mission players are graded on their overall style throughout the mission (as seen in Figure 1); being given a grade as well as bonus red orbs (more given for higher ranks).

**Figure 1***DMC Mission Clear Screen*

From *Devil May Cry*, Capcom, 2001.

This creates a situation where there is both the intrinsic reward of performing stylish combos and receiving a high style rank for the sake of looking cool, and the extrinsic reward of red orbs, which increases according to the player's performance and can then be used to purchase new moves (as seen in Figure 2) to defeat enemies with even more flair.

**Figure 2***DMC Power Up Menu*



From *Devil May Cry*, Capcom, 2001.

Because *DMC* was effectively the first of its kind, the way the game grades style understandably lacks transparency and clarity, because it is difficult to determine what increases style and how to maintain it. The only obvious rule is that taking any form of damage will instantly reset the player's style gauge, making it incredibly punishing. The ranking at the end of missions, likewise, does not provide much information apart from stating clear time and red orbs collected (which can potentially counteract each other because collecting orbs takes more time). Furthermore, red orbs accounting for a portion of the final grade is not an effective measure of how stylish the player was. Enemies do drop more orbs at higher style ranks, but it is still an inconsistent metric. Hideki Kamiya's next game *Viewtiful Joe* (Capcom, 2003) improves upon the style grading in *DMC*, which shows he was conscious of the faults.

Music is also key in establishing this sense of style. *DMC* features dark atmospheric tracks to match its gothic setting, punctuated by intense electronic rock for enemies and boss battles that get the player excited. Dante's stylish yet functional design also contributes to the game's identity; his distinctive red coat and white hair are a striking combination that made the character immediately iconic.

Of course, if the player cannot see what they are expected to fight how can they be expected to be stylish? This is why both the camera and lock-on system supersede the focus on style and are

important to discuss. A manageable camera and lock-on system are important for stylish action games, in the same way that camera placement and cuts are for action films.

True to its origins as an RE game, *DMC* uses fixed camera angle perspectives to display the game world. The consequence of this perspective is that when the camera perspective shifts the player may lose control of Dante, or enemies might move offscreen. *DMC* unfortunately has a habit of shifting the camera perspective far too frequently, which causes the player to lose control of Dante and take unintended hits. To compensate for a situation like this occurring, when shifting perspectives if the player continues to hold the analogue stick, Dante will continue to move in the same direction until the stick is released; this is a serviceable compromise. Enemies also cannot attack from offscreen, and sometimes the camera will also pan to track Dante in certain rooms, or objects will become transparent when in front of the camera.

The concept of a lock-on was likely popularised by *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time's* (Nintendo, 1998) 'Z-targeting' which, in a similar way that *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo, 1996) contextualised camera controls in 3D for a new audience, this then contextualised the idea of a lock-on where the camera's focal point becomes the targeted enemy to provide a better camera perspective for combat. Over time, lock-on has become a key component of many stylish action games, including the entire Devil May Cry franchise. The main issue with *DMC's* lock-on, however, is that there is no lock-on reticule to display which enemy Dante is currently locked onto. This can lead to situations where the player will attack an enemy they did not anticipate. A bigger issue related to attacking enemies the player did not expect, however, is the game's soft lock. Even when the player is not locked onto an enemy, if Dante is close enough to enemies and the player attacks, the game will slightly adjust the direction of Dante's attack to better ensure it hits a target. But this can sometimes have the opposite effect the player, once again, could ultimately target an enemy they did not want to. But these issues surrounding both the hard and soft lock are minor and do not entirely undermine *DMC's* control scheme, which is incredibly intuitive. Performing actions like Stinger and High Time by locking on and holding forward or back respectively while in attack simply make sense in gameplay because Dante's animations match the player's input. He lunges forward to perform Stinger and swings his sword behind him to perform High Time.

Difficulty also contributes to a sense of style. The entire appeal of playing as Dante is a character that walks headfirst into danger while taunting his enemies, thus style in the face of adversity gives

reason to why challenge is appropriate. It is unlikely the player would feel particularly stylish if enemies were not a challenge and could be effortlessly defeated, or unless that was the intention. To facilitate style through challenge *DMC* features a variety of difficult and engaging enemies who all test the player on various aspects of the game's combat, this increases in difficulty as the player progresses through the game. The game starts with Marionettes, a very basic enemy that can only perform melee and ranged attacks that are easy to avoid and are dispatched quickly. Sin Scissors present a new challenge for the player because most of their body is incorporeal, requiring the player to be precise in their attacks. Shadow is a very aggressive enemy who keeps the player dodging its attack before becoming vulnerable. Blades are the next increase in difficulty from Marionettes blocking more of the players' attacks and jumping out of juggle combos. Frosts can regenerate themselves if they are not killed quickly and feature a much wider variety of attacks, and Nobodies are a generally difficult enemy capable of stealing the player's DT and increasing their size and power.

#### [DMC Sin Scissors, Shadow, Blades, Frosts, Nobodies](#)



An interesting notion about the enemies in *DMC* is that they are only ever battled individually. For example, Shadows are only fought in groups of Shadows, not alongside other enemies. Whether

this was the result of memory limitations or a design decision it works regardless and proves that the enemies are enjoyable enough to fight that most players will not recognise they are only fought individually. To force engagement with enemies, occasionally Dante will be locked in a room with enemies and barred from exit by a demonic barrier. Developers have attempted to create multiple solutions to the issue of players not engaging with enemies, an issue specific to 3D games because 2D games can simply lock the screen position and, although the solution of a combat barrier is not particularly elegant, it does work.

Boss battles also serve to test the player in a much more pronounced way than regular enemies, by having each of the bosses specialise in a certain aspect of combat; this is what makes *DMC's* boss line up incredibly effective. Phantom is the game's first boss and serves as an initial test of the player's skill - because of his hardened carapace he cannot be swung at wildly and the player must wait for him to expose his abdomen or head. Despite being the first boss, Phantom also contains many unique interactions: his fireball can be deflected back at him for major damage with proper timing, or destroyed while he is charging; Dante can jump onto his back to target the abdomen, and he can be flinched after several attacks. Griffon challenges the player's gun play and evasion abilities because he stays airborne for most of the battle, firing off a myriad of projectiles, and by shooting him enough he will crash down and can then be swung at. Nightmare is, for lack of a better term, the weird boss and functions as more of a puzzle, having the player activate lights around the arena to make it vulnerable and uses many attacks that are difficult to avoid. Nightmare also has two cores and the damage done to them will affect subsequent fights with Nightmare. Finally, Nelo Angelo functions as the game's 'rival' and the most obvious part where the player's own style is challenged, sharing many of Dante's moves, taunting back at the player, and testing them on every aspect of combat. His similarities to Dante are what make every encounter with him feel like a climatic showdown. Although the notion of a rival character for the protagonist to fight is nothing new in media, as we will see the concept is a popular idea throughout stylish action games. Nelo Angelo's attitude and fight are what likely popularised the idea. Having to fight all these bosses' multiple times in different arenas with additional attacks further demands their respect and mastery each boss battle.

### [DMC Bosses](#)



The quality of these four are what make the final confrontation with Mundus especially disappointing as the game shifts genres into a rail shooter. It is debatable whether genre shifts like this are worthwhile but on its own this section is mostly well crafted and serves as ample spectacle for the final boss. However, for most players, suddenly being thrust into a completely different genre right at the very end can be more frustrating than enjoyable, not helped by the analogue stick's control being inverted and possibly forcing the player to switch to the d-pad. Some players may question why a boss like Nelo Angelo was not the final boss instead, one streamer asking after the battle "I don't understand why he wasn't like the final boss and had like several phases, that's like a fun fight" (Pat States At, 2023, 3:23:54). It is likely that the reason for this genre shift is simply Kamiya's love of arcade games like *Space Harrier* (Sega, 1985). But the result is that Mundus forgoes regular gameplay and the strong notion of style for much more generic spectacle, a large opponent to be conquered despite his excellent angelic design that subverts expectation of a demon lord. Mundus' second phase is not much of an improvement either, mostly because the way the player is supposed to approach Mundus is not obvious and incorporates platforming, which is one of *DMC's* weakest aspects. Both phases of the fight and the way the player fights Mundus are simply not stylish; a final boss that better exemplified *DMC's* style would have significantly more impact.

### [DMC Mundus](#)



There is not much to discuss regarding *DMC*'s narrative because it is very simplistic. It leaves much to be desired: the voice acting is subpar, and the narrative is somewhat disconnected. However, it is hard to say that it actively detracts from the game and there are a few strong moments. Every scene with Nelo Angelo stands out as a highlight, and his introduction where he exits the mirror and taunts Dante is especially stylish whilst also hinting at a connection between Nelo Angelo and Dante. It conveys to the player that he is more than just a regular enemy, with enough of his own personality to taunt Dante and the player into a fight. This is why it is unfortunate that his story is concluded too soon, the revelation that Nelo Angelo is Dante's brother Vergil corrupted by Mundus really should have been given more importance, considering just how significant this should be for Dante (even ignoring future entries). What the player is left with is a single scene that firmly connects the two, and a very subdued reaction from Dante.

### [DMC Nelo Angelo](#)



By today's standard *DMC*'s combat may be seen as simplistic compared to modern stylish action games, but it still stands strong as an incredibly compelling, stylish combat system and a remarkable first attempt at 3D action. While *DMC* focused on style and making the player feel cool, the foundation it established for 3D action games was so effective that this concept of style then morphed and evolved into other concepts that stylish action games focused on. Each micro case study after *DMC* shows how other stylish action games tackle the notion of style to achieve very different results.

### **Shinobi “Swift Execution”**

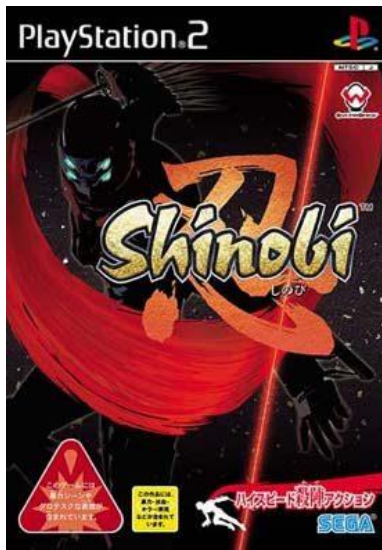
What is important about the games within this section is that it is difficult to say that the influence of *DMC* was present yet, because the nature of game development made it very difficult to implement features present in *DMC*. *DMC* was extremely new and different from anything that came before therefore, despite critical acclaim, it was not yet entirely proven and could have been viewed as a fad. A small degree of influence may be possible regarding aspects that would have been easy to change (lock on, or directional inputs). Regardless, the potential of stylish action

games was certainly recognised since the early 2000s; there were many developers who made their own attempt to craft stylish action games, specifically many 2D series that attempted to transition to 3D. Franchises such as Ghosts 'n Goblins, Rygar, Ninja Gaiden, Altered Beast, and Final Fight all received 3D instalments in the years following *DMC*. Despite *DMC* not having significant influence on stylish action games around this time, they are still worth examination because of the many ways they attempted to approach combat in a 3D environment. *Shinobi* (Sega, 2002) is one of these games, released a year out from *DMC* it is a fascinating stylish action game that shares some similarities with *DMC* but is far more interesting in its unique approach to 3D action.

If *DMC*'s concept of style was the fantasy of being a stylish demon hunter that laughed in the face of danger, then *Shinobi*'s style would one of be efficiency, playing into the fantasy of being a master assassin who is able to execute enemies before they even realise. It is an excellent identity and for the most part the game succeeds in getting the player into this mindset, constructed both through the protagonist Hotsuma's design and the mechanics of the game. Hotsuma's red scarf is not only visually striking, but also the most iconic aspect of the entire game: the focal point on both the Japanese and European box art seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4, Hotsuma is fittingly clad in dark. Its importance to Hotsuma's design can be seen from the moment the player gains control of him.

### **Figure 3**

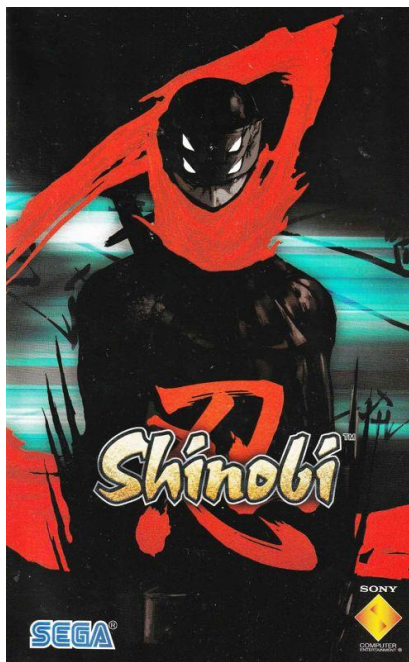
*Japanese Shinobi Box Art*



From *Shinobi*, Sega, 2002.

**Figure 4**

*European Shinobi Box Art*



From *Shinobi*, Sega, 2002.

Although it does not have any gameplay consequences the scarf adds significant follow-through to every action Hotsuma performs, making him look extremely agile and is just plain stylish. *Shinobi* has no narrative to speak of - there are cutscenes throughout, but they are ultimately of little consequence. Events happen without context, the characters have no depth, and it is essentially a flimsy justification for getting to the next stage. Despite Hotsuma's design communicating nothing about the narrative or his character it does convey his profession and contributes greatly to the style of the game.

Hotsuma's move set is straight forward, consisting of basic melee attacks with his sword, an advancing slash by holding down the button, a staggering kick performed by locking on and holding back, and a sweeping slash by holding forward. Hotsuma can also throw shuriken that stun enemies and by double jumping then throwing a shuriken, several shuriken will be spent stunning all surrounding enemies. Unlike *DMC*, *Shinobi* has a dedicated dash button that can be used on the ground and air, it cannot be underestimated how much faster this makes the game feel, an obvious fit for a shinobi. Hotsuma can attack from the air, but there is no juggling present (more interestingly about aerial attacks, landing one on an enemy will refresh the air-dash allowing the player to dash to another airborne enemy). Air-dashing onto a wall will cause Hotsuma to cling to it, which the player can then wall run from; there is no limit to this, which makes the platforming sequences much more manageable. Pressing L2 consumes a scroll, that has varying effects. However, these are discouraged by the game because holding onto the scroll will result in bonus points at the end of a stage. Like *DMC*, *Shinobi* uses room locks to force combat encounters, but Hotsuma's health also gradually deteriorates after a certain period of time and is only extended by the killing of enemies, something older 3D action games did to force combat. In general, Hotsuma's move set encourages fast play and taps into the master assassin fantasy. But it is *Shinobi's* central mechanic, Tate, that really sells the style fantasy.

[Shinobi Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Although Tate is present in the first stage its proper functionality begins in the second stage. When more than three enemies appear at once, several orbs will show up at the top right of the screen (this corresponds to the number of enemies). When Hotsuma kills an enemy one of the orbs will begin to glow and signify the death of the enemy. By dispatching multiple enemies in quick succession all the orbs will glow. This results in a Tate, the primary way to accumulate points. To signify a successful Tate the game will stylishly make quick camera cuts between every defeated enemy before cutting back to Hotsuma who poses and sheathes his sword before every enemy is sliced all at once, punctuated by a quote from him or an additional effect, depending on the length of the Tate.

### [Shinobi Tate](#)



Tate is incredibly stylishly and is what gives *Shinobi* its essential sense of style. This instils the idea that the player is so far ahead of the enemy they can be killed before they even notice. To emphasise how important it is to defeat enemies quickly, to attack an enemy from behind creates double the damage. This encourages the player to achieve Tate and further highlights the speed and efficiency of a shinobi. Locking on and dodging to the side of an enemy will cause Hotsuma to travel behind the enemy further emphasising back attacks. Most enemies in *Shinobi* are extremely weak and cannot challenge the player compared to the imposing challenge of *DMC's* enemies which makes sense since because they primarily serve as fodder to build up Tate.

Scoring also significantly involves Tate and is predominately what determines the player's style grade at the end of a stage. As shown in Figure 5, scoring is based on time, kills, Tate point, boss point, makimono, and damage taken. Kills are determined by the number of enemies defeated, Tate point by how many successful Tates were performed and the size of the performed Tates. Boss points are earned based on how many hits it took the player to kill the boss further incentivising Tate. As mentioned, the number of scrolls the player has left at the end of a stage grants more points through makimono. Despite releasing soon after *DMC*, *Shinobi's* scoring is more fleshed out and focused than *DMC's* because what the game wants the player to do to achieve high style ranks is much clearer.

**Figure 5**

*Shinobi Stage Clear Screen*

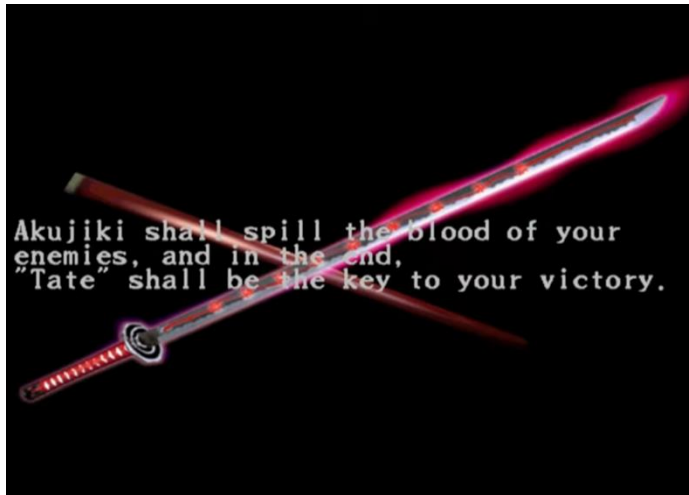


From *Shinobi*, Sega, 2002.

But there is an issue with Tate. The game does not tell the player what exactly Tate is, instead only vaguely suggesting that it will be the key to victory (as seen in Figure 6). In fact, *Shinobi* lacks any tutorials. After the opening cutscenes, the player is placed right into gameplay before they can figure out the controls. Regardless of how much tutorialisation would have been appropriate, the player should be informed about the most basic actions.

**Figure 6**

*Shinobi's Description of Tate*



From *Shinobi*, Sega, 2002.

An even more serious issue with Tate is not about the mechanic but instead *Shinobi's* camera and lock-on. In *DMC*, the camera or lock-on failure was certainly an annoyance that could result in the player's view being obstructed, but when compared with *Shinobi* the impact is limited. *Shinobi's* camera and lock-on failure is catastrophic because the game revolves around Tate. The speed of *Shinobi* demands that the player dispatch enemies in quick succession to maintain Tate and score massive style points. The main problem is that when the player enters an enemy encounter, they are likely to be quickly planning out an approach before engaging and executing on that approach. Enemies die very fast so they are not thinking about the current target, rather the next.

Therefore, when the lock-on decides to prioritise a target, the player has not anticipated that they will need to stop whatever they are already doing and either quickly swap to the target they want or shift to the unwanted target to avoid dropping Tate. Neither of these responses feel great because the decision was not the player's own. Whenever this occurs, the player can end up feel cheated. Furthermore, although it is difficult to precisely determine how lock-on functions it does appear to prioritise enemies on screen compared in favour of enemies that are close to the player. Overall, the lock-on issues are detrimental to the quality of *Shinobi's* combat. *Shinobi* is the perfect example of why a reliable camera and lock-on are important for 3D action games. A simple way the game could be greatly improved would be to have lock-on prioritise weaker enemies first because they are almost always what the player wants to begin Tate on.

Level design is also not strong in *Shinobi*. Every stage is very linear and straightforward, almost feeling like a direct translation of 2D levels. Some of the later stages also put more of an emphasis on platforming and vertical traversal, which the player is simply not equipped to deal with because control over the camera is limited. There are enough visual changes between most stages to avoid visual repetition, however. Boss fights are also not a highlight in the game which is because of the focus on Tate. The boss fights do showcase that Tate is the intended approach for combat because almost all bosses will spawn smaller enemies which lets the player build Tate and then kill the boss in possibly one strike. That is very satisfying, but issues arise when it is too hard to build up Tate, or the boss places itself in difficult-to-reach locations. The game's final boss exemplifies all these issues because the enemies will spawn very infrequently and the boss teleports to precarious locations, and by the time the player accumulates enough kills he might just teleport away.

### [Shinobi Boss Example](#)



*Shinobi's* combat may be simplistic and there is a complete lack of extrinsic motivation, but the game's short length, consistent pacing, and Tate's gratifying cinematic flair keeps it from feeling repetitive. It is unfortunate that it stumbles in a few areas and that its camera and lock-on

significantly hold the game back. If these issues were not as pronounced *Shinobi* could have become an iconic early stylish action game.

### **Otogi: Myth of Demons “The Meaning of Freedom”**

*Otogi: Myth of Demons* (FromSoftware, 2002) is an extraordinarily strange early stylish action game that is both interesting on its own and simultaneously reveals a lot about its developer, FromSoftware and the way they develop games. *Otogi* sees the player take control of Raikoh, a warrior who exists in a state between life and death, maintained by a voice only ever referred to as the Princess (who tasks him with saving the world from demons and restoring the Great Seal).

The foundation of *Otogi's* gameplay involves the player entering a stage with a designated objective, which ranges from concepts like: destroying all enemies, collecting certain items, or defeating a boss. To accomplish this, Raikoh has a variety of abilities including fast light attacks, slower but stronger heavy attacks that can both combo enemies, a far-reaching dash for both the ground and air, and four different magic spells. Dragon shoots out a dragon that homes in on an enemy, Phoenix summons a flaming bird that travels directly forward, Chimera calls down lighting from above to hit enemies close to Raikoh, and Butterfly creates a multitude of butterflies that slowly move forward. Each spell also has three different levels, which increase the power of the spell. These spells consume the magic gauge, which also doubles as Raikoh's initial health bar, gradually depleting unless the player kills enemies; if the bar depletes, then Raikoh's life orbs will begin to deplete. This creates a situation, like *Shinobi*, where the game forces the player to engage with enemies so they can survive. By holding down the button for spells the player can charge the spell and this then increases its strength at the cost of more magic gauge. But, the player can also perform a fully charged spell from the end of a melee combo. This creates a situation in which charging can be entirely circumvented leaving the function effectively useless.

[Otogi Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Raikoh's move set also changes in both small and significant ways, depending on the equipment the player selects before entering a stage. *Otogi* features a variety of equipment for the player to select including a weapon, a magic spell, and an accessory. The biggest impact this has on the player's gameplay is the magic they select; the other two pieces of equipment make very minor changes. Raikoh's combos change slightly depending on the weapon type, but this is mostly an animation change. Each weapon also has a weight stat that determines Raikoh's general movement speed and jump height. Unless the weapon is exceptionally heavy Raikoh does feel light and floaty, intensified by his fast dash that can be used almost indefinitely in the air. This creates the sensation of a very agile character, like *Shinobi*. Some weapons also come with additional effects, such as the dragon staff increasing the power of dragon magic. Accessories, meanwhile, provide minor benefits like increasing defence. Selecting magic can be crucial in specific circumstances because each enemy belongs to one of four houses and by selecting magic that opposes a house the enemy will take double damage, or half if the magic is from the same house. This results in the player thinking about which magic to select before entering a stage, and by examining the enemies present. *Otogi* also contains a leveling system but its direct impact on gameplay is difficult to discern because numbers for stats are not presented; the game probably would not be very different if levelling did not exist.

### [Otogi Equipment](#)



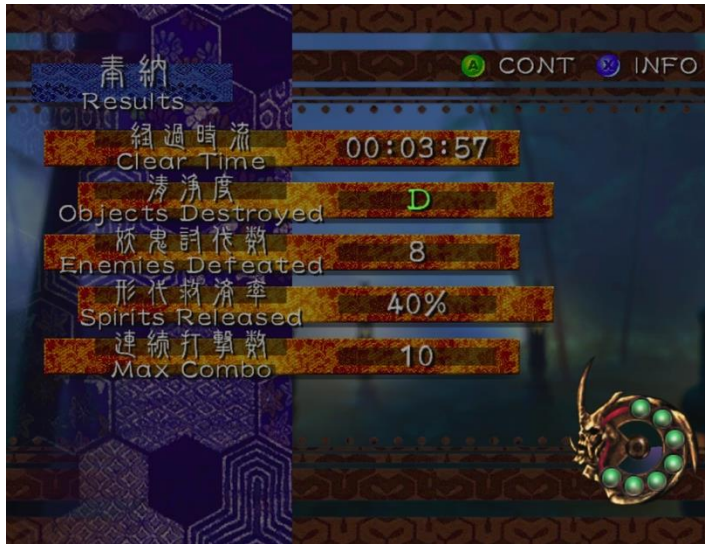
*Otogi* is not a combo-heavy game like *DMC*, it is difficult to perform combos on enemies and the player is not encouraged to do so. *Otogi's* combat is much more focused on short burst of offense and magic spells that hit many enemies. The core satisfaction comes from the vastly destructible environments and powerful magic spells. Almost every object and piece of terrain in a stage can be destroyed using magic and launching enemies into the environment to deal more damage.

### [Otogi Destruction](#)



Seeing many enemies and the surrounding environment being decimated by magic makes the player feel incredibly powerful. This unfortunately then leaves the enemies feeling rather weak with many of them only shooting projectiles at the player. The nature of the powerful spells causes *Otogi* to struggle to create a meaningful challenge. Often *Otogi* resorts to polluting the screen with enemy projectiles in an attempt to hit the player. The nature of combat also makes the game's lock-on less important than *DMC* or *Shinobi*. It also functions slightly differently those two games. Instead of requiring the player to hold down a button, in *Otogi* the player only needs to press the button. This then maintains lock-on until pressing the button again; this is called a toggle lock-on.

This emphasis on the destructible environment is notable because the game encourages it through grading. *Otogi* does contain a grading system which while, similar in functionality, is very different from the grading system in *DMC* or *Shinobi*. It consists of clear time, objects destroyed, enemies defeated, spirits released, and max combo (seen in Figure 7). The player is only ranked on the number of objects destroyed and spirits released, spirits being found within destructible objects and further encourages destruction. Collecting all spirits in the game rewards the player with the powerful moonlight sword. Clearing stages under specific requirements, such as a fast clear time, grants secret equipment. The method of obtaining both rewards is very obtuse, making it unlikely that the player will obtain either without knowing they exist.

**Figure 7***Otogi Results Screen*

From *Otogi: Myth of Demons*, FromSoftware, 2002.

Overall, *Otogi's* combat is satisfying because of some very fundamental aspects. Although on a surface level *Otogi* might not have the style of either *DMC* or *Shinobi* in a similar sense that Raikoh lacks the inherent style of Dante or Hotsuma, the game still manages to create a unique vibe and excels at weaving its narrative into gameplay.

To describe *Otogi's* narrative as esoteric is an understatement. It is very unlikely even after finishing the game, the player will have any understanding of the narrative; so much so that I am sure my own interpretation of the events is missing some key information. Despite the fact that the game presents the player with narrative information consistently through cutscenes that see the Princess tell Raikoh about the world and its history, whatever she or other characters say initially seems impossible to decipher because these narrative threads are very loose. The player often only knows what their objective is for the current stage and not the reason behind it. Yet despite this, through careful examination and much inference, *Otogi* tells a surprisingly thoughtful story about the concept of free will. *Otogi* begins with a text crawl describing how for a thousand years the

Imperial Court ruled, but once the Great Seal was broken it quickly collapse to leave a city devoid of life. Not much is learned about the game's world beyond this text crawl and the onus is left on the player to decipher the cryptic dialogue from various characters. Although much of the world and events that led to the current situation remain vague it becomes increasingly clear that the narrative in *Otogi* is one about free will and the stagnation of life because of immortality.

Raikoh encounters various demons throughout the game who both taunt and question him about his own free will, the most notable being the Crimson King (shown in Figure 8). The Crimson King is a demon who was sealed away by different means than the Great Seal.

### Figure 8

#### *The Crimson King*



From *Otogi: Myth of Demons*, FromSoftware, 2002.

In the second encounter with him before his death, the Crimson King reflects on his life and mentions how the pain he feels over his decision is proof of his free will. Before passing away he bluntly asks Raikoh if he can truly call himself free. The focus of *Otogi* is the concept of free will, what defines one as free, and the stagnation of life because of immortality. This is appropriate for

its setting and results in many thematic comparisons between *Otogi's* narrative and religions such as Zen or Shinto and their treatment of concepts like free will or immortality.

### [Otogi Crimson King](#)



This notion of freedom, Raikoh's freedom specifically is represented through gameplay. He must obey the princess to continue living; this is done by killing demons. As mentioned, Raikoh's health will gradually deplete if he does not kill enemies. This forces the player to act for the Princess in order to maintain Raikoh's life, thereby making it effectively determined by the Princess. Also, whether intentional or not, because the player does not know much about the context or potential consequences of their objectives, this is potentially reflective of Raikoh's actions because, once again, if he refuses to obey the Princess his life ends. It is genuinely compelling to piece together *Otogi's* narrative and leaves much room for discussion about the overall meaning and character motivations in the story.

The presentation in *Otogi* also perfectly captures its unique vibe, reminiscent of ancient Japanese aesthetics. Although the game itself is graphically comparable to other games of this time, it uses an art style reminiscent of Ukiyo-e to depict various demons, weapons, and accessories. Detailed descriptions provide even more insight into the world and narrative of the game. The music also

perfectly fits this aesthetic by incorporating many classic Japanese instruments, resulting in a unique soundtrack.

What is especially interesting about the obtuse and esoteric nature of *Otogi's* story and gameplay is how similar it is to FromSoftware's recent 'Souls' series and adjacent games. *Otogi* and the Souls series share many similarities, the most obvious of which is their focus on civilisations that have fallen to ruin due to the hubris of their rulers. Gaming audiences and critics attribute much of the Souls series identity to Hidetaka Miyazaki. This is certainly true, but *Otogi* proves that FromSoftware have remained true to many concepts present throughout *Otogi*. The potential influence of *Otogi* is something others have recognised as well. An article titled *Why Dark Souls Owes a Debt to its Forgotten Older Sibling Otogi* (Zeller, 2019) explores many of the parallels between the narrative of both *Otogi* and the Souls series, stating that the Souls series "undoubtedly owes a debt of gratitude to its older sibling *Otogi*." (Zeller, 2019)

*Otogi*, like *Shinobi* and other early stylish action games, is attempting its own vision with little concern for the existence of *DMC*. It succeeds in creating a unique experience that cannot be found elsewhere. *Otogi* also reveals how FromSoftware's design ethos has not changed in several decades and, although the series may have faded into obscurity, the ideas certainly have not.

### **Devil May Cry 2 "Let's Not Baby"**

After the *DMC* smash hit, one might wonder how Capcom could possibly follow that genre defining title, or improve on its stylish, challenging gameplay in any new or unique ways. Unfortunately, *Devil May Cry 2 (DMC 2)* (Capcom, 2003) would disappoint audiences in a variety of ways, with critics describing the game as "a disappointing title that's shallow where the first was deep, plain where the first was decorative and imaginative, and simple where the other was complex." (Perry, 2003) Although the exact details of how this occurred have remained hidden much has been learned over the years. Capcom were supposedly so confident in the success of *DMC* that they hastily greenlit a sequel before *DMC* had even released. Series scenario planner, Bingo Morihashi, recounts how "Industry-wise, plans for '*DMC 2*' began at a time when arcade games were on the decline. That was shortly before '*DMC (1)*' was completed" (Capcom, 2015, p. 208).

This sequel was to be developed by Capcom's arcade-centric Production Studio 1, who had mostly worked on fighting games, and not Production Studio 4 (*DMC's* development team); it was developed in almost complete separation, only a few team members carrying over. It was put into development so quickly that much of *DMC's* development crew, including Kamiya, were not initially aware of its existence initially. This alone presents issues because the arcade division was unequipped for console development. Furthermore, many members of the team did not understand or did not like the concept of *DMC*; the producer did not like Dante. Frequent Capcom artist Daigo Ikeno mentions that "we didn't take the parts of '*DMC (1)*' that the players really loved into account well enough ... I think our attitude was a little too much 'we're gonna make it how we want to.'" (Capcom, 2015, p. 204) And that "Dante's sudden change into a more taciturn character was the producer's decision, because he didn't like the joke-cracking wiseass Dante from '1.'" (Capcom, 2015, p. 204)

Time was also an issue for the game. The team was not given enough time to transition to a different type of development process let alone understand, replicate, and build upon what made *DMC* such a big hit. *DMC* had also not been released for very long so it would have been difficult to understand what audiences really liked about the game and why it worked. Hideaki Itsuno (who will later become series director) replaced the original, still unnamed, game director approximately six months before the deadline. He was ordered to reorganize the project and claimed that "they said that nothing was getting done and that needed to change ... they had determined that at least the 'Stinger' attack was essential ... but none of the other attacks had been worked on at all." (Capcom, 2015, p. 221) Essentially, the *DMC 2* that released was the product of six months of development time. With the understanding that *DMC 2* was made by an inexperienced team that did not understand the appeal of *DMC*, disliked the game, and the game was developed in an extremely short amount of time, it seems almost inevitable that *DMC 2* would fail to meet the expectations set by its predecessor. Ironically, *DMC 2* failing to meet expectations in terms of combat, narrative, and style is what gives it value in this research as the game shows how difficult it is to recreate the appeal and gameplay of *DMC*. That lack of appeal is perhaps *DMC 2's* worst aspect, it is an incredibly boring experience both in terms of gameplay and style.

Despite this, the game does introduce some minor improvements upon *DMC*. One of the best changes is the ability to swap between firearms without entering the menu. This greatly improves the pacing of combat and allows for more immediately available options.

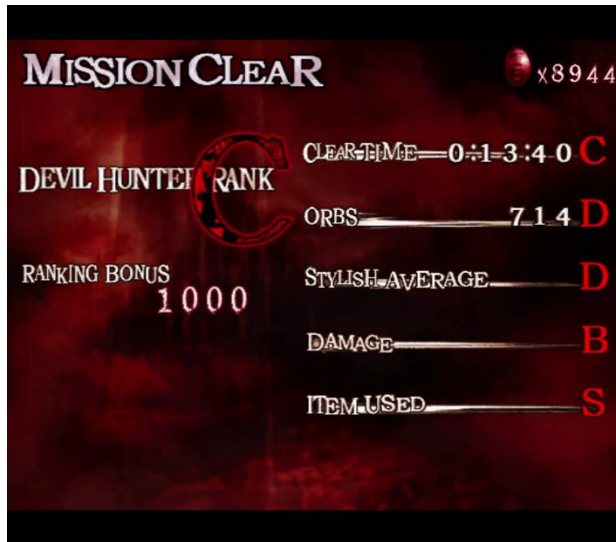
#### [DMC 2 Firearm Switching](#)



Lock-on now has a proper reticule so the player always knows which enemies they will attack when locked on; there are other issues pertaining to the lock-on that undermine this, which will be discussed later. The grading system of the game, (shown in Figure 9), is also slightly more transparent and appropriate than *DMC*: it now grades a stylish average and damage taken, which further encourages players to behave stylishly. But these grading changes do little for *DMC 2*'s gameplay because players are not likely engaged enough to think about how stylish they are.

#### **Figure 9**

*DMC 2 Mission Clear Screen*



From *Devil May Cry 2*, Capcom, 2003.

Finally, Dante has a dedicated dodge button which is not an objective improvement over the original, but it does potentially lay the foundation for dodging mechanics in future titles. Sadly, these improvements are not enough to redeem the rest of *DMC 2* and perhaps the best place to begin critiquing the game is Dante himself.

As mentioned, the producer of *DMC 2* was not a fan of Dante's attitude in the first game and so his personality has seen a complete change in *DMC 2*. Dante has become a very tight-lipped character, and a painfully dull protagonist who lacks any semblance of personality from the original. He often resorts to quiet, brooding angst and a bizarre new coin gimmick like Batman's Two-Face as a substitute for this lack of character.

[DMC 2 Dante](#)



By comparison, even a character like Hotsuma in *Shinobi* who did not speak much in a game which was almost devoid of narrative, was still enjoyable to play because he was very stylish. This change to Dante's character could be interpreted as suffering from some sort of loss, as Ikeno suggests: "his sudden silence almost seemed to imply that something terrible had happened between the events of '1' and '2.'" (Capcom, 2015, p. 204) This lack of personality extends to the storyline and other characters: the only new characters are Matier and Lucia. Lucia appears in only a handful of scenes and although she is a playable character, contributes very little to the game. She does not present any particularly new gameplay ideas and her existence is questionable after Trish was established as Dante's sidekick at the end of *DMC*. Arius, the game's antagonist, manages to be shallower than Mundus was who at least had a personal connection to Dante and his family. The narrative itself is disconnected. It is never clear where Dante is going, or what he is trying to accomplish. He often appears new locations before the mission starts, without any connection to the events or characters. The narrative of *DMC 2* shows that, despite its simplistic story *DMC*'s added context to the game's events and made the player care about the story more, if only slightly, none of which can be said for *DMC 2*.

Dante's lack of personality and style extends to the combat of *DMC 2* which, as previously mentioned, fails to retain what made its predecessor so compelling. Dante's move set remains

mostly the same, using a mixture of sword and gunplay, but compared to *DMC* the feel of Dante's gameplay is much worse. This can largely be attributed to his animations which both feel and look significantly weaker and less impactful than *DMC*; the stinger animation is perhaps the best showcase of this. What was once a powerful, fast, far-reaching move with an accompanying sound effect to convey its impact is now a limp slow sword thrust with the same speed throughout the animation. The dust trail that Dante creates is also less distinct.

#### [DMC 2 Stinger](#)



Dante's pause combos have been replaced by a single combo which can be altered by holding a different direction on the left analogue stick.

#### [DMC 2 Combos](#)



This approach to combos presents interesting possibilities but its implementation, combined with swordplay's general ineffectiveness, prevents the combos from being utilised. This is because, when locked on to an enemy, stinger and high time take priority over the combos. It is a strange and unnecessary change because pause combos avoided this situation entirely and presented no issues. This can be proven by stylish action games continuing to use pause combos. Dante also no longer uses Ifrit, leaving him with only his sword. Although *DMC 2* contains three separate swords for the player to choose the only difference between them is range and damage, which is a surface level choice. Even the simple act of moving Dante feels sluggish, with a noticeable delay on basic actions, such as turning 180 degrees or landing from a jump. There was no delay in *DMC*.

[DMC 2 Sluggish Movement](#)



Contributing to gameplay feeling much worse is the game's soft and hard lock-on. Despite *DMC 2* adding a reticule to the lock-on its functionality has been changed in strange ways. On a surface level, the lock-on is familiar but the soft lock-on is extremely aggressive, so much so that it can be difficult to hit stationary switches if enemies are present.

[DMC 2 Hitting a Switch](#)



By pressing R2 the player can attack without having to be locked on, but this is revealing. It proves that the team was aware that the soft lock-on was too aggressive and chose to implement a feature to bypass it, rather than change the soft lock-on itself. The lock-on also causes the camera to focus exclusively on the locked-on enemy and refuses to de-lock even after moving far away from the enemy.

[DMC 2 Lock on](#)



Despite Dante's imperfect movement and swordplay, the feel of *DMC* contributed to the game's enjoyment, which in turn can make the player want to act stylishly. *DMC 2* completely missed this important point and highlights the problem that, if the character is not even enjoyable to control, how can the player even begin to think about acting stylishly.

The shop, one of the most enjoyable aspects of *DMC*, (allowing players to purchase new moves with red orbs to act even more stylishly and earn more moves) has been ruined. *DMC 2* does not feature any purchasable moves, new or old; only consumable items, blue and purple orbs, and the ability to increase the damage of swords and firearms. Apart from making Dante's gameplay less interesting because he has fewer moves to utilise, the shop also gives little extrinsic reward for the player to act stylishly anymore. Therefore, the player can safely engage enemies with only firearms and never feel the need to achieve high style ranks for the red orb bonus. The joy of spending has been removed. The boring gameplay also results in a lack of intrinsic motivation. Players will probably be uninterested in improving in a game that barely engages them.

Perhaps the best example of how *DMC 2* fundamentally misunderstands the appeal of *DMC* are the changes made to firearms, especially Dante's signature handguns, Ebony and Ivory. Previously, firearms were a secondary feature of Dante's arsenal. They provided utility to his move

set, but more importantly, they communicated ideas about his character, sense of style, and work ethic. Ebony and Ivory barely affected the demons they were expected to vanquish. That did not bother Dante, because he simply used them because they were cool, not for their effectiveness. This asked the player to think about them in the same way but in *DMC 2* they have had their damage output increased tremendously and can now launch and juggle enemies. This change is completely contradictory to the reason why they did low damage, why most enemies were unaffected by their bullets, and despite those attributes they were still useful.

#### [DMC 2 Ebony and Ivory](#)



Because swordplay and general movement have become weak and unenjoyable, choosing to exclusive focus on gunplay is often the best way to engage with enemies in *DMC 2*. The result is incredibly boring gameplay.

#### [DMC 2 Gameplay Demonstration](#)



This is not helped by gun shots in DT that deal vast amounts of damage and further encourage exclusive use of Ebony and Ivory. The way *DMC 2* handles Ebony and Ivory takes away from the appeal they previously held; they are now the best ways to deal with enemies instead of a complement to swordplay. Unsurprisingly, this makes *DMC 2* an incredibly easy game, which appears to have been an objective. The game's producer claims that the biggest issue with the original was "*Devil May Cry's* challenge factor ... it was just too difficult" (Cooper, 2002). But the producer was unaware that this challenge in fact contributed to the game's sense of style.

All this is made worse by the game effectively forcing this playstyle with certain bosses - the most infamous is the infested chopper. The infested chopper causes the player to run away from it, up buildings and across rooftops, the actual fight sees the chopper permanently airborne completely out of reach from melee attacks forcing the player into blinding shooting at it from offscreen.

[DMC 2 Infested Chopper](#)



The infested chopper epitomises the entirety of *DMC 2*, something that barely engages the player. The game is devoid of style and features a character masquerading as Dante in both gameplay and personality. Ironically, the way combat in *DMC 2* looks when doing nothing but shooting enemies creates a connection between the player and Dante, both are incredibly bored and uninterested.

Many of the decisions in *DMC 2* can probably be attributed to its poor development but the result is still a game that completely misses the appeal of *DMC* and fails to retain any of its style or enjoyability. It is not a frustrating or unintentionally difficult game. But the overall experience is both very easy and boring, barely able to engage the player – there is very little incentive for the player to vary their playstyle. Yet somehow, *DMC 2* is still notable two decades later and audiences still discuss the game’s dramatic decrease in quality and wondering where *DMC*’s style went. Perhaps the best summation of style in *DMC 2* is in this a single statement: Dante cannot even taunt enemies, a mechanic that did not directly affect enemies but instead specifically rewarded players for embodying the style Dante once had.

### **Castlevania: Lament of Innocence “A Cautious Evolution”**

By 2003 the Castlevania series had become widely renowned and recognised as one of the greatest 2D action franchises. *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night (SotN)* (Konami, 1997) propelled the series to new heights, and with 3D becoming the dominant perspective it is no wonder the series would also attempt a 3D entry. *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence (LoI)* (Konami, 2003) was not the first foray into 3D for this series because *Castlevania* (Konami, 1999) was developed for the Nintendo 64 (the significance of this will be discussed later). *LoI* still has relevance for this research because it was Koji Igarashi's (director of SotN) first attempt at a 3D Castlevania game. *DMC* was also compared to Castlevania, some claiming that "comparisons to the Castlevania series are inevitable, both in terms of gameplay design and aesthetic feel. It's almost as if Capcom were deliberately showing Konami how to properly execute its franchise in 3D." (Lopez, 2006) *LoI* is the first game in the chronological timeline of Castlevania that tells the story of Leon Belmont as he enters the vampire Walter's castle to rescue his beloved.

To accomplish this the player traverses through five different areas of the castle, slaying bosses at the end of each, then a final level to reach Walter. Leon can perform light and heavy attacks for both the ground and air using the Belmont's iconic whip which can be executed after each other for unique combo attacks. He can guard enemy attacks and parry with precise timing, or dodge after entering the guard stance. As the player progresses through the game, they will unlock more actions that Leon can perform but the game does not use a traditional levelling system as most actions are unlocked by defeating several different enemy types. This system is much more fitting for an action game as the player will be fighting a variety of enemies. It is unfortunate however that most of the actions learned do not contribute to Leon's overall move set. Many actions only extend existing combos rather than provide entirely new moves which limits Leon's potential combo ability. Like *Otogi*, *LoI* also contains equipment but again, adds very little. Equipment only exists as minor statistical changes that are difficult to recognise. Relics are the most impactful change affecting how the player's MP (magic points) will be spent when activated, such as the wolf's foot increasing movement speed until MP is depleted.

[Castlevania Gameplay Demonstration](#)



By far the most striking aspect of *LoI*'s combat, however, is the sub-weapon and coloured orb system. The classic Castlevania sub-weapons make an appearance in *LoI* – for example, the knife, axe, holy water, cross, and crystal. They add a secondary attack to Leon's arsenal, depending on the current sub-weapon. This secondary attack changes depending on which of the seven coloured orbs is currently equipped. This system adds a significant variety of attacks to choose from, even for just a single sub-weapon. The changes brought by the orbs are also genuinely different, such as the green orb with the axe creating a fast-advancing dash to approach enemies while the black orb creates rapid slashes.

[Castlevania Sub weapons](#)



One of the actions Leon will eventually learn is a launcher, allowing him to rise into the air and perform aerial combos; although its implementation is awkward and leaves much to be desired. The main issues are both the look and feel of the aerial combos because the animation looks almost identical to the grounded attacks and this, consequently, makes aerial combos stiff and awkward. As a comparison, *Otogi*, (which also had proper aerial combos) looked graceful because Raikoh was a naturally floaty and light weight character. This lack of satisfaction and reward means there is no incentive for the player to perform stylish launcher combos; and most of Leon's combos exist only on the ground, leaving aerial combos as an afterthought. The inclusion of launchers and aerial combos could almost be seen as a response to *DMC* and the way in which it changed how people perceived the idea of juggling.

[Castlevania Air Combo](#)



*LoI* is a serviceable stylish action game but its lack of distinct identity leaves much of the game feeling too safe. I would argue that a significant issue with creating style for *LoI* is, ironically, the Belmont's iconic weapon as a whip. It is extremely difficult to communicate style through gameplay, both because a whip is not a combat weapon in nature and it is difficult to differentiate it from swords. Leon's whip attacks are largely indistinct, even though they certainly have a long range and some wide sweeping actions, and the occasional whip crack. But it is very easy to imagine many of them being performed with a sword. This is also perhaps why aerial attacks both look and feel awkward - a whip lacks the weight of a sword. Obviously airborne attacks for either a whip or sword are not realistic, but you could imagine a sword causing more impact. The *Castlevania* TV series showcases the various ways a whip can be made stylish and distinct, such as the fight between Trevor Belmont and Alucard (Ellis, 2017).

Beyond the lack of a strong identity, however, *LoI*'s biggest issue is how little the game takes advantage of the 3D environment. It is very easy to imagine the environments working the same in 2D, often composed of long unchanging hallways, square rooms, and almost no verticality as seen in Figure 10 and 11. But it is commendable that the game's five main levels can be completed in a non-linear fashion. However, the levels are far too similar in terms of layout despite being visually distinct, and that backtracking becomes excessive.

**Figure 10**

*LoI Anti Soul Mysteries Lab Map*



From *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence*, 2003, Konami.

**Figure 11**

*LoI Garden Forgotten by Time Map*



From *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence*, 2003, Konami.

Also, unlike classic *Castlevania*, platforming is kept to an extreme minimum and punishment for failure is very minor. It is possible to assume that the reason *LoI* is very safe with transitioning *Castlevania* into 3D is due to the reception of *Castlevania* (Nintendo 64). The previous attempt by the series to create a 3D instalment was not received well by critics. Common complaints from audiences were focused on how poorly executed some aspects were in 3D, such as platforming and the camera. “The often-fixed 3D perspective makes it really hard to judge the distance and location of the platforms, quite often leading to accidental deaths.” (Schneider, 1999) Igarashi also did not work on *Castlevania* so perhaps *LoI* was playing it safe with the 3D to avoid the same mistakes. However, *LoI*'s soundtrack, composed by Michiru Yamane, exudes style and gives the game much of its identity with some of the best music the series had seen yet.

This cautious approach extends to *LoI*'s narrative because it does little to either detract or add to the existing *Castlevania* mythos. As mentioned, *LoI* is positioned as the first game in the *Castlevania* timeline that establishes the eternal feud between the Belmont Clan and Dracula. Perhaps for this reason, any already perceived notion of these two is not altered significantly, the Belmont Clan are righteous vampire hunters and Dracula is the ultimate villain as they have always been presented. Leon Belmont is the archetypal hero that fights for justice and good, who turns the tragedy of losing his betrothed into his motivation to stop evil. Meanwhile Mathias, later revealed to be Dracula, is only ever mentioned in the opening text crawl and is only present in game at the very end. His goal of transforming himself into a vampire to gain eternal life as his revenge against God, blaming him for the death of his wife, Elisabetha.

This is an understandable, albeit surface level motivation for this series iconic villain. Prior to *LoI* Dracula was always a straightforward villain so this backstory does not ruin previous incarnations. This cautious, safe approach to Dracula's origin best describes *LoI*'s entire existence. It is a competent stylish action game that ultimately does little to the *Castlevania* franchise, positive or negative, as well as the wider sub-genre. The game lacks distinct elements aside from its sub-weapons and its gameplay does not take advantage of the 3D perspective.

### **Bujingai “The Clash”**

As is the case for early stylish action games, *Bujingai* (Taito, 2003) falls into the same camp as *Shinobi* and *Otogi*, being a very experimental stylish action game with its own distinct foundation separate from *DMC*, whilst also sharing minor similarities. These similarities mostly extend to foundational concepts such as *Bujingai*'s lock-on and dodging functioning the same way as in *DMC*, or a collectible currency that can be used to improve the player's character. Style grading is also present at the end of a stage called 'Stylized Level Action Rank' and grades consecutive hits, stylized action points, damage taken, completion time, and orbs collected (seen in Figure 12 and 13). Spending a 'continue' after dying will also decrease the player's rank at the end. *Bujingai*'s ranking metrics runs into the same issues as *DMC* regarding clarity - it is difficult for the player to determine exactly what some metrics mean. Stylized action points in particular mean almost nothing to the player because the game never explicitly states what they are.

**Figure 12**

*Bujingai Stage Results*



Game Results		
Max Consecutive Hits	75	Beginner
Stylized Action Points	1384	Master
Damage Taken from Enemies	580	Advanced
Completion Time	00:14:49	Intermediate
Orbs Collected	719	Master
Continues	0	

Please press the \* button to continue.

From *Bujingai*, 2003, Taito.

**Figure 13**

*Bujingai Stylized Level Action Rank*

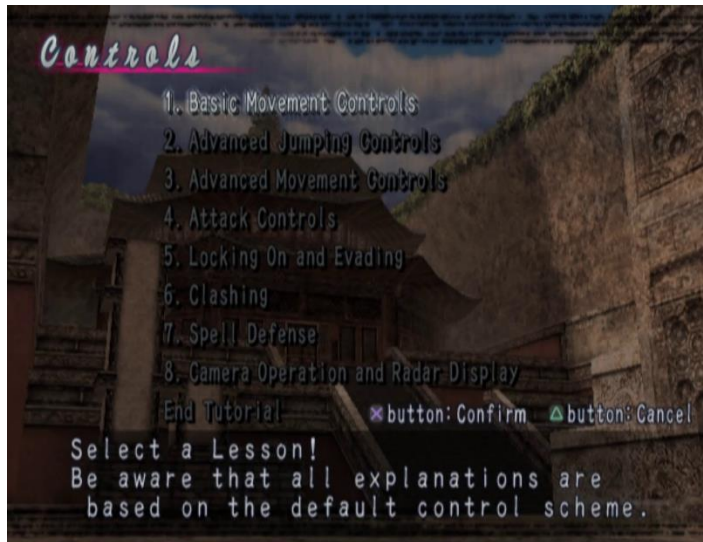


From *Bujingai*, 2003, Taito.

Before moving to a discussion of *Bujingai*'s combat fundamentals, it is worth mentioning that it is the first stylish action game included in this research to feature a proper tutorial for the player to learn the game's mechanics through a series of optional videos that explain various mechanics. *Bujingai* has a very different approach to combat therefore these tutorial videos, a list of which is seen in Figure 14, are appreciated and help the player better understand the mechanics of *Bujingai*. However, the format for these tutorials is somewhat unconventional because most tutorials will have the player act out the tutorials themselves, instead of watching a video. It does not impact greatly on how the player learns the game, but it is unclear why the player cannot do these tutorials themselves considering that the training environment is available for the player to become accustomed to the game.

## Figure 14

*Bujingai* Tutorial Video List



From *Bujingai*, 2003, Taito.

In *Bujingai* the player controls the character Lau, modelled by Japanese pop star Gackt. There are two primary melee attacks here: light and heavy, to be used airborne and on the ground. Repeatedly pressing the light attack button results in a very long combo, finishing with a large kick that sends enemies flying, and heavy attack results in a single spinning slash primarily used to avoid being surrounded. Similar to *Otogi*, the player can equip one of several magic abilities that cost a portion of the magic gauge: these includes spells such as a fire ball, drill attack, or rain of arrows. From a neutral position (which means not already performing any action) this is all the player has available. But by pressing heavy attack at any point during the light attack combo, Lau can transition to a unique attack that then has several follow-up attacks associated with each action. Pressing light attack after will result in a launcher that can be used to combo enemies in the air; pressing heavy attack again performs the spin attack; magic instantly activates the equipped magic; and jump is a flurry of kicks that knocks enemies away. *Bujingai* also has a unique approach to taunts. Instead of an individual action like Dante's taunt, by holding down the attack button at the end of a combo Lau will stylishly pose as the camera snaps into a flattering angle. This is a remarkably stylish way to handle taunts, whilst also encouraging players to perform combos in their entirety.

[Bujingai Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Finally, whilst in mid-air and by holding down the jump button Lau will glide forward a short distance. But the feel of this is very stiff because the player has very little control over the direction in which Lau glides. This lack of control also extends to the game's wall run and jump. The lack of control the player has over Lau's movement is especially problematic because *Bujingai* frequently asks the player to perform long stretches of platforming. If the glide functioned more like that of *Shinobi's* air dash these frustrating platforming segments would probably feel much better to overcome and could also result in more stylish combos.

#### [Bujingai Platforming](#)



These basic mechanics make for an already stylish and satisfying combat system, but it is the clash, *Bujingai's* most distinct mechanic that really makes it stand out among other stylish action games. One of the resources Lau utilises is a ring of defence petals, shown in Figure 15. When an enemy attacks the player, specifically from the front, a clash will be engaged. Lau deflects the enemy's assault until the defence petals are depleted. If the petals are depleted, Lau's guard will break and he will almost always take damage.

**Figure 15**

*Defence Petals*



From *Bujingai*, 2003, Taito.

By pressing the attack button during a clash sequence, the player can initiate a counterattack and Lau goes on the offensive. Against regular enemies the counterattack will typically defeat them outright. But it is against powerful enemies and bosses, who have their own defence petals, where clash truly stands out. Clash creates extremely stylish, compelling sequences composed of attack flurries where both the player and enemy are locked into a tug of war until either's defence depletes, or one retreats. To retreat, the player can press the dodge button during a clash to escape the enemy's attacks, which is typically done to avoid Lau's guard being broken and getting hit as a result. Furthermore, enemy magic attacks can also be repelled with clash - this requires the player to time their attack just before the magic hits them. If successful, the magic gauge will flip, and by mashing the attack button until the gauge is full or if the gauge is already full, unleash a power blast back at the enemy.

[Bujingai Clash](#)



Clash, in combination with *Bujingai*'s animations, visual effects, enemy, and environment design gives the game a very flashy, stylish look and feel that is reminiscent of Tokusatsu action, a medium of Japanese film and television that makes heavy use of practical effects. That *Bujingai* communicates a strong sense of style through gameplay is especially important because *Bujingai* has no narrative to speak of. Much like *Shionbi* there are cutscenes throughout and the notion of a story, but *Bujingai* ultimately has even less impact than *Shinobi*.

As mentioned, regular enemies will typically die outright in a clash counterattack. This results in *Bujingai* struggling to challenge the player in interesting ways because enemies cannot handle the power of clash. Most enemies also do not engage with clash in interesting ways - enemies will typically attack the player and then be countered and this is how most interactions with regular enemies play out. The result is that moment-to-moment combat in *Bujingai* feels somewhat underwhelming. The most engaging and stylish moments of *Bujingai* are its boss fights that revolve around clash, which unfortunately only applies to a minority of bosses. The two bosses that perfectly capture what makes the clash system so potentially engaging are the battles with Master Naguri and the second battle with Rei, the game's final boss.

The primary reason these two are especially great boss fights is because they both force the player to engage with the clash system. They are almost untouchable without first breaking their guards. They also have more unique follow-ups out of clash keeping the player attentive. This is unlike the Overlord enemies who only appear to counter the player's counter. Rei is an epic showcase of *Bujingai's* combat and proves that clash is a combat system with real potential to be extremely stylish and distinct. The battles against Rei and Naguri also continue to prove that, like Nelo Angelo, typically the most engaging boss archetype for stylish action games is an opponent comparable to the player's own character, both because they can gauge the strength of their opponent and it also results in much more stylish showdowns than generic spectacles that emphasize the opponent's size.

### [Bujingai Bosses](#)



Ultimately, *Bujingai* is a stylish action game that buries its potential under frustrating encounters, boss fights that do not play to the game's strengths, and excessive platforming sequences. Yet despite these flaws, *Bujingai's* clash system remains so engaging and stylish that it often carries the game and results in sequences unlike any other stylish action games. It is a game of extreme

highs, with some of its boss fights and clash, and extreme lows, with its platforming sequences and lacking regular enemy encounters.

## **The Pinnacle**

### **Ninja Gaiden “The Essence of a Ninja”**

As mentioned in the section regarding *Shinobi*, the early 2000s saw many 2D action franchises attempt the jump to 3D, with varying degrees of success. So, it is no surprise that one of the most iconic 2D action franchises, Ninja Gaiden, would create its own 3D instalment with *Ninja Gaiden* (Team Ninja, 2004). *Ninja Gaiden* is especially notable because it was considered by some to be the first genuine contender to *DMC*. One review stated “*Castlevania* had atmosphere, *Rygar* had level design, and *Devil May Cry* had cool. Only *Ninja Gaiden* has the whole package” (Nutt, 2004). *Ninja Gaiden* is a reboot of the classic series that sees the master ninja Ryu Hayabusa on a quest to recover the dark dragon sword and avenge the slaughter of the Hayabusa ninja clan. What sets *Ninja Gaiden* apart from other stylish action games released after *DMC* is just how well considered the game is overall. It manages to create a satisfying yet challenging game that exudes as much style as *DMC*. I played the second release of *Ninja Gaiden*, for the purposes of the present research (the second release contains additional content).

*Ninja Gaiden*'s first mission starts the player in a level separate from the rest of the game, gradually introducing mechanics to accustom the player. Ryu starts with only his basic sword and a set of shuriken. Shuriken are a basic projectile that can be thrown in both the air and on the ground. Ryu will gain additional range weapons to choose between, thus allowing for minor changes depending on the situation. Ryu will also acquire ninpo, magic-based attacks that consume an orb when used. But they lack interesting options because most of them serve as big attacks that clear the screen, and not much else. Ryu's sword, however, has an absurd number of moves associated with it - far more than any other character has displayed yet. They are performed with a variety of input methods, such as button combos (involving light and heavy attacks), a button plus a direction on the analogue stick, pressing multiple buttons at once, or Ryu's current state. Ryu's primary method of defence is guarding which covers all directions around Ryu. By flicking the analogue stick while

guarding Ryu will roll out of danger. Guarding is generally the safest way to defend against enemies so to counteract its strength, if the player guards for too long enemies can break the player's guard. Certain enemies also have grab attacks that bypass guard.

### [Ninja Gaiden Gameplay Demonstration](#)



As the player progresses through the game Ryu will gain more weapons that expand upon his move set. Although the standard sword remains the most consistent throughout the game the additional weapons have strong utility. Unfortunately, the only way to swap between them is to enter the menu but this prevents any potentially interesting interactions or combos that combine different weapons.

Three of the most important and stylish moves within Ryu's arsenal are the flying swallow, izuna drop, and various ultimate techniques. When specifically jumping towards an enemy and pressing heavy attack Ryu will dive towards the targeted enemy and slash them, dealing reliable damage. Flying swallow is an extremely versatile move, often being the main way to approach enemies. It is extremely satisfying to land with a powerful sound effect and the move often decapitates enemies. The technique functions most of the time, but the nature of the input and lack of target indicator means occasionally the player might perform flying swallow on the wrong enemy. An

interesting aspect of *Ninja Gaiden*'s combat is that, unlike every other stylish action game analysed so far, *Ninja Gaiden* does not feature a lock-on of any kind; this is neither positive nor negative. The game's combat still functions well without it and there are very few instances where it could be potentially helpful. The izuna drop can be purchased in mission three and it is easily the most stylish move in the game, and perhaps its most iconic. By launching an enemy and then performing an aerial combo, the player can finish it by grabbing the enemy and comes crashing down with them. This will possibly be the player's main aerial combo and, despite using it for most of the game, it never grows stale - thanks to the great feeling impact of the technique, killing most enemies and knocking away enemies on the ground.

### [Ninja Gaiden Flying Swallow and Izuna Drop](#)



Holding down the heavy attack button will cause the attack to begin charging. When charged to either the first or second level Ryu will unleash an ultimate technique that will kill most enemies outright. Charging the attack takes a very long time. But this can be circumvented if Essence is nearby. When killed, Enemies will drop Essence which comes in three different colours: yellow, blue, and red. Absorbing yellow Essence will grant Ryu currency; if blue, it is a health restore; or restore ninpo if red. However, these benefits are not earned if Essence is obtained by charging an

ultimate attack (yellow Essence will only grant 20% of the currency). This creates a very dynamic risk reward situation for the player, especially regarding blue Essence. If the player needs health, they can attempt to collect the Essence quickly, or alternatively pull the Essence towards them and use it for an ultimate technique to kill enemies and consequently forgo the health.

### [Ninja Gaiden Ultimate Technique](#)



In addition to the plethora of air and ground options there are a variety of unique interactions with the wall in *Ninja Gaiden*; far more than any stylish action game previously discussed. Ryu can run up, run along, jump off, and jump between walls. It is not just the sheer quantity of wall interactions that is greater but also how valuable all these interactions are, and that they add depth to the combat. Because walls are so important this actively changes the way the player views the environment during combat. Alongside the ground and air, the player can now consider the distance between themselves and enemies to walls, and how to best utilise them. The most obvious use of this is when the player finds themselves cornered - they can quickly run up a wall before jumping off, and land with a powerful downward slash attack.

### [Ninja Gaiden Wall Interaction](#)



These interactions alone would be great, but it also helps that running up and along walls is extremely responsive, (far more so than *Shinobi* or *Bujingai* - so much so that it eventually becomes second nature and the player no longer needs to think about controls while on a wall). Alongside a great amount of consideration given to the wall combat environment, they contribute greatly to the style of the game encouraging the player to think like Ryu, a ninja that takes advantage of his surroundings to dispatch his targets. In fact, the entire combat system encourages thinking like Ryu. Ryu is very fragile. His defensive options do not come from durability but speed and evasiveness. This encourages the player to move around enemies quickly, getting in a burst of offence before retreating and then re-engaging with a technique like flying swallow. Despite Ryu's extreme feats of skill, his animations almost let you believe that he is a person who is at the absolute peak of his profession and not a superhuman being like Dante. His no-nonsense attitude and emphasis on training further this idea, something he admits himself.

### [Ninja Gaiden Ryu's Strength](#)



Taking all these combat options into account, it is not an overstatement to say *Ninja Gaiden* has the most captivating combat system of any stylish action game since *DMC*. It is also able to instill a great feeling of style within the player, making them feel like a ninja. This shows that it is possible to get the player into that ninja mindset without introducing stealth gameplay, which is what most games centred around ninjas involve.

Rankings in *Ninja Gaiden* (ninja grades seen in Figure 16) function similarly to *DMC*. This also means the same issues are present, although the feel of *Ninja Gaiden* is executed even worse than in *DMC*. Rankings in *DMC* rewarded higher ranks with additional red orbs and this created a feedback loop that incentivised earning high ranks and mastery of style. *Ninja Gaiden*, by comparison, gives the player no incentive to earn high ranks so their inclusion is superfluous. Furthermore, karma (the score for an overall playthrough) also lacks meaning because the leaderboard used to compare player scores no longer exists.

## Figure 16

*Ninja Grade*



From *Ninja Gaiden*, 2004, Team Ninja.

The camera in *Ninja Gaiden* also has the same nasty habit that *DMC* had, sometimes it will transition between different angles far too frequently. This hampers the player's ability to see and control Ryu.

#### [Ninja Gaiden Camera Cuts](#)



Discussion of level design has been neglected in the analysis of most stylish action games so far because they have generally unremarkable level design, which leaves little to discuss. The level design in *Ninja Gaiden*, however, is far more interesting, because once the player arrives at Vigoor after the first three missions the rest of the game takes place there. This results in a somewhat interconnected environment that sees the player backtrack through the world, exploring new locations in a similar vein to *DMC*. This adds an element of non-linearity to *Ninja Gaiden* and results in far more involved level design. This interconnectivity gives the game more of an adventurous feel. *Ninja Gaiden* can probably create an interesting world because its environmental design has very little consideration for visual consistency; this is unlike *DMC* which stayed true to its European Gothic inspiration. The Vigoor Empire appears to be located somewhere in the Middle East but simultaneously contains Egyptians tombs, Aztec temples, and a parallel fire and ice cavern.

*Ninja Gaiden's* combat might exude style. But the same cannot be said for its narrative which, much like Ryu himself, is very self-serious and appears to be completely unaware of how little it ultimately matters. By contrast, *DMC* had a handful of redeemable aspects that prevented the story from detracting from the game. But the complete lack of self-awareness in *Ninja Gaiden's* lowers any potential intrigue. This is best seen at the very end of the game where Murai, a character that was only present at the very start of the game, is revealed to be the game's final boss. The music during the cutscene where this is revealed gives the impression that it is a shocking twist. But because Murai has not been present at all this moment lacks any impact. If the narrative in *Ninja Gaiden* was more pronounced this final boss would have had the real potential to leave an impact on the player in the same way that Nelo Angelo did.

[Ninja Gaiden Final Boss](#)



*Ninja Gaiden*, much like the original 2D game is a very difficult game and a large part of that difficulty is due to the enemies the player encounters. *Ninja Gaiden* has a respectable amount of enemy variety - although the player will mostly be fighting against Black Spider Clan ninjas, soldiers with different weaponry, and the occasional fiend, there is still enough to keep the game going until the end. The enemy variety is not as high as in *DMC* but that is not detrimental because what causes the enemies in *Ninja Gaiden* to remain challenging throughout is how aggressive they are. Like stylish action games before it, *Ninja Gaiden* also utilises room locks to force the player to fight enemies. But it uses these much more sparingly than previously analysed stylish action games. *Ninja Gaiden* instead opts to make its enemies so aggressive that running away is often difficult for the player; they also tend to ambush the player by hiding around corners or waiting for the player to get close before striking, something that keeps the player alert and aware of their surroundings (much like Ryu's profession demands).

#### [Ninja Gaiden Ambushes](#)



Although encounters with regular enemies are consistently challenging the same cannot be said for the boss fights in *Ninja Gaiden*. These fights fluctuate wildly within the game's large boss roster. The main issue is that many of the boss fights are extremely difficult, if not outright impossible to approach through normal combat. They often ignore all of Ryu's attacks and, in general, it is difficult to determine when exactly they can be attacked. As an example, the first boss fight against Alma sees her fly around and only becomes vulnerable once hit. But as can be seen in the footage, flying swallow will sometimes not interact with her at all. This certainly makes many of the boss fights challenging, but not in a way that is satisfying for the player to overcome. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to tell when a boss is vulnerable to attacks. Simultaneously, a technique such as flying swallow is so powerful that if it worked every time many of the most difficult boss fights could be trivialised because the player could repeatedly dive into a boss potentially preventing it from attacking.

[Ninja Gaiden Boss Example](#)



*Ninja Gaiden* is an excellent stylish action game with fast, challenging combat that demands respect from the player and makes them feel like a ninja. It is very easy to understand why it was held in such high regard, in comparison to its contemporaries, especially *DMC*. Stylish action games previously discussed were of very high quality but were often held back by various aspects of their design. *Ninja Gaiden*, despite its faults, presents a new level of quality and shows that the industry was starting to become fully aware of the impact of *DMC* (even with *DMC 2* stumbling) something that would become much more apparent in the following years.

### **Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening "A Devil's Reawakens"**

Despite *DMC 2* being a disappointing to both audiences and critics it was still financially successful; that success was probably because the game was called *Devil May Cry 2*, a highly anticipated sequel to a groundbreaking game. It is also possible that because the game was released during the early-internet era when information took a longer time to reach audiences, fewer people were initially aware of the game's poor quality. Regardless, *DMC 2* did not end the Devil May Cry series. Itsuno, determined to not be known solely for his involvement with *DMC 2*, asked

Capcom to let him work on the next Devil May Cry game from the very beginning, feeling that “part of me was dissatisfied because I hadn’t started with the project from day one ... so I asked the company if they would give me ‘*DMC 3*’ from the start, and they agreed.” (Capcom, 2015, p. 220) Thus, *Devil May Cry 3: Dante’s Awakening (DMC 3)* (Capcom, 2005) was created and truly lives up to Itsuno’s desire to right the wrongs of *DMC 2*. What makes *DMC 3* an excellent follow-up to *DMC* are not the ways in which it is different, but how it refines and expands upon *DMC* in almost every capacity: especially combat, style, and narrative. It is understandable that this safe approach for *DMC 3* would have been taken after *DMC 2*. Therefore, instead of attempting to redefine the series they chose to refine and expand upon what made *DMC* unique. *DMC 2* ended on a rather unceremonious note with Dante riding off into the demon world which left little room for progression. So, *DMC 3* decides to look backwards by creating a prequel story centred on Dante in his youth as he ascends the Temen-Ni-Gru on an invitation from his brother Vergil.

The foundations of the gameplay and combat in *DMC 3* are very similar to *DMC*: Dante is still the primary playable character who wields a sword and the same pair of handguns Ebony & Ivory to stylishly combat demons. This will increase the player’s style rank and contribute to their end-of-mission grade, thereby earning red orbs to purchase new moves and power-ups and advance through the Temen-Ni-Gru. The Temen-Ni-Gru itself is very similar to Mallet Island in terms of level design - the player will revisit areas and collect items to progress. It is more linear than Mallet Island but shows that the thinking for *DMC 3* was expanding and improving upon *DMC* and not attempting to fix things that were not broken.

*DMC 3*, however, has many additional improvements and mechanics that enhance the overall experience, starting with the style rank (which breaks its own limits, going beyond S rank into SS, and even SSS rank). These new style levels also extend to the end-of-mission grade, which itself is largely the same as previous games where it grades time, orbs, stylish points, damage, and items used which creates the same problems as before. If the player gets an S in every category, they will earn a perfect SS rank. These new additions to the style rankings just continue to capitalise on the appeal of chasing those higher style ranks and show that the team recognised what was enjoyable about *DMC*’s combat, and how it could go beyond the coveted S rank.

A new quality-of-life feature brought to the style rank is a bar underneath the current rank that displays the rank degrade in real time; a helpful way to communicate to the player what affects

their style rank. Another small quality-of-life feature is the lock-on that retains the reticule from *DMC 2* but makes the clever change to have the reticule represent the enemy's health bar instead; this saves precious screen space, so players do not have to look away from their gameplay. Taunts return from *DMC* after their absence in *DMC 2*, they function almost identically to *DMC* and restore the DT gauge and increase style rank after use. But now Dante has a variety of taunts that change, depending on the current style rank. This is an appropriate addition that allows the player to more strongly connect with Dante, knowing that he is also getting excited about feeling more stylish. As well, certain combos when performed at SSS rank will gain additional hits and become more effective; this further promotes stylish gameplay, not just through the satisfying feeling or the extrinsic reward of red orbs but by making the player's combat potential stronger.

### [DMC 3 Gameplay Demonstration](#)



The central new mechanic that *DMC 3* introduces are fittingly called styles, which Dante has four of. These styles are selected at the start of each mission or at goddess statues during missions. Styles are key to determining how Dante plays, altering his move set in various ways depending on the current style. Swordmaster gives Dante's devil arms several new attacks such as the sword, rebellion, or gaining a new launcher tool. Trickster focuses on Dante's mobility, giving him several

dash options and a teleport that sends him above enemies. This is also the style the game starts the player on - a smart choice because it is the easiest to use and the additional mobility proves to be useful in almost every encounter. Gun Slinger adds new techniques to Dante's firearms, such as the ability of Artemis to rain shots, whilst also increasing their power. Finally, there is Royal Guard that gives Dante a parry, that when successfully performed, builds up a gauge and allows him to perform release and deal damage based on how full the gauge is.

### [DMC 3 Styles](#)



Dante acquires two more styles throughout the game: Quick Silver and Doppelganger. But these are more specialised than the other four, not affecting Dante's weapons or the way the player approaches combat (they act more as bonuses). Each style can be levelled up several times after enough use and this unlocks more actions within each style. For a first playthrough this is not ideal because it discourages experimentation with other styles. Excluding replays of missions, it is unlikely players will be able to max out more than one style before the end of the game. Styles are a fantastic introduction to the series and vastly expand player expression and creativity, giving the player multiple ways to approach combat encounters and fit well with Dante's personality and drive for style.

In addition to Dante's new styles, *DMC 3* features many more devil arms and firearms than *DMC*, allowing the player to bring two of each to a mission and seamlessly swap between them during gameplay. It is self-explanatory how much this expands potential combat options and combos; the player no longer needing to play an animation or enter the menu to swap weapons.

The first new devil arm is Cerberus, a three-section staff with many sweeping attacks makes it useful on the ground. But it has very limited aerial utility. One of its most useful moves is Revolver, a forward moving attack where Dante spins Cerberus, making it very good at deflecting attacks. Agni and Rudra are a pair of twin swords that function somewhat like rebellion but with some different moves and a great Swordmaster aerial combo. Nevan is by far the most unconventional devil arm in the series yet, not a weapon but an electric guitar that Dante plays to summon electric bats to attack enemies. Nevan does not have a basic combo, instead a tune-up mode that has different effects while performing. It is a very difficult weapon to succeed with but feels extremely stylish when pulling off the challenging moves. Finally, there is Beowulf, the game's equivalent to Ifrit with the same button hold-mechanic; it has different combos and input moves, however, making it much more expansive.

### [DMC 3 Devil Arms](#)



Firearm options remain largely similar to previous games, including Ebony and Ivory, the returning shot gun and missile launcher, as well as new firearms Spiral, a long-range rifle, and Artemis a demonic gun that fires plasma arrows at enemies. As was the case with styles, the ability to select two devil arms and two firearms lets players customise their combat experience to a great degree and allows for more personalisation of style; some hardcore players may even forgo Dante's sword entirely. It cannot be understated that, along with these new additions to combat that feel like a natural expansion of *DMC*, *DMC 3* overall feels great to play, especially after the complete lack of polish in *DMC 2*. Dante is more responsive, his attacks have significantly more weight and impact, visual effects are more pronounced with excellent sound design. All this further promotes the impact of actions. Using stinger as an example again, *DMC 3* reaches further, has a nice visual effect and strong sound effects, as well as a screen shake to convey the impact.

Enemy designs in *DMC 3* are arguably not as varied as in *DMC*. But they do still feature plenty of challenging and engaging enemies. It disappoints slightly towards the middle and end of the game where the player ends up fighting the chess pieces far too frequently, an enemy that does not react to the player's attacks at all. The game lacks a Shadow / Frost equivalent, a strong enemy that appears in enough encounters to consistently challenge the player. At the very end of the game the Abyss enemy type are introduced, a tough enemy that fights back but can still be comboed properly; if they were introduced slightly earlier the enemy variety would not change but the pacing would feel better.

The boss line-up in *DMC 3* is somewhat similar to *DMC* with each boss designed to test the player on an aspect of combat (in similar ways that Phantom, Griffon, Nightmare, and Nelo Angelo did). *DMC 3* has many bosses, so for the sake of brevity, only the major boss fights will be mentioned. Cerberus functions as the initial challenge of the game, like Phantom. The challenge is not too difficult because he remains stationary for most of the fight. This allows the player to avoid his attacks more easily, which change depending on the currently active head. Agni and Rudra are a duo boss fight that can be approached in a variety of ways because they are fought together. They will occasionally perform synchronised attacks and attempt to cover each other but if the player is attacking one, they will not be constantly attacked by the other. Once one of them is killed the other will transform into a stronger form and this makes them a very engaging boss fight as a result. Vergil is, fittingly, the game's rival character again and the only boss that is technically

fought multiple times; he grows in power with each battle, gaining new tricks to match the player's new tools and unsurprisingly, results in one of the best bosses in stylish action games so far. Nevan can be compared with Griffin in that she is focused on projectile patterns which the player must dodge while trying to get close to her. Her constant evasion means that when she becomes vulnerable the player must capitalise on damage. Beowulf is a straightforward brawl with the player without any tricks - he simply tries to hit them hard and fast.

Geryon is a tricky boss fight that sees the horse run around the arena firing off projectiles. The player must attempt to get close and cause Geryon to fall over by repeated hits. Finally, there is Arkham, an uneventful boss – simply a big blob with attack animations that are difficult to determine and a very annoying leech phase (although it is very fitting that a villain who sacrificed everything for power would end up as a pathetic blob of energy). The fight is somewhat redeemed thanks to the novelty of fighting alongside Vergil and being able to retain a slight amount of control over him. The boss line-up in *DMC 3* might be more uneven than in *DMC* - due to its greater quantity - but it still presents a variety of unique and challenging battles that force the player to work for their style.

### [DMC 3 Bosses](#)



As mentioned, *DMC 3* features a much younger, more immature Dante and this attitude is reflected in both his design and gameplay. Dante in *DMC 3* is very similar to his previous designs, sporting his iconic red coat but forgoes a shirt. This gives him a much more lax, casual look appropriate for his personality because he is completely unconcerned with everything happening, other than what Vergil is doing. Dante's motivation for venturing up the Temen-Ni-Gru really is as simple and single-minded as Vergil is at the top and he wants to fight. Regarding character designs, Vergil is the perfect analogue to Dante's carefree attitude: he sports a proper blue coat, simple form-fitting vest and jeans, and chooses to slick back his hair. All this characterises him as a more serious and composed character than his brother. His weapon, Yamato, is a katana that rewards precise cuts. Therefore, if we were to identify the appeal of Vergil's style it would be one of deadly precision and focus. Dante's animations are much more expressive and immature than *DMC*, with attacks that are extremely unconventional or difficult to describe as an attack at all (Nevan best represents this, obviously being an electric guitar with its more traditional attacks exclusive to Swordmaster).

These changes result in Dante's style in *DMC 3* feeling much more immature and rebellious than the cool and mature attitude present in *DMC*. It is important to mention that Dante's attempts to be stylish are almost always undercut during cutscenes - the game will not let the player entirely forget that Dante is ultimately someone who thinks he is much cooler than he really is.

[DMC 3, Not so Stylish Dante](#)



The narrative in *DMC 3* is much more pronounced than in previous games. This is clearly something the team wanted to achieve, which is understandable because it reinforces the game's style in many ways and makes the experience more compelling by exploring its characters in more depth. In terms of style, the choreography of the cutscenes does a remarkable job at showcasing the various styles of three main characters, Dante, Vergil, and Lady (but especially Dante). There is almost nothing Dante does within cutscenes that players themselves cannot do when playing as him, so being able to see him perform stylish feats motivates players to do the same. Vergil almost always maintains a calm and collected attitude throughout cutscenes, establishing him as an intimidating and powerful character. Lady, meanwhile, is the first fully human character in the series and her style appropriately represents this by having her focus entirely on firearms to combat demons.

[DMC 3 Lady](#)



*DMC 3* is ultimately a story about familial conflict, which applies to both the game's main plot concerning the sons of Sparda, Dante and Vergil, as well as the sub plot revolving around Lady. As mentioned, Dante's only motivation for climbing the Temen-Ni-Gru is to fight Vergil. He maintains this carefree attitude for most of the game, often intentionally ruining scenes intended to be deeply emotional - such as one of his confrontations with Lady.

[DMC 3 Dante and Lady](#)



This carefree attitude comes to a head in the first battle against Vergil where Dante loses, and Vergil exclaims to him after his defeat that might controls everything. Vergil's goal is to gain power, plain and simple, but he never explicitly states why exactly he wants power. But given what he says in this cutscene, and later, it is to become as strong as his father. This desire for power probably arises from Vergil's inability to save his mother; one might psychoanalyse Vergil, surmising that his trauma has caused him to believe that if he were to gain the power of his father, he could have saved her. However, what Vergil ultimately misses is that Sparda had something to protect while he clings onto the past, making his quest for power fruitless because he has nothing tangible to protect.

[DMC 3 Vergil](#)



Despite his reasoning being flawed, however, Vergil beats Dante in this first fight because he is simply more motivated. Meanwhile, Dante is not fighting for any reason other than because he can. Dante's attitude does not completely change after this moment but closer to mission 14 when talking to Lady when he clearly starts to recognise what is important and his responsibility in this mess, and later in mission 16 when he becomes fully committed to stopping Arkham and Vergil.

[DMC 3 Dante's Realization](#)



Lady's subplot centres around her desire to kill her father Arkham and grappling with the incredibly harsh reality of that decision. Arkham, unlike Vergil, is despicable having sacrificed his wife to obtain the power of a god. The game makes no efforts to have Arkham appear as anything other than a monster, the player will likely feel no remorse for him whatsoever. Therefore, there are few reservations about Lady doing this and she is very confident about killing her father. However, it is a complex façade one which she maintains right up until the very end. Immediately after killing Arkham, Lady's façade collapses and shows that until the end she wished she did not have kill him and held onto the idea that he could somehow be brought back.

[DMC 3 Lady's End](#)



Lady has far more agency and relevancy to the game's narrative than Trish did, and her sub plot compliments the familial conflict of the sons of Sparda story perfectly, making *DMC 3* much more thematically resonant. But the game's finale is what ties everything together. The final confrontation between Dante and Vergil is an excellent scene that shows their contrasting personalities, and how Dante has evolved over the course of this game while Vergil remains steadfast in his goals. Both Dante and Vergil are suffering from the death of their mother but choose to hide behind that trauma in different ways: Dante with banter and his devil-may-care attitude and Vergil with cold, calculated determination, both unsure how to communicate other than the only thing they know, violence.

[DMC 3 Ending](#)



The finale of *DMC 3*'s also resolves the *DMC* issues by reordering the sequence of events. The issue with *DMC* was that Mundus was a disappointing final boss who traded out the standard gameplay for generic spectacle. *DMC 3* retains elements of that spectacle in Arkham but is placed right before the final battle with Vergil, who provides a much more rewarding final boss and lets the game end on a very high note. Vergil, ironically, is better than himself as a rival. It is a fantastic finale and a major redemption for *DMC*. *DMC 3* does not have the most complex story, and it is hardly subtle often characters will plainly state their motivations. But that does not undermine its many strong qualities and how it retroactively improves the *DMC* story, turning Vergil into a somewhat tragic character and giving Dante a simple but effective character arc that adds to his 'devils never cry' motif. When Dante says devils never cry here, he is dehumanising himself but moving forward he turns that message into something positive.

*DMC 3* is a phenomenal stylish action game that simultaneously redeems the series after *DMC 2* and proved the Devil May Cry series was in fact the king of action games and was not going anywhere. The game was released at perhaps the best time, too, because this was when many of the most revered stylish action games were starting to release. It is possible that if *DMC 3* did not exist, or it disappointed audiences once again, Devil May Cry could have fallen into obscurity as other stylish action games rose in its wake. Despite the critical success of *DMC 3* its sales were

much worse than either *DMC* or *DMC 2* - likely because players that were let down by *DMC 2* lost confidence in the series (not that these low sales mattered ultimately because the stylish action sub-genre just one month later would explode in popularity, more than ever before).

### **God of War “Channel Rage”**

*God of War (GoW)* is perhaps the most well recognised stylish action series that shocked audiences by using gore and sex as a big component of its perceived identity. The *Mortal Kombat* series has proven time and time again that gore and sex, and especially gore, are an effective way to get people to pay attention. The game’s production values were also extremely high, making it evident that Sony wanted a first party contender to *Devil May Cry*, despite the series being exclusive to PlayStation at the time. This approach proved successful for *GoW* as well because the franchise would quickly surpass even *Devil May Cry* in popularity and become a household PlayStation series.

*GoW* openings strongly. After selecting the game’s difficulty, the game immediately transitions from the menu into the now iconic opening scene where protagonist, Kratos, laments about how the Gods of Olympus have abandoned him before sending himself to his death. It is a highly cinematic opening that immediately shows where the series priorities are and provokes many questions: who is Kratos, and how has he ended up in this situation?

[GoW Opening](#)



The God of War series is often known for being very angry and ugly, yet its opening remains sombre and tragic. Almost instantly after the opening cinematic the player is placed right into the middle of combat, also proving that alongside being highly cinematic, *GoW's* combat is just as much a part of the experience. The combat system in *GoW* is distinctly more simplistic than in *DMC* or any other stylish action games discussed. But it does excel in creating a distinct, very literal power fantasy, as opposed to the various notions of style in other stylish action games (that being to make the player feel like the God of war through brutality and scripted spectacle).

Kratos' signature weapon, the Blades of Chaos, perfectly embody this concept, designed to bring as much carnage to a battle as possible. Kratos can perform light and heavy attacks with the Blades, a very versatile weapon which will execute almost every kind of attack the player would desire: from close strikes to long range sweeps, a variety of button combos with different effects, or a launcher by holding down heavy attack which can lead into aerial combos. Kratos can also grab enemies to either pummel or throw them at other enemies - which can also be performed in the air, or in some cases pull enemies back down to continue juggling them. The defence options for Kratos rely on blocking like Ryu from *Ninja Gaiden* (but, unlike Ryu Kratos cannot be guard broken), and dodging which is performed using the right analogue stick. The analogue stick is an unconventional approach that was likely chosen to give the right analogue stick some functionality,

or it would have remained unused. Kratos also gets his own DT equivalent in God mode, which empowers him and grants his attacks super armour (he still takes damage but will not be staggered). The player cannot cancel God mode once activated - unlike DT - which results in less decision making compared to DT (which made the player consider the best times to activate it).

### [GoW Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Finally, Kratos gains four magic-based abilities throughout the game that consume his magic gauge to offset their power. Poseidon's Rage is an area of effect (AoE) magic that causes lightning to strike down around Kratos. Medusa's Gaze petrifies enemies caught in the beam, which lets Kratos shatter them when frozen. Zeus' Fury is a basic flurry of lightning bolt projectiles and Army of Hades summons several souls to swarm enemies.

### [GoW Magic](#)



The versatility of the Blades, and by extension Kratos, are what enables *GoW*'s combat to feel more free-form and accessible than other stylish action games. This instils a powerful feeling within the player and lets them incite the carnage Kratos brings. The inclusion of magic is surface level, but the high power level of each ability adds to the levels of brutality the player is capable of; not only are they themselves an unstoppable warrior but the Gods are also on their side. Like *Ninja Gaiden*, *GoW* also does not feature a lock-on, which in this instance is unsurprising since the Blades of Chaos are an AoE weapon. This makes a single target lock-on redundant. *GoW* does contain a second weapon, the Blade of Artemis, a large, curved blade. But the entirety of *GoW* feels so specifically designed for the Blades of Chaos that it is very easy to forget the weapon exists at all, despite the ability to swap between both weapons freely. This really shows how much of a perfect fit the Blades of Chaos are for what *GoW*'s combat is trying to achieve. To deviate from that would result in less satisfying combat. Alongside the emphasis on spectacle and violence, *GoW* is the first game discussed so far to employ a variety of quick-time events (QTEs), context sensitive actions that see Kratos enter a scripted animation while the player responds to the prompts on screen to successfully execute the QTE.

#### [GoW QTE](#)



The benefit of QTEs is that they allow the game to create much grander spectacle through these controlled sections. The downside is that they take away agency from the player and can make them feel like they wish the QTE was something they could have done themselves. QTEs are not inherently bad, and their quality is often determined by their inclusion. But *GoW* utilises them very well, often resulting in some of the best displays of raw power.

[GoW Spectacle QTE](#)



As is common now, killing enemies and destroying objects grant the player red orbs, allowing them to power up Kratos' weapons and magics and gain additional effects and new moves. The player is also actively rewarded for causing as much carnage as possible through the combo counter. Instead of tracking style as *DMC* does, *GoW* tracks how long the combo is with increasingly graphic callouts the longer the combo is, also granting bonus red orbs (seen in Figure 17).

**Figure 17**

*GoW Combo Counter*



From *God of War*, Santa Monica Studio, 2005.

For fans of *DMC* or *Ninja Gaiden* it might be easy to scoff at *GoW*'s more simplistic combat and emphasis on spectacle, but the game is not concerned with being considered on the same level as those games. If anything, the game absolutely makes the player feel like the God of war. The appeal might be surface level, but it is hard to deny its effectiveness. There are some minor features found in the combat that result in it feeling more accessible: Kratos' larger attacks, the ability to cancel most of his animations at any time, slow motion on certain moves to enable easier combos, and invincibility is much more frequently available.

Most enemies in *GoW* can be disposed of with almost no effort and struggle to put up much of a challenge, partly because their designs lack much intrigue (only having a handful of attacks each and Kratos effortlessly invalids so many of them). There are some challenging enemies, like the centaurs and satyrs, but they appear infrequently. Therefore, the result is that most combat encounters feel incredibly one-sided. Of course, this feeling is appropriate for making Kratos feel powerful. But other stylish action games have been able to achieve the same with more threatening enemies. It would arguably feel even more satisfying to tear apart enemies that attempt to match Kratos' might.

When it comes to boss fights, *GoW* is very conservative with only three throughout the entire game: The Hydra, Pandora's Guardian, and Ares. The Hydra is a very easy boss, but it helps to immediately establish what the focus of *GoW* (spectacle, as previously mentioned) and it appears so early in the game that it leaves an incredibly strong impression. The Hydra has become one of the most iconic parts of the game. In comparison to other stylish action games *GoW* places its

camera much further back than others, which always allows for a concise view of the action. The Blades of Chaos being so distinct helps keep track of Kratos. This is one of *GoW*'s strongest aspects, considering how problematic the camera often is for this sub-genre. Pandora's Guardian is another solid boss fight that involves stunning the beast before launching a log at it to slowly destroy its armour, before revealing the health bar. Ares, the game's final boss, is separated into three completely different phases. The first phase is a giant battle that circumvents the typical issue with these spectacle boss fights - by opting to make Kratos as big as Ares and allowing for a comparatively normal fight. Phase two sees Kratos pulled into an illusion where he must defend his family from clones of himself. It is an extremely difficult section that requires almost perfect play to get through - appropriate for how difficult this would be for Kratos. Phase three sees Kratos wield the Blade of the Gods in a tug of war sword fight against Ares where they share a life bar, and whoever's life bar fills first is victorious. The way the combat system works in *GoW* is a much better fit for this style of boss fight, much more than other stylish action games discussed. This makes every boss in *GoW* an enjoyable bout of spectacle. Simultaneously, the game's combat would not be as enjoyable against the rival characters that other stylish action games excel at because the Blades of Chaos are designed to combat multiple enemies or larger targets.

### [GoW Bosses](#)



Kratos' story is clearly supposed to be Santa Monica's attempt at crafting a Greek tragedy and for the most part the game is successful in this. As mentioned, the game's opening cutscene perfectly captures Kratos' complete lack of hope as he plummets to his death. This simultaneously gets the player immediately invested in his story and how he came to this position. Kratos' objective given to him by Athena is to kill Ares, who is waging war on Athens. By doing so Kratos' sins will be forgiven. Thus, Kratos doggedly pursues his goals in the hopes of forgetting the horrors that haunt him, pushing aside everything that stands in his way, even overcoming death itself, and eventually kills Ares. After doing so, however, Athena reveals a final cruel trick from the Gods, having only ever said that Kratos' sins will be forgiven but his nightmares will remain. Having lost all faith in everything we return to the start, but before Kratos can end his life the Gods save him and allow him entry to Mount Olympus to become the next God of war. Perhaps this is their ultimate betrayal, making Kratos the very thing he despises.

### [GoW Ending](#)



It is an effective tale of how one would even achieve such a herculean task, the answer to which is Kratos stripping himself of all humanity and committing even more atrocities along the path for the slightest possibility of forgetting his past. This makes the purpose of the journey debatable.

There are some glaring flaws in the game's narrative, presentation, and tone that will sometimes undermine Kratos' tragic story. Kratos is an extremely antisocial person, driven solely by one goal. He is prone to violent outbursts regardless of who is on the receiving end. Therefore, moments like the narrator saying Kratos pleases many women and the infamous sex minigame - alongside other moments, work against the tragic story the game is trying to tell.

### [GoW Shock Value Moments](#)

Clearly these moments are designed for shock value to drive audiences to talk about the game. But *GoW* already has more than enough moments of shock value. The entire gameplay foundation could be viewed as done purely for shock value. These instances feel like a distraction from what Kratos' story is about, the game wants the player to believe that Kratos is actually a cool character and not a self-destructive asshole. Another, much more concerning issue is the lack of clarity regarding whether Kratos or Ares is responsible for the deaths of Kratos' family. Ideally, Kratos should be responsible and, unable to cope with the consequences of his actions, deflects blame onto the only other person he could: Ares. This then sends him on a revenge quest that ultimately changes nothing because his trauma persists, betrayed by the Gods. This would perfectly fit the Greek tragedy angle and frame Kratos' actions as clearly self-destructive. However, the game appears to place more blame on Ares, who is at least partially responsible, by having him chime in after Kratos kills his family and states that with his family dead nothing will hold him back. Also, before Kratos kills Ares, the God attempts to justify himself again by claiming all he was trying to do was make Kratos into a great warrior.

### [GoW Ares](#)



Ares obviously did not kill Kratos' family. Kratos committed the act, yet by positioning Ares in this way, suggesting that he somehow placed Kratos' family there, or manipulated Kratos in some way. This partially takes away Kratos' guilt, and it both undermines and complicates his story.

*GoW* knows what its priorities are, and the areas it can surpass *Devil May Cry* in: cinematic spectacle. It achieves both. Despite simplistic gameplay and a narrative that trips over itself the game is undeniably deserving of being considered alongside the likes of *Ninja Gaiden* and *Devil May Cry*.

### **God Hand “Summon up the Power”**

Shinji Mikami, executive producer of *DMC*, started to distance himself from the *Resident Evil* series after completing *Resident Evil 4*. He had grown tired of working on it for so long and went onto to join Clover Studio (a studio founded by Capcom) with the hope of working on something new. However, most of Clover were occupied with working on *Ōkami* (Clover Studio, 2006). Mikami, not wanting to be completely unoccupied for the next year, asked studio head Atsushi Inaba if he could look for outside help to develop a game. Inaba asked Mikami if he was okay with

that, which Mikami was, and thus his next game *God Hand* (Clover Studio, 2006) would be made quickly and cheaply.

*God Hand* is a stylish action game dedicated to its combat and almost nothing else. The desire to create such a game arose from Mikami's disappointment with the Final Fight series, stating that "Capcom USA were making a sequel to Final Fight ... when I played it, it was shit. I used to enjoy Final Fight ... I wanted to make a game like that, if I ever had a chance." (Archipel, 2020, 2:57) These development details are worth understanding because they are key to understanding the reality that *God Hand*, was created in and help to contextualise many of the game's decisions. *God Hand* is an out-there, crazy stylish action game that cares very little for conventions, taking a unique approach to stylish action. It requires an accurate description to better understand the game.

The left analogue stick moves protagonist Gene but, unlike most other stylish games where movement is determined by the position of the camera, movement is relative to the character. Pressing forward will always move the character forward, pressing back moves them back, and left and right rotate their position. It is certainly not a perfect control method and has fallen out of favour for a variety of reasons. But given *God Hand's* perspective it works well enough for the game. Pressing L1 makes Gene turn 180 degrees so players are not completely helpless from behind. Flicking the left analogue stick up twice also causes Gene to dash and start running. Gene has several attacks only available when running. The right analogue stick causes Gene to dodge, which changes depending on the direction: up dodges in place, left and right sidestep to each direction respectively, while down performs a backflip. Each of these dodges have their uses depending on the situation, and there is no universal answer that invalidates the others.

### [God Hand Movement](#)



Three of the face buttons, X, square, and triangle, are all associated with Gene's attacks. Unlike other stylish action games, they are not predetermined. After the first level Gene's move set is fully customisable. The player can choose what techniques they want on each button from a list of currently owned techniques (shown in Figure 18). The player can select several techniques to place on square as a combo, place individual techniques on triangle and X, as well as when holding back on the analogue stick and pressing those buttons.

### **Figure 18**

*God Hand Technique Screen*



From *God Hand*, Clover Studio, 2006.

*God Hand* features 114 techniques, which enables a ridiculous amount of player choice when it comes to their playstyle. Certain techniques even change depending on an enemy's current state. The shop lets the player buy new techniques or upgrade Gene's health and tension gauge with money. Any money the player earns can also be spent at the casino, which includes various gambling minigames to potentially earn more. There is a results screen that grants players money based on their performance, but *God Hand* does not feature any grading system. Certain enemies will drop random techniques and if the player does not find certain techniques useful, they can be sold for money. Gene also has techniques that are always available and cannot be changed. These predetermined techniques can be performed depending on the state of an enemy, such as the axe kick always being available when close to a downed enemy.

Despite the imposing 114 techniques this number is not as impressive as it may seem because there are many techniques that are upgrades to existing ones, dealing more damage. There is no reason to use left jab 1 over left jab 2, as an example. Most of Gene's techniques can be cancelled by dodging, resulting in incredibly fast gameplay or unique combos. Circle meanwhile is used for context sensitive actions such as grabs, pummels, or QTEs. This does mean, however, that *God Hand* involves a lot of button mashing - something that is almost never desirable in any game because it can cause strain on the player's hands and potentially break controllers. Pressing R1

activates the roulette wheel, Gene's other method of attack, slowing down time and allowing the player to select incredibly powerful techniques that consume a number of orbs. Like regular techniques the player chooses which ones they want. Because time slows down when using the roulette, it is an essential tool to be used in dire situations to regain the edge in combat or crush enemies even harder. R2 unleashes the God hand, Gene's DT equivalent. Once his tension gauge is full the power and speed of his attacks are increased, making him invincible and allowing the player to completely smash their enemies. Finally, L2 taunts enemies which enrages them and causes enemies to act more aggressive whilst increasing Gene's tension gauge; this involves far more risk reward compared to other taunts because not only is the player making themselves vulnerable, but they are also making enemies stronger.

#### [God Hand Gameplay Demonstration](#)



*God Hand* has a distinct focus on hand-to-hand combat with an emphasis on unique enemy interactions. Enemies in *God Hand* can be stunned, dizzied, launched, juggled, tripped, guard broken, counter hit, and a variety of context sensitive actions like stomping or throwing. A large variety of enemy interactions are desirable in stylish action games because they allow for more diverse gameplay and ways to approach enemy encounters. Counter hits are one of the most

important interactions because they are a key way to damage some of the game's challenging enemies. A counter hit is when the player's attack connects with an enemy while they are performing an attack. Successful counter hits give attacks different properties than regular hits, such as the standard launcher instantly launching an enemy high up instead of needing to charge the attack.

### [God Hand Counter hit](#)



*God Hand* is a difficult game but its unique approach to difficulty makes it far more accessible than it would otherwise be. Much like Mikami's previous game *Resident Evil 4*, *God Hand* also includes dynamic difficulty in two ways. The first occurs when a player fails on a section too many times – the game will remove certain enemies to make it easier. The other is the difficulty level gauge, perhaps the game's most distinguished mechanic and controlling every aspect of the in-game difficulty alongside the difficulty mode the player selects. The gauge gradually fills as the player deals damage, taunts, and defeats enemies, scaling from level 1 to DIE. As the level increases enemies become more aggressive, start to attack in groups more often, gain new attack patterns, and better defend against the player's assault. When at level 1 and 2 enemies will also not attack the player from offscreen to better help inexperienced players adjust to the game. The

gauge is a great mechanic that directly caters to the player's skill. If they are good, there is no way to play through *God Hand* on easier difficulties. Choosing to play on hard mode will lock the gauge to DIE, which is extremely demanding. There are some ways to lower the difficulty: taking damage, and dying, will lower the gauge so less skilled players will not get stuck on harder difficulties; the grovel roulette technique can also be used to lower the level by 1 (however, it requires the player to use a roulette resource, and it is unlikely they would want to look like a coward by using it).

### [God Hand at Level 3](#)



Of course, difficulty would not mean much if the enemies and bosses were lacking. But the enemy variety in *God Hand* is reasonably good despite the game re-skinning almost every enemy type at least once. But this does work because enemies are very threatening, especially in groups. The boss fights fall along this same line, most of them are fought in the same way as regular enemies but with more distinct move sets, such as Gorilla Mask who uses a variety of grab attacks.

### [God Hand Gorilla Mask](#)



The game's most notable boss is Azel, the game's rival character. He gets two boss fights, both of which provide the player with the most intense challenge the game has to offer. Unlike Vergil in *DMC 3*, though, Azel is not the game's final boss and does the reverse of what *DMC 3* did by placing its spectacle boss, Angra, after the rival battle. As discussed in *DMC 3*, it is much more satisfying for the final boss to be a true test of the player's skill. But because Angra is very easy it is essentially a victory lap and there are several mechanics during the fight to ensure the player does not die, like health items spawning.

#### [God Hand Final Boss](#)



Aside from the combat itself the other striking aspect of *God Hand* is the behaviour of its camera. *God Hand's* camera is very zoomed in, but this is an absolute necessity because the player needs to be able to read enemy attacks even just to land counter hits reliably. There is a mini map in the top right to inform the player of enemy positions, and while helpful, only goes so far. *God Hand's* camera also does not use standard third person camera clipping, where the camera is treated as a physical object that can get stuck on objects in the environment. Instead, the camera will clip through everything, causing walls to disappear if they would otherwise obfuscate the player's view.

[God Hand Disappearing Walls](#)



It certainly looks awkward, but this is offset by being able to always see the action and there is a real possibility that if the game's camera did not function like this *God Hand* might just be unplayable. Environments and level design also fall under this same principle, extremely primitive and often are nothing more than a couple of hallways or rooms with a distinct theme (almost certainly due to a lack of resources and time). However, their simplicity combined with the game's lack of care for realism, means that enemy collisions with the environment are very consistent - when an enemy hits a wall they will always splat, and they do not distract the player.

It is difficult to describe in any detail what the appeal of the combat in *God Hand* is because it is so surface level. Feeling like a cocky show-off with lots of moxie (nerve and attitude). This is because, alongside the game knowing what it wants to be, the narrative in *God Hand* is somewhat treated as a complete joke. The story is extremely self-aware and completely refuses to take itself seriously, with tons of humour throughout. *God Hand* is a very crude and stupid game, an attitude so pervasive it begins even before starting the game when the player chooses either easy or normal difficulty. Choosing easy will cause Gene to mock the player for their choice. The game takes potshots at almost everyone, especially Gene whose entire quest is treated as a joke that Olivia somehow got him into.

*God Hand* is the 3D beat 'em up audiences deserved and one that Mikami should feel proud of, after feeling frustrated with *Final Fight*. It remains a truly unique stylish action game that outright rejects conventions with core combat, that refuses to become boring, always keeping the player on their toes, and although it might not share much in terms of gameplay with *Devil May Cry* the attitude is there.

### **Attack of the Clones**

*DMC* would send waves throughout the gaming landscape, captivating a huge audience with its new approach to 3D action and stylish gameplay. Several years later, *DMC 3* and *GoW* would send a second wave throughout the gaming landscape, especially the latter which proved that it was possible to create a stylish action game more accessible than its contemporaries, whilst still being difficult and reaching a much larger audience. The result of these waves alongside the sub-genre's rise in popularity resulted in a multitude of stylish action games that shared similarities to *DMC*, some of which have already been discussed, but also other games that were overt clones. The term clone in reference to video games is used to describe games that are either inspired by, or very similar to, previously popular games. To use another genre for example, before first person shooters were widely referred to as such many were simply labelled 'Doom clones' due to the overt similarities they shared with the titular game. In this instance games that were either mechanically or stylistically like *DMC* or *GoW* may be labelled as either a '*DMC* clone' or a '*GoW* clone'.

It is important to note that, although the term clone is often used in a derogatory sense to dismiss certain games as lacking in originality, for most games listed within this section that is not the case. Rather, these games are placed under this label because they do not provide enough of a new experience to warrant an expanded discussion. Clones are still worth examining because they add validity to the idea that the popularity and quality of both *DMC* and *GoW* was recognised and beginning to have a noticeable influence on other action games - or in some cases, influence the direction of an entire series. They also give a better understand what specific aspects of *DMC* or *GoW* audiences and developers considered important and worth recreating.

### **Legacy of Kain: Defiance**

*Legacy of Kain: Defiance* (*Defiance*) (Crystal Dynamics, 2003) is the fifth and final entry in the Legacy of Kain (LoK) series that radically changes the gameplay to something much more in line with *DMC*. The game was released in late 2003 which gives enough time to reasonably suspect that the development team was aware of *DMC* (which released late 2001) and could rework the previously simplistic combat of the series into something with more depth.

It is important to recognise the time difference between game releases in relation to the nature of game development. For example, it would be inappropriate to call *Shinobi* or *Otogi* clones, because they share little with *DMC* and they were released in late 2002, meaning that they would probably have been deep in development. Previous LoK games had combat but were more akin to 3D Zelda games, particularly in the sense that combat was part of the overall experience rather than the focus. Combat in *Defiance* plays a much greater role and is arguably what the player will be doing for most of the game (clearly being what the team wanted to emphasize with the popularity of *DMC*). The team were largely successful in achieving this and, as a result, the combat of *Defiance* is the series most engaging. But this is mostly because the game is fundamentally very similar to *DMC*.

*Defiance* contains two playable characters, Kain and Raziel, the two protagonists in the series. They play largely the same with some slight variation in their animations. Both characters can perform basic actions that are very familiar by now such as light attacks, a heavy attack launcher that functions identically to *DMC*, and aerial combos. The game utilises a toggle lock-on as opposed to the hold lock-on in *DMC*. But like the lock-on in *DMC*, *Defiance* also lacks a reticule. *Defiance* released two years after *DMC* and by that point several games had lock-on reticules, making this exclusion difficult to defend. The two most distinct mechanics in *Defiance* are telekinesis and swappable reavers. Telekinesis can send enemies flying in all directions, allowing the player to easily dispatch enemies if they are close to ledges. The most interesting way telekinesis can be used is launching enemies into the playable character, which then relaunches the enemy and allows for a combo extension (which is very satisfying). Unfortunately, Raziel cannot do this until the end of the game, making him significantly less enjoyable than Kain. This is a

major issue because the player spends an equal amount of time playing as both. The last move that Kain and Raziel acquire emphasises this relaunching combo structure by binding enemies in mid-air, allowing for even more extensions. The player's combo potential is severely limited by how little airtime Kain and Raziel get, as well as limited options in general - Raziel and Kain have only five unlockable moves each. Therefore, these two mechanics at least give *Defiance* something comparatively interesting.

Progression in *Defiance* is also like *DMC*, which involves exploring the environment for paths forward, and specific items to unlock areas while occasionally solving puzzles and unlocking new tools along the way. Additional reavers for both Kain and Raziel are the primary new mechanic. The changes these make to gameplay are minimal however, mostly resulting in different powerful attacks once the gauge is full. These could have been an effective way to increase the combat variety in *Defiance* because some do change attack properties when the character's gauge is full. Their lack of significant change is therefore disappointing.

The similarities to *DMC* are obvious and, although the game introduces a handful of its own concepts, they are not enough to make up for the rest of the experience existing as a weaker *DMC*. The flaws in *Defiance* mostly stem from a lack of polish, probably due to a lack of development resources, but nonetheless creates a situation where the combat in *Defiance* feels stiff. Actions simply do not flow well into each other and they lack impact. The game's sound design is also extremely weak, resulting in almost every attack feeling limp and lacking in power. Enemy design is another major issue, with most enemies being impossible walls that cannot be comboed and have tons of health, or the most basic enemies that provide no challenge whatsoever. Overall, *Defiance* is an action game that is unapologetic in how mechanically similar it is to *DMC*, making very few of its own improvements or additions to stylish action combat. It is a serviceable stylish action game that gets by on the strength of LoK's narrative, but the gameplay is not special in any meaningful way.

[LoK Defiance Gameplay Demonstration](#)



### **The Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge**

*The Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge (Oogie's Revenge)* (Capcom, 2004) is the video game sequel to the film developed by Capcom. That *Oogie's Revenge* was developed by Capcom makes it a particularly strange case because, despite being an overt clone, *Oogie's Revenge* shares some credits with the Devil May Cry series. This does suggest that some ideas present in *Oogie's Revenge* could have had an influence on later stylish action titles. Obviously, *Oogie's Revenge* is a children's game, so it is no surprise that the combat overall is quite simplistic. Playing as Jack Skellington, the player can whip and grab enemies with Jack's new soul robber or slam them into each other. By spinning the left analogue stick and attacking this causes Jack to pirouette and attack enemies around him. The soul robber can also be charged, which empowers the next attack and changes the slam to a spin that then pulls in enemies.

Jack also has a rather unique dodge: after three consecutive dodges the next dodge has a different animation and noticeably more recovery to prevent players from simply dodging whenever. This can be circumvented rather easily, though, because the animation only triggers if the player dodges

in the same direction three times. Jack can even taunt enemies which, alongside instantly charging the soul robber, shares a mechanic with *God Hand* (taunted enemies are sent into Oogie mode, which makes them stronger). *Oogie's Revenge* even features a results screen and ranking almost identical to *DMC*, grading the player on time, combo, damage, and exclamation marks (which are earned by taunting enemies or performing the spin) and results in a nightmare rank between D – S, like *Devil May Cry*.

Regarding the importance of character appeal and getting the player to embody the protagonist, when it comes to *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Selick, 1993) and adapting it to a stylish action game, the core of its appeal certainly should be about how to make the player feel like Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King. A good stylish action game can be elevated by, or arguably should involve, character in some way. *Oogie's Revenge* is about as successful as it could be regarding this - Jack will eventually gain the ability to swap between his regular form, the Pumpkin King, and Santa Jack, both of which have different moves. It is far less complex than the style system in *DMC 3*. But is still somewhat ahead of its time by its ability to swap between them instantly. If the game included only the soul robber, I would say the game fails at making the player feel like Jack. Therefore, the inclusion of Pumpkin King and Santa Jack, although minor additions, do add a lot.

Fundamentally, an issue with Jack as a stylish action game protagonist is that he is not a fighter. If anything, he is a trickster character, so the soul robber was probably created to give Jack a primary weapon because he has none. The boss fights are perhaps where the game best taps into Jack's style. They start as typical bosses but during the battle the player can collect music notes which increases a gauge - when filled will transition the fight into a rhythm game dealing damage based on performance. It is a perfect fit for the property and because this is a game based on the film, the music is expectedly very good (although that is because most of the music are songs from the film or remixes, and the boss fights have similar melodies to certain songs with different lyrics).

Presentation is perhaps the game's strongest quality. But, again, this is because it is all based on the film and fans might be disappointed that *Oogie's Revenge* does not explore the other holiday towns, only taking place in Halloween and Christmas town. Given Disney's protection of its properties one might imagine Capcom being told they could not explore any of the other holiday towns. However, the film already has such imaginative visuals that it is a letdown that so much of

the game is imagery from the film. For a game that is effectively ‘*DMC* for children’ *Oogie’s Revenge* is a solid stylish action game that takes much of its style from the film’s quality and iconography whilst applying tried and true mechanics that result in an overall satisfying, albeit simplistic combat system.

#### [Oogie's Revenge Gameplay Demonstration](#)



#### **The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning**

Perhaps the most baffling clone is *The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning* (*TLoS*) (Krome Studios, 2006). This is a reboot of the original Spyro series that, although not entirely a one-to-one representation of *DMC* or *GoW*, is emblematic of industry trends and the shifting popularity of genres. The most likely reason why the Spyro series was rebooted into something more akin to stylish action games was because *GoW* was a popular game, and 3D platformers were on the decline due to market saturation and declining quality (including the Spyro series itself). Therefore, rebooting the series as a darker, more narrative-driven action game similar to what was popular would make sense on paper, but it is an overt case of trend chasing. However, the game was

certainly not given the time or resources to make this happen as *TLoS* is a painfully below average action game. Perhaps most of the game's resources went to its celebrity voice cast, which includes the likes of Elijah Wood, Gary Oldman, David Spade and so on. This was probably done to make the game appear more mature than the original series. Spyro retains most of his original moves from the original series, capable of charging, gliding, and breathing fire. But what is new is a very rudimentary melee combo that launches enemies for the finishing hit. Holding the attack button will also immediately activate the launcher individually. When an enemy is in the air Spyro can follow up with an aerial combo, but the player has little control as Spyro strafes around the launched enemy and options besides this combo are extremely limited. The aerial combo also has an excessive amount of slow motion attached to every hit, which breaks the pacing of combat. Oddly this can be disabled in the options menu, which begs the question about why it exists at all.

Magic is the other method of attack, alongside breathing fire. Spyro will gain three other breath abilities (electric, ice, and earth) which have minor differences that each add a small amount of variety to the combat. Magic is extremely powerful and easy to abuse and, because enemies reliably drop green gems which regenerate magic meaning, there is no threat of running out. These breath abilities can also be upgraded with a system and screen that is unapologetic in its similarities to *GoW*, with an identical depleting pool of energy (shown in Figures 19 and 20).

### Figure 19

*The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning Upgrade Screen*



From *The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning*, Krome Studios, 2006.

## Figure 20

*God of War Upgrade Screen*



From *God of War*, Krome Studios, 2005.

Contrary to this, Spyro does not get any new melee moves throughout the game. This makes combat very unexciting, even though the game is short. Enemy variety is extremely poor, most of the game is spent fighting the same apes recoloured multiple times, and every boss fight lacks substance. None of them are more complex than the act of dealing damage when the boss becomes vulnerable. It should not come as a surprise that the combat in *TLoS* is very simplistic, it is a game design for a younger audience but even *Oogie's Revenge* displayed stronger gameplay. By contrast, the foundation of the gameplay in *TLoS* is simply not well-crafted enough to enable anything remotely interesting.

[Spyro Gameplay Demonstration](#)



## Ghost Rider

*Ghost Rider* (Climax Action, 2007) is a movie tie-in game from the film of the same name. Movie tie-in games generally do not have a very good reputation, typically seen as cheap products with the sole intention of earning sales by sharing a name with the film. *Ghost Rider* released the same day as the film which could produce the most cynical opinion that the game was solely created to earn extra profit. With that idea in mind, one might expect *Ghost Rider* to be the most shameless clone so far. Yet somehow *Ghost Rider*, despite being unable to escape its association with the film, is a surprisingly inspired game with some of its own genuinely unique choices. It is still very much a clone. But when playing the game, it is evident the team was deeply passionate about stylish action games like *Devil May Cry* and *GoW* and wanted to make the most of the situation. *Ghost Rider* has by far the most going for it as a clone in terms of combat and shows that Ghost Rider as a character is a great choice for this sub-genre.

Ghost Rider, the character, fights demons with light and heavy attacks, grabs, and various powerful moves associated with resources. For light attacks Ghost Rider swings his chain around in a similar

manner to Kratos and punches enemies for heavy attacks, as is commonplace now. Light and heavy can be combined for unique combos. Guarding is identical to *GoW* with the same ability to cancel most moves, making them a very low commitment. More shocking about guarding is that *Ghost Rider* contains the same orb absorption from *Ninja Gaiden*, whereby guarding the player can quickly absorb orbs to build gauge faster. It is not as much of a risk-reward decision as in *Ninja Gaiden* because the mechanic is tied to blocking and not an attack, but the inclusion is interesting, nonetheless. Dodging is also the same as in *GoW*, performed with the right analogue stick. When an enemy takes enough damage, they will be dazed allowing the player to grab them as done in *GoW* but, unlike that game, enemies must be stunned to be grabbed. Taking a page from *DMC*, *Ghost Rider* contains the *DMC 3* style gauge in the form of the vengeance bar (functionally identically to *DMC 3*'s style gauge), encouraging players to avoid taking damage and vary their moves. There is a neat addition to the vengeance bar: as the player climbs the ranks *Ghost Rider*'s flame becomes progressively hotter and eventually reaches blue flame, which possibly makes his attacks more powerful.

Regarding style, *Ghost Rider* features a unique mechanic: certain enemies have a style barrier and cannot be damaged until the player's style is at a certain rank and the barrier can be destroyed. This is a fascinating idea that admittedly is not often present in the game, but it does provide a different challenge from the most difficult challenges common in action games. Instead of simply asking the player to fight progressively tougher enemies it forces them to be stylish and the game still allows the player to combo the enemy. This is not to say fighting progressively harder enemies is flawed though. There is an issue regarding style barriers, however, but not related to the mechanic itself: if the player is hit, they lose all the style they have accumulated, so for enemies with maximum style rank barriers it can take a very long time to defeat them. At the end of stages, the game presents a grading system identical to *DMC 3*'s that grades time, damage, souls, skill, and then gives an overall grade. And, of course, *Ghost Rider* can also taunt which builds a lot of vengeance. However, the animation is very long and makes it very risky to use in the middle of combat.

*Ghost Rider* has several resources including a spirit gauge that starts at four uses, and by consuming one the player can then unleash the hellfire shotgun or spend them all to activate retribution, *Ghost Rider*'s DT. While retribution is active *Ghost Rider* is stronger and faster.

Grabbing an enemy while in retribution performs the iconic penance stare, instantly killing an enemy. This looks great and feels extremely powerful which was important to achieve because the stare is Ghost Rider's signature attack. Ghost Rider's chain also charges up as the player fights and when at maximum unleashes a link charge attack, a massive AoE that kills almost everything. *Ghost Rider* does not have the most groundbreaking combat, and it is obviously not as distinct as *Devil May Cry* or *GoW*. But for a game that almost certainly had to be released the same day as the film with extremely limited development resources it is commendable how good *Ghost Rider* turned out to be and does prove that there is a lot of quality within clones.

### [Ghost Rider Gameplay Demonstration](#)



### **Dante's Inferno**

*Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010) released a console generation later, which places it outside the sub-genre's initial explosion in popularity. But it is hard to deny the game's aggressive similarities to *GoW* (quite possibly the most shameless clone discussed here). This is because *Dante's Inferno* desperately wanted the attention of audiences, and the game's publisher EA

wanted this to be a huge hit (which is why the game nowadays is mostly recognised for its high degree of marketing). This included a variety of stunts designed to generate press and the first video game commercial to ever premiere at the Super Bowl. Describing *Dante's Inferno* as loosely based on The Divine Comedy is an overstatement. The game barely follows the literature in any meaningful way, making discussions around connections between the two irrelevant. It allowed the team to name the protagonist Dante, however, which was possibly done to draw the attention of Devil May Cry fans.

In terms of gameplay the control scheme for *Dante's Inferno*, and the actions Dante himself is capable of, are almost identical to Kratos. A combination of light and heavy attacks, holding down heavy attack resulting in a launcher, a grab, guarding, dodging on the right analogue stick, and a bevy of QTEs. Dante can also shoot cross projectiles and perform various magical abilities that he acquires throughout the game, akin to the God powers in *GoW*. And by killing enemies the player gains souls that let them purchase upgrades consisting of new moves and other power ups. There are also various selectable relics that modify stats and abilities, but these have very little impact on gameplay.

*Dante's Inferno* does include a handful of its own systems to distinguish itself, but it does still play in a very similar way to *GoW*. It feels mediocre as a stylish action game- the animations and sound effects have an appropriate weight behind them - but it is difficult to feel especially engaged by the game. This is probably because the enemies rely on similar tropes as *Defiance* to create challenge: the toughest enemies barely react to the player's attacks, breaking out of combos frequently and they a lot of health. Furthermore, what feels like a glaring oversight is in fact an extremely easy infinite combo that works on most enemies by performing launching into aerial ground slam repeatedly. Discovering this combo completely trivialises most combat encounters because it is so easy to perform. Boss fights lack the enjoyable spectacle of *GoW*, clearly trying to achieve the same heights but they miss the mark. Visual clarity is also an issue as enemies lack distinct visual and audio queues before attacking, this is a major issue because the camera is placed very far back, leading to the situation where the player can be hit without knowing what has hit them.

Dante has a redemption gauge that, when full, activates an empowered state (the equivalent of God mode from *GoW*). The mechanic itself is unremarkable but what is more interesting is when the

game first introduces this mechanic it specifically mentions that performing stylish combos will fill it faster (seen in Figure 21).

## Figure 21

### *Redemption Bar Introduction*



From *Dante's Inferno*, Visceral Games, 2010.

This is curious because *Dante's Inferno* never explicitly states what it considers stylish and, frankly, the game does not have an identifiable style nor a style gauge like *DMC* to let the player know what is stylish. This is indicative of a larger issue with *Dante's Inferno*: the game lacks a strong identity, its gameplay lacks any of the appeal of *GoW* (as previously discussed), and visually the game is all over the place. Some parts of *Dante's Inferno* depict the nine circles of hell and its inhabitants in imaginative, striking, and horrific ways. Cerberus is a great example, looking unlike its typical depiction as a three-headed dog. For most of the game, though, the presentation of hell is very generic and uninspired. The enemy designs particularly suffer from this, indistinguishable from any other basic hell spawn. This dichotomy stems from the game's development because artist Wayne Barlowe was hired to produce concept art for the game and a lot of his work was disliked by the team so only a portion made it into the final game. Unsurprisingly, the designs that Barlowe created (like Cerberus) prove to be the most visually distinct aspects of the game.

Continuing this lack of identity is the game's 'unholy' and 'holy' experience system. Holy and unholy are increased by the game's absolve system (or a slight amount when the player performs a grab follow-up). Throughout the game, the player will encounter the damned souls of historical figures and the player can choose their fate, rewarding holy or unholy experience depending on

what was chosen. If the player chooses to absolve the damned, they must play a rhythm game every time; this takes an unnecessarily long time. Clearly the intent behind this system is to bring some sort of mortality system to the game. Typically, these sorts of morality mechanics are an easy way to bring player choice into a game and will have some sort of narrative consequence. But *Dante's Inferno* does not comment on the player's action in anyway, leaving the system feeling uncommittable and unnecessary. Unholy experience increases the power of the scythe, while holy increases the power of the cross so there is an impact on gameplay.

*Dante's Inferno* is trying incredibly hard to be known as one of the greatest stylish action games. Yet its lack of commitment to its own ideas and the frequent similarities to *GoW* results in a game that cannot be pointed to as exceptional in any aspect. Everything *Dante's Inferno* does is better represented elsewhere.

#### [Dante's Inferno Gameplay Demonstration](#)



## **The Seventh Generation**

Looking at the contents of this section it may appear strange that there are significantly fewer games than the combined results of previous sections. This is due to a variety of factors that affected Japanese game development. The scope of this topic is much larger than the present research entails, but a brief explanation is necessary to establish why there was a noticeable decline in the quantity of stylish action games during this generation.

The seventh generation initially saw Japanese games decline in quality compared to what came before. Although a lot of the reasoning behind this decline is speculation, changes in both hardware and software are potentially responsible. Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi reflecting on this decline felt that:

“I think that one of the main reasons for that is the fact that consoles like the NES and PlayStation were very specific hardware. This made it easier for Japanese developers to master the hardware, as we could ask Nintendo or Sony directly in Japanese. This is why – I realize it might be impolite to say this – Japanese games were of a higher quality at the time. As a result, Japanese games were regarded as more fun, but when hardware became easier to develop for, things quickly changed.” (McFarren, 2023)

Former Castlevania producer Koji Igarashi adds that:

“Japanese developers had been developing skills specifically for console games, but in North America and Europe, there was a long history of PC culture. By the time there was no longer a big difference between developing for console and for PC, Japanese developers could no longer rely on their specialty as console developers, and had to master PC development.” (McFarren, 2023)

Others have pointed to changes in software potentially impacting Japanese game development. Richmond Lee mentions this: “Remember how Japanese 3DCG fell behind technically during the Aughts/2010s? This was because Softimage (by far the most popular 3D art app in Japan) was acquired by Autodesk in 2008. They quickly gutted it and stopped supporting it” (Lee, 2023). Regardless of the reasoning behind this decline, western games became much more prevalent than Japanese games during the seventh generation, earning more notoriety and sales. Japan’s share of the video game market in 2009 fell to slightly more than 10 percent from the possible 50 percent

in 2002 (Tabuchi, 2010). This resulted in some Japanese developers abandoning what made their games special in the hopes of appealing to a western market.

Although it is difficult to determine the reasons why this shift occurred for most of the Japanese industry, Capcom's reasoning for a shift to western appeal has been well documented and can probably be attributed to the beliefs of one man, Keiji Inafune. Inafune's belief that Japanese games could never be popular in the west was one he held before the seventh generation. But it was in 2009 when that really came to the forefront and Inafune stated that "personally when I looked around [at] all the different games at the TGS floor, I said 'Man, Japan is over. We're done. Our game industry is finished.'" (Chester, 2009) In 2010, Inafune became Capcom's Global Head of Production and thus had an incredible amount of influence over Capcom. Therefore, the late 2000's and early 2010's saw Capcom release several titles with a distinct focus on western appeal. Games such as *Bionic Commando* (Grin, 2009), *Dark Void* (Airtight Games, 2010), and *Lost Planet 3* (Spark Unlimited, 2013) are such examples and the Dead Rising franchise, primarily developed by Capcom's Vancouver branch, saw a huge push from Capcom and Inafune.

Later in October 2010, shortly after becoming Global Head of Production, Inafune would leave Capcom, but the damage was already done. For the next few years, a good portion of Capcom's biggest releases continued this focus on western appeal. Capcom's reputation with audiences continued to decline throughout this era, only starting to turn around with the release of *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* (Capcom, 2017) and *Monster Hunter: World* (Capcom, 2018) both of which strongly focused on the core appeal of their respective series.

As mentioned, the reasons for this shift from other Japanese developers is more difficult to determine, although a potential reason, beyond the decline in sales, may be that Capcom is possibly looked at as an indicator for the direction of games in Japan. At the Japan Fighting Game Publishers Roundtable a translator speaking for Katano from Arc System Works said that "when you don't want to aggravate your userbase you can kind of look at Street Fighter and see what the expectations are before you try to do your own thing" (Bandai Namco Esports, 2023, 34:28). Obviously, this is a single comment regarding a single genre, but it may suggest that Capcom, given their pedigree and importance in gaming history, does influence the rest of the Japanese industry.

The consequences of this shift to western appeal saw a variety of genres, some niche and others big, that were primarily developed in Japan largely disappear during the seventh generation, (hence the small number of stylish action games covered within this section). Furthermore, the initial drop in quality combined with the shift to western appeal resulted in a toxic attitude towards Japanese games with some dismissing any games that originated from Japan. Most infamously, developer Phil Fish at a GDC panel in response to a question regarding his thoughts on recent Japanese games said, “they suck, I’m sorry like you guys need to get with the times ... we’re totally kicking your ass back then you guys were the king of the world, but your time has passed” (Mad Kangaroo, 2015, 0:45). This sentiment towards Japanese games has not entirely dissipated either. Recently, *Final Fantasy XVI* (Square Enix, 2023) producer Naoki Yoshida kicked the Hornet’s nest regarding this attitude towards Japanese RPGs specifically, whose translator in an interview said:

“One thing he wants to get across is that when we create games, we don’t go into them thinking we are creating JRPGs, we are just creating RPGs. The term JRPG is used by western media rather than users and media in Japan ... this is going to depend on who you ask but there was a time when this term first appeared 15 years ago, and for us as developers the first time we heard it, it was like a discriminatory term. As though we were being made fun of for creating these games, and so for some developers the term JRPG can be something that will maybe trigger bad feelings because of what it was in the past. It wasn’t a compliment to a lot of developers in Japan.” (Skill Up, 2023, 28:19)

These comments from Yoshida reignited this discussion, with many people reflecting on this time and how this attitude still exists in a small capacity. Journalist Gene Park (2023) commented that “as an Asian person I absolutely felt anti-Asian sentiment throughout the gaming press and industry, and it was happening well before Phil Fish made his racist comment to a Japanese developer’s face”.

With all said, however, stylish action games did not completely disappear during this generation and those that remained will be the basis of analysis for this section.

### **Devil May Cry 4 “The Next Generation”**

*Devil May Cry 4 (DMC 4)* (Capcom, 2008) holds two special titles in the series - being the first seventh generation game in the series and a multi-platform game - which are important distinctions because they inform the bold change that *DMC 4* makes for the series. For the first time Dante is not the protagonist. *DMC 4* opens with a new protagonist, Nero, running through the streets of Fortuna and slashes apart scarecrows before arriving at the church for the Order of the Sword, (a religious sect that worships Sparda as a God). Nero, clearly uninterested in the worship of Sparda, decides to leave but before he can the ceremony is interrupted by none other than Dante, who murders Sanctus, the leader of the Order.

### [DMC 4 Opening](#)



The initial appearance of Dante in *DMC 4* is much more antagonistic than anything before. Dante does not say anything as he murders knights of the Order, only speaking after Nero impresses him. If the intent was to make the player question Dante's role in this game, it does not work for the simple reason that it is hard to believe Dante would turn evil for any reason. After the opening cutscenes the game transitions into a proper tutorial mission designed to get the player accustomed to the game but, more importantly, Nero's gameplay. Therefore, just as with Dante, Nero's move set and playstyle need to be established.

Like Dante, Nero has his own sword and firearm combination, the Red Queen and Blue Rose respectively. Blue Rose is similar to Ebony and Ivory, the main differences being a slower rate of fire because it is only one gun, and also the ability to charge a shot up to three stages by holding down the button and unleash a massive blast. Blue Rose can be charged while performing other actions, so the long build-up does not invalidate the mechanic. Nero's sword, the Red Queen, is a blade with an engine inside capable of performing similar combos and moves to Dante's swords. Both the high time and stinger equivalent use the same input method, although Nero has aerial combos by default (unlike Dante who must be in Swordmaster).

The key mechanic that separates Red Queen from Dante's swords is called 'Exceed'. By pressing the Exceed button Nero will 'rev' his sword, which increases the gauge next to his health. When a portion of the three-piece bar fills, the next sword attack will have its properties altered, such as dealing extra damage or gaining additional hits. Increasing the gauge is not as simple as mashing Exceed or holding the button. It must be specifically held and then released for the best result, akin to a motorcycle. The real trick with Exceed is after an attack with Red Queen: if the player times the Exceed button press correctly, it will instantly build a portion of the gauge, and this substantially expands Nero's combat capabilities and increase the difficulty of his gameplay. As with previous games the player can purchase new moves to expand character move lists - one of Nero's purchasable moves is the 'MAX-Act' ability which, with perfect timing, will fill the Exceed gauge entirely.

[DMC 4 Red Queen and Blue Rose](#)



Exceed is a fantastic mechanic that differentiates the gameplay of Nero from Dante and makes him difficult in an entirely separate way. Ideally, the player should be aiming to Exceed every attack and change their combos, depending on whether they are successful (especially if they execute a MAX-Act). Nero's other personal mechanic is Buster - by using his demonic right arm Nero can perform a powerful grab attack when close to enemies. Buster is a straightforward mechanic, but its application is extremely varied. There are also certain scenarios against enemies and bosses where Buster can be used and, if successful, results in a unique interaction, such as throwing a spear back at the boss. Nero also acquires the Snatch ability in mission two - when locked onto an enemy and performing Buster Nero will pull smaller enemies towards him or pull himself towards big enemies.

[DMC 4 Nero Gameplay Demonstration](#)



It is not inaccurate to describe Nero as an easier, more accessible character than Dante, no doubt a decision done in the hope that new players from other platforms who were unfamiliar with the series would be able to get into the game. Nero is easier because he has only one melee weapon and one firearm, no styles to choose from, the Red Queen has easy aerial combos, Buster gives players easy access to big damage, and Snatch lessens the importance of positioning since enemies can be pulled towards Nero. Despite Nero's accessibility though Exceed enables him to remain an engaging and fun character, his moves also feel great to perform - especially Exceed and MAX-Act, due to a combination of visual and sound effects that make the attacks feel very powerful.

*DMC 4* in general continues to improve upon the feel of the series, resulting in some of the most satisfying and stylish combat yet. Nero's simplistic playstyle, especially compared to Dante, is possibly the first reason why Devil May Cry fans did not initially take kindly to Nero. Fans of *DMC 3* coming into *DMC 4* expecting to play as Dante, only to be stuck with a new and easier character could give a bad first impression. Nero's visual design also does not stand out much from Dante or Vergil, appearing as an awkward in-between. There are a variety of other factors that possibly resulted in this negative opinion of Nero later into the game. But even at the very start Dante mocks Nero's Exceed mechanic with his sword, which immediately makes Nero look silly, having the previous protagonist mock his central mechanic.

### [DMC 4 Dante Mocking Nero](#)



After the tutorial and following boss fight against Dante, Nero repeatedly punches him in the face before impaling him with Rebellion which is a great introduction to Nero's fighting style and the appeal of his gameplay: aggression. While Dante's style focused on being as cool as possible, taunting danger at every opportunity, and finding creative ways to use his weapons, Nero is a young aggressive punk who fights with pure anger and has the strength to back that up. Nero is completely disinterested in the style of his actions; he still has the same cocky energy that Dante does but it is much meaner. Nero's gameplay reflects this attitude well: his sword swings are clearly meant for impact and damage and Buster always violently tosses enemies around, and his taunts are much more aggressive than Dante's. This emphasis on aggression makes Nero's core mechanic very appropriate because his weapon literally ignites as he fights. His animations also convey a general lack of swordsmanship skill, often swinging Red Queen around as a hunk of metal than a blade.

Regarding style, the iconic style gauge returns and remains identical to its *DMC 3* incarnation, although the ranking system has been slightly changed (consisting only of clear time, stylish points, and orb finds). Taunts also return, expanded even further with even more unique taunts,

depending on the style rank. Currency has also seen a big change, now split into red orbs and the new Proud Souls system. Proud Souls are only gained from the end-of-mission results screen, (shown in Figure 22). They are the primary currency used to buy new moves.

**Figure 22**

*DMC 4 Mission Clear Screen*



From *Devil May Cry 4*, Capcom, 2008.

The difference between Proud Souls and red orbs is that the player can refund any purchases made with Proud Souls, allowing for much more freedom in what to purchase. If the player does not end up liking a move they bought they can simply refund it. The cost of moves also increases with each purchase, to balance out how they are spent. On their own Proud Souls are good but red orbs do still exist and can now only be spent on items. Because the only non-consumable items are blue and purple orbs, red orbs are effectively spent on just those items - all of which can be bought very quickly. Therefore, once the player owns all the items orbs are functionally worthless. This also brings into question why 'orbs found' is still a ranking metric if they become obsolete so quickly.

The progression and level design in *DMC 4* is mostly unnoteworthy except for its variety of gimmicks that are separate from the core combat that begins in mission six with the infamous Dice

Room. To progress past this room players must move their piece from one end of the board to the other by attacking a single die (dice) to determine how far it moves.

### [DMC 4 Dice](#)



Even among a series that does not consider realism to be a priority the entire scenario cannot help but look absurdly contrived. There is a trick that trivialises the section, however, as the number on top of the die will always be that result if the die is only hit once.

Mission six is also where Nero awakens his devil trigger, using the Yamato in a scene very reminiscent of Dante's own DT awakening. After awakening his DT Nero says something eerily similar to Vergil regarding power with the not-so-subtle implication being that Nero is Vergil's son, Nero being able to wield Yamato only furthering this. This is not outwardly confirmed in *DMC 4*, but the evidence is hard to deny. Nero was an orphan raised by the Order and formed strong relationships with Kyrie and Credo. What Nero says during this scene is shockingly reflective of not just his own goals and motivation but also those of Vergil. Nero, like his father, strives for power. However, there is a significant difference between the two: Nero wants power to protect those he cares about, especially Kyrie, regardless of what happens to himself as a result.

### [DMC 4 Nero Devil Trigger](#)



Meanwhile, Vergil desires power for power's sake and never gives a definitive reason why he wants power; analysing his character showed that his desire for power was most likely created because of his inability to protect his mother and his admiration for Sparda. Vergil did not have anything tangible to care about, only a memory, and this is why his son Nero does not succumb to that lust for power. Nero's Devil Trigger (DT) is also visually interesting because it is a spirit and not a demonic form - the reason behind this is that the catalyst for awakening his DT was the sword, Yamato, which separated the demon world from the human world, therefore separating Nero's demonic form. In terms of gameplay, Nero's DT is fairly similar to Dante's (increasing his power and regenerating his health) but because his DT manifests as a spirit it also adds additional attacks to Nero's sword swings and Vergil's mirage blades for gunshots. All Buster attacks become stronger with new animations to show the increase in power, and he also can use two powerful moves while in DT: Showdown and Maximum Bet. When Nero activates his DT enemies close to him are launched making it an effective defensive tool too.

[DMC 4 Nero Devil Trigger Gameplay](#)



Enemy design in *DMC 4* is one of its strongest aspects and introduces a bevy of interesting enemies and reintroduces enemy concepts from *DMC* enhanced for *DMC 4*'s more complex combat system. Those enemies include Frosts and Blades (renamed to Assaults) and both function almost identically to their *DMC* counterparts but with additional moves. Bringing back these enemies gives the series combat a deeper connection and proves how good they already were in *DMC*, considering how little is changed.

The two most interesting new enemies are Bianco and Alto Angelo, constructs created from the remains of Nelo Angelo's armour. True to their origin the Angelos fight in a similar manner to Nelo Angelo, Bianco deflecting attacks from the front with its massive shield, (primarily needing to be attacked from behind) while Alto attacks with its giant sword. When Alto is accompanied by Bianco it will issue commands to them, creating several different formations to assault the player; this requires an entirely unique approach to deal with them. The most controversial new enemy is Blitz, easily the hardest regular enemy in the series - extremely fast, teleports frequently, and if the player attempts to use a melee attack it will not work initially. The player must shoot Blitz until it is no longer electrified before being able to combo it. However, if Blitz is not immediately killed and it charges up again it will enter an enraged state where it can attempt to kill the player before

killing itself which feels very unfair. Blitz is more frustrating than challenging. It could have been a great enemy if it fought without the suicide attack.

### [DMC 4 Enemies](#)



Despite the amazing enemy line-up, sadly the boss line-up in *DMC 4* is noticeably weaker than *DMC* or *DMC 3*. The main demon boss fights (Berial, Bael, and Echidna) are serviceable but lack the memorability of *DMC* or *DMC 3*, possibly because they all interact with the protagonists in the same way, as evil demons who hate humans. That is not to say previous bosses were especially deep characters but there was diversity in their interactions with Dante. There is another more obvious issue with the bosses that will be discussed later. There are also many uninteresting bosses such as the Reactor Room, Agnus Angelo, and Sanctus - all are not very engaging, the latter two primarily run away from the player.

### [DMC 4 Demon Bosses](#)



The best boss in *DMC 4* is Credo Angelo, primarily because it is an incredibly dynamic fight. Credo provides both challenging offence and defence and there are many different approaches that the player can take with Nero in this fight. He feels like an evolution of Nelo Angelo. Unfortunately, despite this being the game's equivalent to Vergil or Nelo Angelo, Credo is only fought once. The design of Credo's demonic form as properly angelic is a clever decision, showing that despite working for Sanctus he is a genuinely heroic character.

[DMC 4 Credo](#)



Sanctus himself is a weak villain, Mundus at least had a personal connection to Dante. But Sanctus is simply an evil leader who wants to destroy the world and create a true utopia using the Savior. Halfway into the game Nero, who unable to defeat Sanctus in his battle with him and save Kyrie, is absorbed into the Savior, causing it to activate and this then spurs Dante to action and results in a character switch.

[DMC 4 Sanctus](#)



The next half of the game sees a return to Dante as the protagonist, giving the player everything, they would want in terms of gameplay and character. But Dante's character is unfortunately somewhat detrimental to the story of *DMC 4*. Dante's attitude in *DMC 4* is extremely nonchalant, quite possibly due to the positive reaction of his attitude in *DMC 3* (although this somewhat undermines the dire circumstances the Savior presents). Dante is clearly aware that he could stop Sanctus at any moment but chooses to let Nero try and do it instead; it feels like this trip to Fortuna is a holiday for him. Dante's lack of care peaks as he and Trish mock the Savior's design while Credo is dying behind them.

[DMC 4 Dante's Attitude](#)



In general, the narrative in *DMC 4* is much weaker than in *DMC 3*, primarily because it lacks an identifiable core and presents another reason why audiences also might not have taken to Nero. His role in *DMC 4*'s narrative does not feel well considered - his goal for half the game is to track down Dante, who he is unfamiliar with. This does not drive Nero in the same way as Dante's motivation in *DMC 3* and also allowed Dante to grow as a character. Following orders for nearly half the game does not fit Nero's punk attitude either, making it hard for the player to care about him when Nero himself is not bothered by what is happening for the first half of the game until Kyrie is kidnapped.

Dante's gameplay remains mostly the same as it was in *DMC 3*, starting with Rebellion, Ebony and Ivory, and a shotgun. There have been some slight changes to his overall move set, most of which are just further refinements. But the most impactful change is Dante's access to all his styles at once using the directional pad. To say that this expands his gameplay options would be an understatement. The ability to swap between evasion, extra moves, gun power, and charge Royal Guard all at the same time quite literally quadruples his depth. Dante also has a fifth style in Dark Slayer, allowing him to briefly wield Vergil's Yamato. The second major change to Dante is no longer having to settle for two devil arms and firearms in a mission. He can now gain access to all of them, which deepens his gameplay even further. Dante's new weapons consist of Gilgamesh, a

CQC weapon that combines elements of Ifrit and Beowulf, Lucifer which can set pins before detonating them, and Pandora, a multifaceted weapon with many alternate forms.

[DMC 4 Dante Gameplay Demonstration](#)



This makes Dante feel extremely overpowered. Very few enemies stand a chance against him, with some enemies that feel like they were designed for Nero specifically. Dante feels even more overpowered because Proud Souls spent when playing as Nero carry over to Dante and allow the player to purchase almost all his abilities the moment the swap happens. The biggest impact this has is being able to max out the styles immediately. Unlike *DMC 3*, where styles levelled up as the player used them, style levels are now purchased with Proud Souls. This then solves the issue of sticking to one throughout a playthrough. But it does introduce a new issue of having all the strongest options available immediately. The result is that Dante does not have a genuine sense of progression, further hindered by the fact that Dante does not get any new content.

Despite Dante being the most expansive he has ever been, it is at the point when the player switches over to him that it becomes clear that *DMC 4* is simply unfinished. Every mission played as Dante reuses content Nero played through and to compensate for the lack of new content *DMC 4* introduces even more awful gimmicks. Nero's sections already contain some frustrating gimmicks,

like the dice game, but swapping to Dante causes them to become really aggravating. An example is the jungle missions, which already included platforming sections playing as Nero. But going through it again introduces the Fault enemy. Faults emerge from the ground and if it grabs the player, it then forces them into a combat room before being set back further than where they were.

#### [DMC 4 Faults](#)



This does not only apply to the environments though because Dante must fight Echidna, Bael (renamed to Dagon), Berial, and Agnus for a second time with zero changes, unlike the bosses in *DMC*. Fighting every boss multiple times makes fighting Credo once especially disappointing. Despite the mountain of reused content, however, Dante does get to skip the dice minigame by destroying it in a cutscene - another example of the game disrespecting Nero.

#### [DMC 4 Dante Dice](#)



The story also essentially pauses until Dante returns to Fortuna, making Dante's half feel especially unfinished. This is the final reason why fans might have developed a negative opinion of Nero. The least charitable view of his half of the game is that he was stealing content from Dante. All this reused content has a major impact on the quality of *DMC 4*, unfortunate because Dante is great to play as and if he had new areas to go through, or even the same areas without the gimmicks, it would massively improve the game.

Dante's final challenge is battling the Savior, arguably the worst boss in the entire series. It is a painfully boring and slow boss that sees the player jump around platforms, destroying jewels before its health bar can be damaged. It continues to prove that these massive spectacle battles are difficult to make interesting unless they are carefully curated for the gameplay as they are in *GoW*.

[DMC 4 Savior](#)



The final two chapters return to Nero where he again rolls the dice and fights every boss (except Credo) for the third time. This feels like a slap in the face for both him and the player. Continuing the trend of repeated content Sanctus is the game's final boss, who remains very similar to the previous battle with him. The game ends with an ultimate Buster from Nero before Dante lets him inherit the Yamato, seemingly passing the torch to him as series protagonist.

#### [DMC 4 Ending](#)



*DMC 4* is far from a bad stylish action game. It retains many of the established strengths of the series and, although the introduction of Nero is not perfect, he presents a different gameplay style distinct from any characters before. However, its flaws are much more noticeable than either *DMC* or *DMC 3* with far too much content reuse that undermines Dante's half of the game. The imbalance of quality leaves *DMC 4* in an awkward position making the series shakily leap into the next generation.

### **Bayonetta “Beauty and Brutality”**

As result of a poor commercial success, Capcom made the decision to dissolve Clover Studio but even before this closure Hideki Kamiya, Atsushi Inaba, and Shinji Mikami had already founded their own studio, Seeds Inc. (who would later merge with Odd Inc. and in 2007 reemerge as PlatinumGames). In 2008 they announced their first three games, one of which was Kamiya's next directorial game, *Bayonetta*. Kamiya's desire to create another stylish action game almost a decade after *DMC* arose from people feeling that in comparison to stylish action games that came after it, *DMC* was much simpler. Kamiya claims that “I started hearing people say ‘*DMC* is really good

but the first one doesn't have enough moves and it doesn't have enough weapons, or this and that' that was seven years ago! Let me show you what I can do" (Lawson, 2014). His goal was essentially to reclaim the throne of best stylish action game and attempt to move the sub-genre forward again. In some ways one might view *Bayonetta* as the proper sequel to *DMC*, sharing a lot of its DNA whilst also including many refinements from Kamiya's games after *DMC*. *Bayonetta* follows the titular character on a quest across Europe to uncover her memories and remember who she is.

True to Kamiya's desire to prove himself, *Bayonetta's* opening sequence starts strong. A pair of Umbran Witches battle dozens of angels atop the crumbling Umbran Clocktower while a narrator establishes the history of the world and the relationship between the Umbra Witches, dwellers of the dark, and Lumen Sages, controllers of light. The prologue then goes on to establish Enzo and Rodin, two of the game's supporting characters, and Bayonetta herself as she scandalously reveals herself (which makes for quite an entrance).

### [Bayonetta Opening](#)



Bayonetta, both the game and character, are here to make a statement: to put all other stylish action games to shame. This then transitions into a brief series of tutorials to accustom the player to the

combat in *Bayonetta*. Bayonetta's two primary attacks are her fast punches and slow kicks, both of which can be combined to unleash a huge variety of combos (such as punch kick punch, or punch punch kick punch).

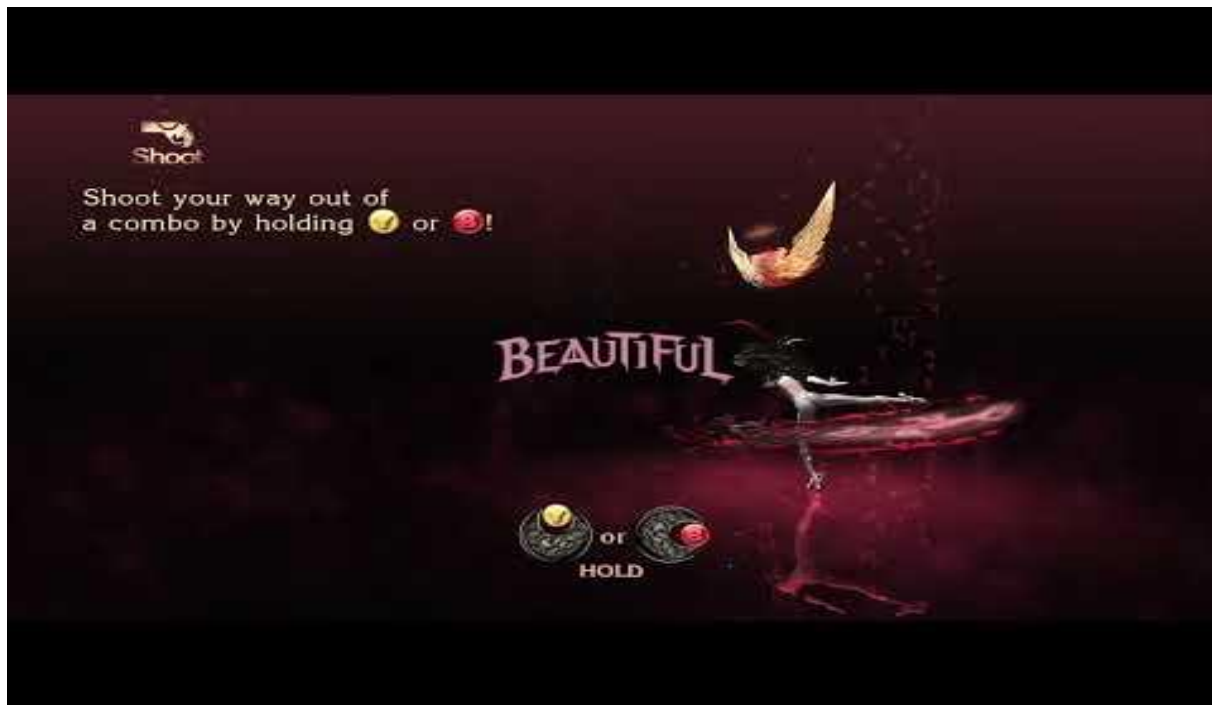
### [Bayonetta Punches and Kicks](#)



Many of the combos in *Bayonetta* will end with a wicked weave, a powerful attack from Bayonetta's main demon, Madame Butterfly. Bayonetta's primary weapons are her handguns, Scarborough Fair. But she also has other weapons that can change her attacks, such as Shuraba, a katana that changes the punches to sword swings. Bayonetta has an enormous list of possible combos with her handguns. This can make starting the game a daunting task because it is unclear which combos are good, or how to memorise them. An effective approach to simplify the combo list is to identify which combos the player finds useful and then initially settle on using those. Bayonetta's attacks also extend to the air, although if a kick is used outside a combo in mid-air Bayonetta will come crashing down with her heel. This helps to make air combos more approachable because the player only needs to remember that aerial combos are started with punches. Bayonetta can also regularly shoot her guns like Dante, but the stream of bullets is much more intense. *Bayonetta's* lock-on functions almost identically to the lock-on in *DMC*. However,

because fewer moves are tied to lock-on and the soft lock-on is not as intense as in other stylish action games its importance is lessened. Both punches and kicks can also be held down to shoot out a stream of bullets. This mechanic's connection to two other mechanics is crucial to the understanding of *Bayonetta's* combat.

### [Bayonetta Hold Attacks](#)



The first mechanic is Bayonetta's dodge, and it has a significant amount of invincibility compared to dodges seen in other stylish action games, but this does come with a caveat. If the player dodges five times in a row, then the fifth dodge has a longer animation that the player will be stuck in (just like *Oogie's Revenge*) but also like that game the performing of any other action in between the dodges will prevent this. If the player dodges at the last possible second before an enemy's attack, the player will activate *Bayonetta's* most iconic mechanic, Witch Time. While Witch Time is active all enemies move in slow motion and can be freely comboed. The physics of the game also changes to emulate that slow motion therefore when enemies are knocked back, they will not fly as far. Bayonetta's movement speed also increases and both these changes help to convey the idea that it is not just the enemies that are slowed down, but that time itself has slowed down. Certain

enemy attacks have a distinct flash and sound effect to indicate an incoming attack so the player can dodge accordingly.

### [Bayonetta Witch Time](#)

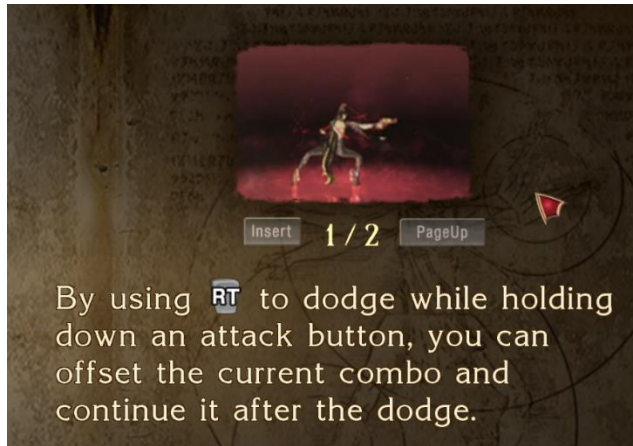


If there was anything about *Bayonetta* that could be described as having influenced the stylish action sub-genre it would be Witch Time, or more specifically, rewarding the player for a perfect dodge. Most stylish action games created after *Bayonetta* reward the player for precision dodging or feature their own variation of Witch Time. This is most likely because Witch Time is a very satisfying and rewarding mechanic that gives players a clear opportunity to punish enemies and reward careful dodging. However, it is debatable if Witch Time is *Bayonetta's* core mechanic because it is removed on the hardest difficulty, Nonstop Infinite Climax, and there is another mechanic far more essential to combat than Witch Time: Dodge Offset. Holding down punch or kick, at the start of or during a combo, then dodging and continuing to hold the button, allows the player to continue their combo after a dodge (they do not need to reset it). Dodge offset is vital in order to understand *Bayonetta's* combat. Although the mechanic is shown in the techniques menu (seen in Figure 23), it is never overtly presented to the player. Perhaps the reason Dodge Offset is not tutorialised was because it is difficult to explain and would not have made sense to introduce

it to a player who just started the game. However, Dodge Offset should have been presented to the player because much of the combat in *Bayonetta* does not work without it.

### Figure 23

#### *Bayonetta's Description of Dodge Offset*



From *Bayonetta*, PlatinumGames, 2009.

The second benefit to holding down an attack button and firing a stream of bullets is the potential to significantly build up more combo points than by simply mashing out combos. *Bayonetta* takes its style ranking in a very different direction to the *DMC* series. It swaps out the style gauge in *DMC* for an elaborate combo grading system. Every attack the player performs builds a certain number of points which is affected by various factors. At the end of a verse (combat encounter) the player will be graded on combo, time, and damage and then given a grade for each (shown in Figure 24). The game then takes those three grades and presents an average for the verse itself. At the end of a chapter all the player's grades from each verse are tallied into a total rank for the chapter (seen in Figure 25).

### Figure 24

#### *Verse Results*



From *Bayonetta*, PlatinumGames, 2009.

## Figure 25

*Bayonetta Chapter Results Screen*



From *Bayonetta*, PlatinumGames, 2009.

There is a lot of maths behind the combo system and grading that affects the multiplier and the multiplicand, and I lack the knowledge to give an adequate explanation. Yet the system is the most

transparent and communicative style ranking seen in a stylish action game yet, plainly stating what actions result in the greatest number of points, and where the player can improve. Two obvious factors that affect grading are items and taunts. Every time the player uses an item, half a skull is added to the rank at the end of a chapter (a full skull drops the rank by one). For example, if the player were to get a platinum rank at the end of chapter but had one skull, they would instead get a gold grade. This system disincentivises item use in general, preventing players from effortlessly achieving high ranks by abusing consumable items. When Bayonetta taunts enemies they will become enraged, attacking faster and not becoming staggered as easily (as like *God Hand* and *Oogie's Revenge*). Attacking enraged enemies will give more points and this encourages players to get cheeky with the enemies if they desire higher ranks. Bayonetta unfortunately only has one taunt.

### [Bayonetta Taunt](#)



Alongside attacking and dodging, taunting also increases Bayonetta's magic gauge. When the magic gauge is maxed out this allows her to perform a torture attack, an extremely powerful move that places enemies in elaborate torture devices and if they are killed will drop their weapon, (which can be used temporarily).

### [Bayonetta Torture Attack](#)



The magic gauge can also be used for a handful of other attacks unlocked later in the game. Torture attacks feel very powerful and add to the feeling of dominating your enemies. But they require a lot of button mashing and, given how many torture attacks are performed over the game, this can become strenuous. *Bayonetta* includes a lot of button mashing in general and what has been said about mashing before applies here: it quickly becomes tiring. The same applies to *Bayonetta's* QTEs which, although infrequent, can occur rather unexpectedly and if failed are an instant death and this can feel very unfair.

### [Bayonetta QTE](#)



This establishes the basic flow of combat which is much more of a back-and-forth affair with enemies than in the Devil May Cry series. In *Bayonetta*, the player attacks enemies whilst weaving in and out of combat, using Dodge Offset to execute combos before finishing with wicked weaves, and activating Witch Time to gain the upper hand when an opportunity arises. The player's role in combat is a mixture of aggressor and defender, while in Devil May Cry the player was almost always the aggressor, engaging enemies head-on and applying so much pressure they cannot even attack. Combat is also much more freeform, using Dodge Offset and quickly stringing together many different attacks, whereas in *DMC* the player is attempting to execute lengthy combos on a single enemy.

[Bayonetta Gameplay Demonstration](#)



To help maintain this flow enemies cannot attack from offscreen like some stylish action games. This makes the feel and look of combat in *Bayonetta* very different from *Devil May Cry* or anything else: the way Bayonetta is animated has a confident air of elegance and class that makes battles look almost like a dance and this helps to distinguish her sense of style from Dante's stylish and cocky attitude. If Dante was a modern, stylish interpretation of a Demon Hunter then Bayonetta would be the equivalent for witches - instead of being a crusty old hag that cast spells she is a confident and sexually liberated woman who dominates her enemies by summoning demons, defining the appeal of her gameplay. This elegance and class are reinforced by the choice of music, a cover of *Fly Me to the Moon* and the battle theme *Mysterious Destiny*; a completely different sound from anything in *DMC*. Of course, there have been female protagonists in stylish action games before, although an extreme minority as shown by the other chosen games. None make a statement as loud as Bayonetta who feels like she is specifically here to show up the competition. As briefly mentioned in the literature review, the sexualisation of Bayonetta has been a point of discourse for over a decade now. The most well discussed aspect of the franchise which has created its own history, the evolution could be analysed simply on its own, but this is outside the scope of the research.

In addition to the core mechanics of *Bayonetta* there are other gameplay aspects worth discussing, such as the various weapons. As mentioned earlier Bayonetta acquires a bevy of different weapons throughout the game by collecting LP records and returning them to Rodin at the gates of hell, the shop where accessories, techniques, and other collectibles can be purchased (shown in Figure 26).

### Figure 26

*The Gates of Hell in Bayonetta*



From *Bayonetta*, PlatinumGames, 2009.

The weapons in *Bayonetta* feature a great variety of move sets and unique interactions with enemies and their inclusion certainly deepens Bayonetta's combat potential: although the game feels so good to play with just the handguns that it is easy to exclusively use them. Bayonetta has two weapon sets, both consisting of one weapon for her arms and one weapon for her legs (shown in Figure 27). This enables some weapon mixing, but most weapons can only be equipped to either the arms or legs. Bayonetta can also equip two accessories but these feel like somewhat of a missed opportunity because most accessories have an innate downside to compensate for the strength of

their effects. Some accessories are so strong they allow the player to invalidate certain parts of the combat.

**Figure 27**

*Weapon Select in Bayonetta*



From *Bayonetta*, PlatinumGames, 2009.

Some of the most interesting purchasable techniques are the Beast Within abilities unlocked at the end of chapter five when Bayonetta gains Panther Within which, as the name implies, transforms Bayonetta into a panther by doubling tapping Dodge. This increases her movement speed and can also be used to Dodge Offset combos (called Panther Offset in this instance). Bat Within transforms Bayonetta into a cauldron of bats when the player dodges an enemy's attack at the last possible moment. This simultaneously makes dodging easier and more difficult as Bat Within has a longer Witch Time effect, rewarding players who wait for a riskier opportunity. Double tapping dodge in the air activates Crow Within which then lets Bayonetta fly for a small amount of time and can summon feathers that surround her. The player also gets access to the Umbran Spear technique: by doubling tapping lock-on Bayonetta will quickly dash towards the targeted enemy for the cost of one magic jewel.

### [Bayonetta Beast Within](#)



To compensate for Bayonetta's mobility, enemies are extremely aggressive and varied and this results in a solid line-up of angels. The angels have an appropriate amount of resistance to Bayonetta's attacks. They are not staggered all the time but can still be comboed so the player will feel the impact of their attacks. To use an example, arguably the game's most iconic enemies, Grace and Glory are a pair of lightning and fire clawed angels who are always fought together and makes them one of the hardest enemies in the game. However, they remain fair because only one will attack the player at a time, so the challenge is focusing on the current attacker and recognising when they swap.

### [Bayonetta Grace and Glory](#)



Although most of the angels provide a variety of challenges, a few let down the experience, primarily because they are not fought in a conventional manner, (such as the Kinship, which is a floating boat that does not really move, only shooting projectiles). The designs of the angels are also interesting, striking a balance between classical and historical interpretations of angels. Their pristine outer shells hide away their grotesque flesh forms and observing that outer layer fall off as they take damage makes the player feel powerful, as if they were being ripped apart piece by piece. *Bayonetta* is a very inspired game and you can clearly tell there was a lot of care and attention given to how the designs and locations in the game would be informed by historical and religious history.

The boss fights in *Bayonetta* take a very different approach from *Devil May Cry*, and like *GoW*, are primarily gigantic spectacle battles - which they deliver in droves. These battles are also decently designed in their own regard, featuring more complex scenarios than the bosses in *GoW*. Bayonetta lets her hair down during these sequences, transforming all her attacks into wicked weaves. Tearing apart these giant angels really conveys the spectacle and power difference between regular gameplay. It almost feels as if Bayonetta is holding back against regular angels, knowing that she does not need to call on her full power to defeat them.

### [Bayonetta Boss Example](#)



Despite their size, however, the battles with Jeanne, the game's rival character, are clearly the highlight for the same reasons that Nelo Angelo, Vergil, and Credo Angelo were all the best battles of their respective games. Jeanne gives the player a direct comparison to their own gameplay and style. She is especially interesting because, while the bosses listed above had their own distinct styles, Jeanne is almost identical to Bayonetta. This creates a much more comparable character, and each fight with her builds upon the last to make the progression and parallels very overt. The final battle with Jeanne is a perfect blend of spectacle and difficulty but it is brought down by what comes before. Before the last battle with Jeanne begins, the player must complete a rail shooter segment (inspired by *Space Harrier* as *DMC* had).

### [Bayonetta Jeanne and Rail Shooter](#)



Because the battle with Jeanne is so long and difficult, if the player wants to learn the fight, they must play through the entire *Space Harrier* section again (which itself is very long). For what should be the final test of the player's skills in combat, to be forced to play through another genre entirely first feels like a great oversight.

Despite frequent cutscenes and a novel's worth of lore to read within the game regarding the universe, angels, and demons, *Bayonetta's* narrative in fact has very little to say. The actual events of the game are surface level, not really saying much and they lack a strong antagonistic force. Towards the end of the game the Lumen Sage, Balder, is revealed to be the true antagonist – he desires to reshape reality in his own image by awakening Jubileus the Creator. On top of a weak motivation, he appears so late into the game that it is difficult to feel connected to him or compelled to stop him. His relationship to Bayonetta as her father is also not given the appropriate amount of importance.

[Bayonetta Balder](#)



Really, it is Bayonetta herself who carries much of the game's narrative with tons of iconic moments that make for a fun character to have as a protagonist.

#### [Iconic Bayonetta Moment](#)



*Bayonetta* truly does succeed in Kamiya's goal of wanting to prove to others he could make something as good as *DMC* again, and *Bayonetta* is a fantastic stylish action game on its own. The combat in the game is some of the most satisfying discussed so far with a strong sense of style as well as innovation and influence. It has some irritating features but not enough to break an otherwise phenomenal stylish action game that immediately places itself next to the likes of *Devil May Cry*, *Ninja Gaiden*, and *GoW*.

### **DmC: Devil May Cry “A Forceful Reboot”**

As outlined at the start of this section, Japanese game development suffered from serious problems during the seventh console generation and saw a general shift in the quality, sales, and opinion on Japanese games. There is perhaps no better game that represents the changing market than the infamous *DmC: Devil May Cry (DmC DMC)* (Ninja Theory, 2013). Despite selling the most in the series up to that point, Capcom viewed *DMC 4* as having low sales and felt that the series needed a new direction to maintain relevance. *DmC DMC* producer Motohide Eshiro stated that “*Devil May Cry 4* as an example ... we sold 2.7 million of that particular game, but we looked at the market and saw that there were other action games selling four million, five million, all these copies.” (MacDonald, 2010) This new direction of course was Western-orientated and, impressed by their work on other games, Capcom chose European developer Ninja Theory to usher in this Western direction.

Continuing the idea of wanting to expand the audience of *Devil May Cry*, *DmC DMC* would make efforts to simplify the game's combat and allow newcomers easier access into the series. Combat designer Rahni Tucker that when looking at high level players said, “they're always in the air, they're always juggling enemies around ... we wanted to take that magic the pro-players could create and give more casual players a bit of that feeling.” (Evans-Thirlwell, 2013)

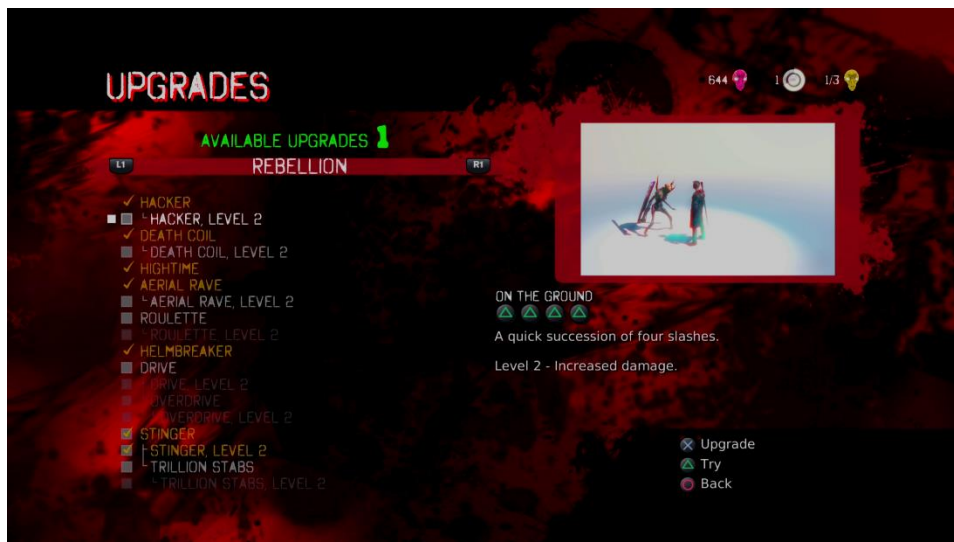
Therefore, the objectives of *DmC DMC* were to create a *DMC* game with a Western identity and sense of style in both its gameplay and narrative, and a more accessible game. The analysis will cover how successful it has been in achieving these ideas. For the purposes of the present research, I played the Definitive Edition (DE) of the game which includes new features and enhancements

partially informed by fan feedback. When relevant, some of these changes will be discussed. Finally, for a clearer breakdown, gameplay will be discussed first and the game's narrative and handling of characters second.

For the sake of discussion and to not confuse Dante (*DmC DMC*) with Dante (*Devil May Cry*) the former will be referred to as 'Donte', as in 'don't call him Dante', a fan nickname to differentiate him from the original. Fundamentally, *DmC DMC* plays like the original series, with the same objective of encouraging the player to perform stylish combos using an assortment of melee and ranged weapons, building the style gauge to achieve high ranks and at the end of missions earn bonuses. Red orbs are still present but, like *DMC 4*, can only be spent on items. The main currency for purchasing moves and abilities are upgrade points (shown in Figure 28) which, like *Proud Souls*, can be refunded at any point. The upgrades in *DmC DMC* feature the common problem of having upgrades that are statistically better versions of existing moves, like *God Hand*, which pads out the upgrade list to make it appear more expansive.

**Figure 28**

*DmC DMC Upgrade List*

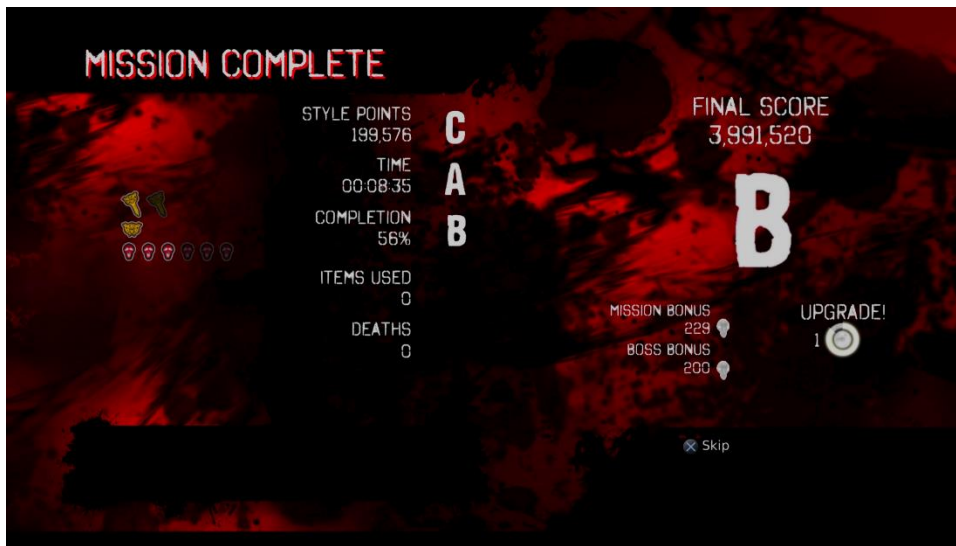


From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

The end-of-mission grading is still present and grades the same metrics as Devil May Cry - style points, time, items used, and deaths - the new addition of ‘completion’ tracks how many secrets are found in the mission (seen in Figure 29).

**Figure 29**

*DmC DMC Mission Complete Screen*



From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

*DmC DMC* also introduces a variety of its own changes and new mechanics to the formula with varying quality. Perhaps the most impactful was the initial removal of a hard lock-on, which was re-introduced to the game in DE due to feedback. Because the original release lacked hard lock-on moves that previously required lock-on, such as Stinger and High Time have had their inputs changed. Stinger now requires pressing the left analogue stick forward twice and then the attack button (shown in Figure 30). But this has none of the same tactile feel because it is difficult to determine the exact direction of the Stinger (unlike before when it always went to the locked-on target). High time also now has its own button.

**Figure 30**

*DmC DMC High Time and Stinger New Inputs*

From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

As discussed in *DMC*, one of that game's greatest strengths was the intuitiveness of the control scheme. The method of input for moves like Stinger and High Time simply made sense because the motion was similar to the action Dante would perform. Changing something so fundamental to the series that never in fact presented any issue, and because it remained the same in every game, does feel like a pointless decision. DE allows Stinger to be performed with the original input method, but its implementation is lacking as this is the only move associated with lock-on. High Time is still its own button, which is admittedly understandable since this could have potentially affected other aspects of the game. Dodging is now a permanent feature of Donte's move set, and this can be used to cancel almost all of his attacks; this can also be performed in the air although its usefulness is extremely limited in comparison with Trickster's air dash. Donte also now has aerial combos by default, like Nero. In fact, he has the same aerial pause combo that Nero did, and this allows for additional airtime. Ebony and Ivory also make a return and, although their power is far less than in *DMC 2*, they can now stagger enemies with regular gun shots.

[DmC DMC Gameplay Demonstration](#)



The intent of changes like these are done in the hopes of achieving accessibility, by streamlining Dante's move list. Although ideas like a dedicated dash or launcher button are not inherently flawed, the removal of styles is detrimental to both the game's identity and depth. That is not to say that every change *DmC DMC* is detrimental to these concepts. 'Pause combos' remain the same in *DmC DMC*, but Dante's weapons will flash to indicate the player has waited enough time to execute the pause combo (seen in Figure 31).

### **Figure 31**

*Weapon Flash for Pause Combos*



From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

This is an excellent change that keeps the mechanic intact whilst allowing new players to perform pause combos without needing to first learn the timing. Pause combos can also transition into other weapon pause combos and greatly expand their flexibility. The inclusion of a ‘training mode’, a first for the series, is another beneficial way *DmC DMC* makes the game more accessible by allowing the player to explore combat possibilities in a safe environment.

### [DmC DMC Training](#)



In terms of new mechanics, *DmC DMC* grants Donte a variety of unique weapons and tools that are very different from the weapons and mechanics Dante himself earns. Continuing the trend of stealing from Nero, Donte in mission two acquires Ophion Demon Pull and Angel Lift which function identically to Nero's Snatch ability.

### [DmC DMC Ophion Abilities](#)



As was Snatch, these are fun mechanics that enable quick and easy access to long aerial combos. But it feels wrong to take a mechanic that is exclusive to Nero and give it to Donte in a game about re-establishing Dante. To perform these grapples the player needs to hold on either the left or right trigger for Angel Lift or Demon Pull respectively, which is awkward with hard lock-on - another sign that lock-on was never intended. That ease of use is something to focus on because it is extremely easy to reach high style ranks in *DmC DMC* and the Ophion abilities do greatly contribute to this. I would argue that the main reason for this, however, is that the structure of combos in *DmC DMC* are easy to identify and Donte has a lot of airtime. It is easy for players to immediately understand that Launcher into an aerial combo before grappling an enemy and doing another combo to prolong airtime is in fact very effective. Nero also gained more airtime than Dante, but it was much more difficult to maintain airtime than Donte. Doing these long aerial

combos is fun because the mechanics are well understood. But because the player never needs to work for their style, they can never reach the same heights as combos in the original series. Combos in *DmC DMC* feel good in a very generic way, but they do not embody style in the way Dante used to.

Mission nine is when Donte awakens his Devil Trigger - which behaves very strangely in comparison to the original. Instead of simply regenerating health and increasing damage, when DT is activated all enemies are sent into the air and stay there, allowing the player to easily combo them. It is a very bizarre change that takes away from the previously simple, but thoughtful usage of DT.

### [DmC DMC Devil Trigger](#)



Additional weapons can also be swapped to by holding down the back triggers, left for Angelic weapons and right for Demonic weapons; Donte has two of each which are swapped with the directional pad. His Demonic weapons are Arbiter, a slow heavy axe effective at breaking shields, and Eryx, comparable to Dante's own fist weapons because the weapon features the same ability to charge attacks by holding down the button. The Angelic weapons are Osiris, a scythe with an emphasis on AoE attacks, a unique mechanic called Feed that deals more damage when fully

charged, and a pair of chakras called Aquila with incredible range and the ability to pull enemies in. Donte also has two other firearms, Revenant (a shotgun) and Kablooey (a sticky bomb), but their functionality is extremely limited. The variety of weapons in *DmC DMC* is serviceable but it suffers from the same issues as combos do: they feel generic. Arbiter is an axe, Osiris is a scythe, Eryx are gauntlets, and Aquila are chakras but there is no twist to the weapons and ultimately, they feel like they could belong to any character.

This is perhaps the biggest issue with combat in *DmC DMC*: Donte's gameplay lacks a distinct style. Where Dante was distinctly style over effectiveness and Nero focused on raw aggression Donte is more of a generic action game protagonist. This is an issue with the character in general because it is difficult to believe that Donte cares about how stylish he is or how people perceive him. This affects how the player feels about playing as Donte. If the player does not believe that their character is cool, why should they care about performing stylish combos? If anything, Nero's emphasis on aggression is a more accurate comparison. Donte's design is also very bland and generic, without the oversized jacket Donte runs around in a white tank top and jeans. It is very important to understand that this radical change in Dante's design was a decision made by Capcom and not Ninja Theory. Capcom VP of Strategic Planning and Business Development, Christian Svensson says that "the original concepts that came back for Dante were actually extremely close to the Dante everyone knows and loves ... the feedback that came back from [Keiji] Inafune and [Hideaki] Itsuno was, 'No guys, this needs to be completely different'" (Reilly, 2010).

Enemy design also lacks the originality or challenge of the initial series, being both visually generic, (appearing to share a corrupted Mannequin motif) and they suffer from frustrating designs that are counteractive to player engagement. The most infamous of these designs are coloured-coded enemies: certain enemies will appear as primarily blue or red, like the Frost and Hell Knights, which forces the player to swap to an Angelic or Demonic weapon respectively in order to interact with them at all.

[DmC DMC Hell Knight](#)



It is self-explanatory that forcing the player to use specific weapons on certain enemies in a stylish action game this is about player expression in fact goes against the core concept. DE makes colour-coded enemies slightly better by allowing the player to damage them with other weapons but they will not be staggered. Previously, attacks from the incorrect weapons would bounce off the enemy. Perhaps to compensate for the lacklustre enemies *DmC DMC* features a variety of set pieces for its combat encounters which involves environmental hazards that affects both the player and the enemies.

#### [DmC DMC Environmental Hazard](#)



Used sparingly, these can be effective ways to create encounter variety, but *DmC DMC* relies on them so frequently that they in fact distract from the core combat. The game's environmental design for *Limbo* can at times be fun and creative, and the absolute highlight is mission ten and the battle against Bob Barbas.

[DmC DMC Bob Barbas](#)



Overall, the boss fights are weak despite only having six, five are structured in similar ways. Those five appear to prioritise spectacle over substance because very little can be said about the mechanics of any of the bosses, which are defeated by attacking a weak spot before the boss staggers and can be properly damaged. Bob Barbas is the only boss fight that succeeds despite its simplicity because the battle is visually fun, mocking news broadcasting as showcased above.

To conclude, the combat in *DmC DMC* although enjoyable on a surface level, lacks the identity, style, and depth of the original series. It is not the absolute worst in terms of game feel but there are also significantly tighter, more responsive, and impactful stylish action games that have come before and after this. For players unfamiliar with the series, or stylish action games in general, they will likely come away from *DmC DMC* with a positive experience but when exploring the sub-genre even slightly in fact reveals how lacking *DmC DMC* is.

Despite the gameplay in *DmC DMC* providing a mostly enjoyable experience the quality of the game's narrative and characters are extremely hard to excuse. To set the scene for discussing the problems with the narrative and characters, *DmC DMC* takes place in Limbo City, a modern-day city that is secretly controlled by the demon king Mundus. Mundus manipulates the world through debt and the comforts of life and demons reside in a parallel plane called Limbo. Living in hiding

on the outskirts of society is Donte, a drifter who hunts demons and wastes his life away with alcohol and sex. After an eventful night out, Donte awakes to Kat who tells him he is in danger, before a demon known as a Hunter then drags him into Limbo and Donte is ambushed by demons. After defeating the Hunter, Donte is invited by Kat to The Order, an organisation intent on putting a stop to Mundus led by Donte's long-lost twin brother, Vergil. After Donte learns of his past by visiting his family's mansion, he resolves to help Vergil and Kat to bring down Mundus.

Perhaps the best place to begin dissecting the problems with the narrative is with Donte himself. The issues with Donte's design are one thing but his attitude and behaviour is a separate problem, which starts from the opening cutscene with the substance abuse. With the original *DMC*, Kamiya specifically wanted to prove that a cool character could be made without having them smoke or drink. Therefore, having Donte drown himself in alcohol whilst getting laid as the player's introduction to the character feels deliberate.

#### [DmC DMC Donte Introduction](#)



It is intended to incite anger in fans of the original and it does give the impression the game has disdain towards the original series. But this is so obvious and in your face that it is not interesting. The game aggressively tells the player that this is not the same character therefore do not expect

him to behave the same, and so has him do the exact opposite of what Dante would do. At the same time, however, *DmC DMC* does not appear to be honest with itself because Donte's design does not reflect his substance abuse and he looks fairly healthy (as seen in Figure 32).

### Figure 32

#### *Donte In-Game*



From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

This is in stark contrast to the game's reveal trailer where, to be blunt, he looks like a meth addict (shown in Figure 33).

### Figure 33

#### *Donte's Initial Reveal*



From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

This design change was probably a response to the fans who did not like his new look. But rather than completely overhaul the design, because Capcom wanted something different, they only made him look less gross. The result is, as mentioned, a protagonist that looks extremely generic and whose design does nothing to inform his character. This lack of commitment to Dante as his own character is a recurring issue throughout the game's narrative. Early into the first mission, a scene played for comedy occurs when a white hair wig with Dante's hairstyle lands on Dante's head and he looks into a mirror before ripping it off.

[DmC DMC Dante Wig](#)



Again, the game clearly tells the player this is not in fact the same Dante. The humour of the scene does not work though because the game is not honest with itself. Later when Donte activates his DT his hair turns white (shown in Figure 34). Then, at the end of the game (in Figure 35), Donte's hair turns completely white suggesting over the course of the game he has developed into the original Dante.

### Figure 34

*Donte's Hair Turns White*



From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

**Figure 35**

*Donte's Hair Is Completely Bleached*



From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

Donte is often ridiculed by fans for being an unlikeable and mean character - which he certainly is. But Donte is more of a boring and reluctant hero and, for someone who the game considers a rebel and deviant, he is more than welcome to follow orders. Dante's reinterpretation fails at retaining what made the character appealing to begin with, in addition to the game's own frustrating decisions and lack of commitment. However, Vergil was handled in a significantly worse manner.

There are two significant changes to the Sons of Sparda story. The first is Donte and Vergil, no longer half-human half-demon. Instead, they are Nephilim, half-angel half-demon and this dramatically changes their characters and feels like a misunderstanding of the original series. The name *Devil May Cry* loses its meaning now that they are half-angel because 'devil may cry' suggests that there was humanity to be found within demons. This position as special individuals also elevates the Sons of Sparda above the humans they are attempting to save. This makes them less relatable and not as interesting thematically. Alongside being an unnecessary change, the game cares very little about Donte being a Nephilim or even angels in general. Angels are barely present in the game's narrative and Donte only gets DT when he should also have an Angel Trigger. Concept art shows what appears to be a potential Angel Trigger so perhaps there were in fact plans to involve angels more. The other change to their dynamic is with Donte, explicitly presented as

stronger than Vergil (represented in Figure 36). This undermines the dynamic they had in *DMC 3* and is counterintuitive to what *DmC DMC* ultimately does with Vergil.

### Figure 36

*A Younger Donte Helps Vergil Up*



From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

Vergil is initially presented as a much more likeable character and an ally to Donte, and he retains this position for most of the game by helping Donte from behind the scenes, using his intelligence rather than strength to expose any weaknesses in Mundus' rule.

[DmC DMC Vergil Introduction](#)



Vergil's design is also a much closer to the original than Donte, retaining his iconic design elements such as the white slick back hair and proper coat. This outlook on Vergil shifts slightly during mission twelve when the forces of Mundus invade The Order's hideout and Vergil is determined to not let the demons learn their plans. Donte stalls so that Kat in the real world can delete the data. The invasion of The Order itself lacks impact because the player knows nothing about The Order, aside from Kat and Vergil. This moment is also very contrived - the plans Vergil mentions mean nothing because their base is currently under siege. After deleting the data Kat, with no way out, is abandoned by Vergil and Donte before being shot and kidnapped (later to be used as ransom).

[DmC DMC Order Invasion](#)



Vergil's valuing of this data over the life of one of his most trusted allies already feels off. But it is mission fifteen where player opinion on him will completely change and begin to question why he is considered a hero.

Having learned that the one weakness of Mundus is his unborn child being carried by his mistress, Lilith, Dante defeats and kidnaps her, and offers a trade to Mundus. As the trade slowly unfolds with Mundus giving back Kat in exchange for Lilith, Vergil shoots Lilith in the stomach, killing her child, before shooting her in the head.

[DmC DMC The Trade](#)



It is a deeply evil moment. But it is really the two gunshots that makes it difficult to view Vergil as anything other than the villain from this point. *DmC DMC*'s treatment of its female characters feels horribly misogynistic, made even worse by Tameem Antoniades, the game's director, who comments on the original series female characters: he claims, "I've got nothing against big tits ... if you're going to try and stimulate someone on different levels, there's better ways to do it ... that to me is more attractive than a prostitute walking around with a big gun." (Dawkins, 2012) The prostitute walking around with a big gun is almost certainly in reference to Lady and describing her as such is incredibly dismissive of her story and role in *DMC 3*. She also had far more autonomy than Kat does throughout the entirety of *DmC DMC*. Lady was also present in *DMC 4*, but it was more of a cameo role. The game clearly wants Kat to be a sympathetic character who suffers from trauma, believing that it would make her more likeable and empowering than Lady or Trish. But this stance cannot help relegating her to the sidelines and the game also establishes that she has a saviour complex for Vergil.

[DmC DMC Kat's Story](#)



As for Lilith, she obviously was not a great person but she had very little presence in the narrative and was primarily carrying Mundus' child so that she would remain valuable to him. Killing her in this way is unnecessarily evil. At the start of mission 16 a new scene is added in DE - as an attempt to justify Vergil's decision. But it misses the point because Donte is more angered by the number of innocents who died in the blast that Mundus retaliated with than the horrific action just committed by Vergil, and why he would do something so evil. This scene also does not add anything to the narrative - of course Donte would be upset at Vergil's actions but the issue is that Donte does not challenge him at all.

The game continues with Vergil who acts as an ally despite his previous actions up until the battle with Mundus concludes. Despite *DmC DMC* being a reboot and having the opportunity to do something interesting with Mundus he remains as simplistic as he did in *DMC*. Instead of the intimidating, subversive design Mundus once had, he is now a businessman with a monster form that can best be described as a mountain of garbage (as seen in Figure 37).

### Figure 37

*Mundus' Monster Form*



From *DmC: Devil May Cry*, Ninja Theory, 2013.

After Mundus is defeated, Vergil unceremoniously reveals his true intention to rule over the world and is seemingly shocked that Kat and Donte oppose this.

[DmC DMC Vergil Reveal](#)



*DmC DMC* has positioned Vergil as a greater good, ends-justify-the means-character who values saving humanity above all else. At no point has the game suggested that he wants to supplant Mundus. It also brings into question why Vergil works with humans at all if he thinks so little of them. Of course, this causes a conflict between Vergil and Donte and sees Vergil as the game's final boss (a cheap attempt to recreate the ending of *DMC 3*). This does not work, for two reasons: the first is that it has not been earned (nothing in the game has built up to this moment); and the second reason is that Vergil has been thoroughly established as weaker than Donte. There is therefore no motivation or uncertainty going into this battle, the player knows they will emerge victorious. Vergil himself has barely been seen wielding the Yamato so suddenly becoming so capable is very uncharacteristic. The fight itself is also uninteresting because it uses the same moves as Vergil does in *DMC 3* but everything is slower, less impactful, and far less challenging.

The game's attempts at social commentary are handled just as poorly as its characters. It is more accurate to describe *DmC DMC* as having hypertext rather than subtext. Every attempt at social commentary can essentially be boiled down to this: 'the corporations are run by demons controlling the system'. It is very juvenile and superficial, lacking any real bite or saying much of anything.

[DmC DMC Social Commentary](#)



Before *DmC DMC* was released, Tameem Antoniades had this to say about Dante and the original series: “Dante has been the centre point of *DMC*. There's just something about the character – it's a stylistic element ... we've got to preserve that. We've got to make it current, but we've also got to preserve what made it special” (MacDonald, 2010). *DmC DMC* does not preserve what made *Devil May Cry* special. In isolation it is a serviceable stylish action game with decent combat that enables very easy combos. However, when compared to the original series or any other great stylish action games it lacks style, identity, character, and depth. Its narrative, meanwhile, is tasteless, edgy, and nowhere near as clever as it believes itself to be; it cannot decide whether it wants to recreate the original series or tell its own narrative. The reinterpretations of iconic characters are miserable, and it manages to be horribly misogynistic. *DmC DMC* really epitomises the whole shift towards Western appeal that was initiated during the seventh generation and shows how misguided the entire direction was. These days *DmC DMC* exists almost as a relic of that era (the original series would eventually return), whilst this one appears to be all but forgotten. Capcom has effectively looked at it and said: ‘not in a million years’.

### **Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance “Cyborg Ninja Action”**

Despite a lot of the Japanese video game industry attempting to shift appeal towards the West, PlatinumGames remained firm in their focus on dedicated, stylish action games. What they would release next was something nobody could have expected. *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* (MGR) (PlatinumGames, 2013) is a stylish action game spin-off from the iconic Metal Gear series. This sees the recurring series character, Raiden, return to the role of protagonist as he confronts the private military company, Desperado (who wants to destabilise nations for profit). The game was planned to be developed internally by Kojima Productions. But difficulties the team faced when developing swordplay-focused gameplay meant that it was postponed until later when it resurfaced with PlatinumGames as its new developer.

*MGR* is a curious case, not just for the choices made in the game, but how it was seemingly the perfect storm – to precipitate a variety of internet memes that have caused the game to remain shockingly relevant. *MGR*'s popularity skyrocketed in 2022 to heights the game had not seen since its initial launch (PlayTracker, 2022). There is just something about the game's qualities, characters, and iconic moments that have caused it to resonate with so many people.

### [MGR Memes](#)



Although it may be easy to decide that *MGR*'s popularity is only due to memes, it is also just a special game where the experience is highly memorable.

In comparison with other stylish action titles, the gameplay in *MGR* is very distinct with a completely different core. Raiden can perform light and heavy attacks which can be combined to create different combos, a commonplace mechanic by now. When performing Ninja Run, which enables Raiden to run and jump over terrain automatically, the player can slice while running with the light attack button, or slide out of Ninja Run with a heavy attack. Holding down the left trigger enters Blade Mode where Raiden stands in place and the player can freely slice in front of Raiden; moving the right analogue stick while in Blade Mode will alter the angle of the slice for more precise cuts.

### [MGR Blade Mode](#)



The core of combat in *MGR* is found in two mechanics: firstly, the Parry which functions similarly to *Bayonetta*'s Parry accessory (the player must flick the left analogue stick forward and press light attack at the same time to initiate the Parry which will then deflect an enemy's attack and, if time perfectly, initiate a counterattack); and Zandatsu is *MGR*'s other core mechanic. After the first chapter Raiden gets a new body that enables Zandatsu, an enhanced version of Blade Mode,

and where Raiden can dismember enemies and pull out their vitals to fully replenish his health and fuel cells. This will determine how long the enhanced Blade Mode lasts.

### [MGR Parry and Zandatsu](#)



Triggering Blade Mode manually will slow down time by 50%. But Raiden can also activate an enhanced version that slows down time by 90% (primarily achieved by landing a successful Parry counterattack or combo finisher, which is the proper way to utilise the mechanic). But not every attack can be parried - attacks that are denoted with a yellow flash cannot be parried while attacks that can be are denoted with a red flash.

### [MGR Yellow Flash](#)



Zandatsu and the Parry are exceptionally satisfying to execute: the slowdown in combination with the impactful sound effects and level to which enemies can be dismembered creates a mechanic and combat loop that never feels repetitive.

[MGR Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Raiden also gets a Devil Trigger equivalent with Ripper Mode, and this increases his damage and causes his attacks to slice enemies as attacks do in Blade Mode. This description of *MGR*'s combat might appear short but the combat in *MGR* is noticeably simpler than the likes of *Devil May Cry* or *Bayonetta*, both because the core is so straightforward, but also for a variety of other reasons.

The first reason is because the enemy interactions are extremely limited, both due to a small number of interactions, but also because Parry determines everything in *MGR*. As an example, enemies can be launched but the incentive to do so is practically non-existent because all of Raiden's best combos are in fact on the ground. This relates to the second reason; the game has a variety of different button combos (several shown in Figure 38) but there are not many and their interactions with the enemies are extremely limited. Basic combos that have many hits are preferable as the ranking system rewards longer combos.

### Figure 38

*MGR Combo List*



From *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, PlatinumGames, 2013.

*MGR* also includes a variety of sub-weapons that are mostly Metal Gear references, such as the Cardboard Box. But attempting to use these in a combat scenario is very finicky and not worthwhile. This becomes especially problematic against enemy helicopters which almost necessitates the use of a rocket launcher to defeat.

[MGR Helicopter](#)



True to its series roots, stealth is an option in *MGR* at times. But again, the incentive to do so is small - beyond simply killing off a couple of enemies before a combat encounter begins. *MGR* does feature several different main weapons, but their usability is extremely limited. Raiden's body can be customised at any point during a chapter which functions as the game's shop, (shown in Figure 39). Here the player can purchase health and fuel cell upgrades, new skills, costumes, and upgrade the power of Raiden's sword.

### Figure 39

*MGR Customize Menu*



From *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, PlatinumGames, 2013.

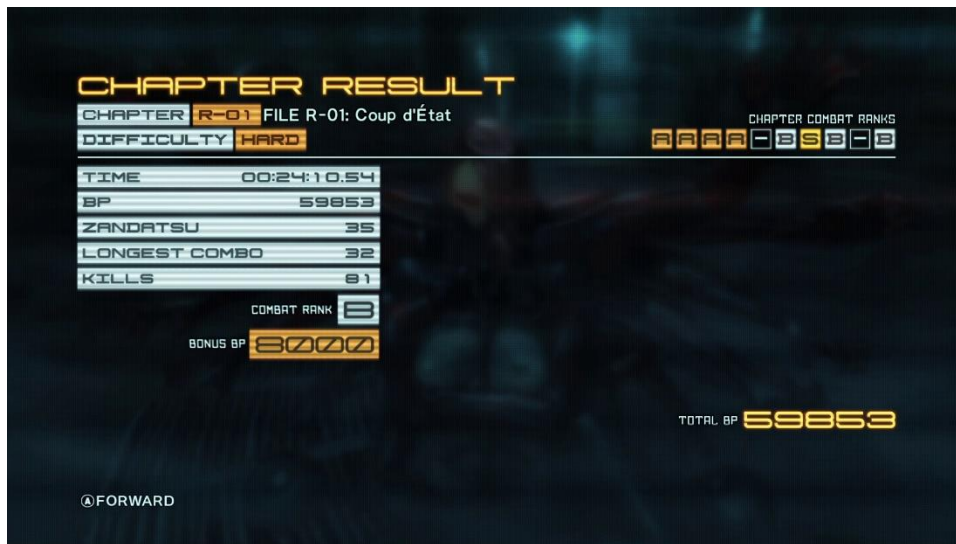
An important purchasable skill is Defensive Offensive, an invincible sidestep. After defeating some of the bosses their weapons become purchasable, which are all very distinct. The Polearm has wide sweeping attacks, the Tactical Sai pulls Raiden towards enemies with an electric grapple, and the Pincer Blade is a slow but powerful weapon. The first issue is that they must be purchased at all, which creates an unpleasant situation where the player must decide between powering up the sword and buying new skills which they will always have access to, or a new weaker weapon with fewer moves. The remaining issues relate to the limited choice of only one weapon aside from the sword that can be equipped at the same time. The player must go into the menu to swap between them, not conducive to fast gameplay, and having to change to another weapon also sacrifices the sword's heavy attack, and the player then loses many combo options. Because the functionality of the weapons is so different from Raiden's sword this makes it a very disappointing experience. There is no easy way to use them. The weapons could have substantially expanded the game's combat potential (especially the Sai) if they did not sacrifice heavy attacks and could be freely swapped to.

In reality, *MGR* wants the player to engage with combat by playing extremely aggressive and continuously attacking. The sprinting attack is an obvious example of this, allowing the player to deflect all incoming projectiles whilst maintaining their combo. But it is the ranking system that

best proves this. The ranking system used by *MGR* grades time, BP, Zandatsu, longest combo, and kills. All these are then tallied into a graded number. This same system is used at the end of a chapter (shown in Figure 40).

**Figure 40**

*MGR Chapter Results Screen*



From *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, PlatinumGames, 2013.

This is a serviceable ranking system but undeniably simplistic especially regarding combo - showing that the game just wants the player to never stop attacking, as opposed to *Bayonetta* or *Devil May Cry* which rewarded variety through stylish combos. S grades are also only awarded if the player takes zero damage, further encouraging this non-stop aggression. Enemy design is also lacking with a surprisingly small roster, and most being fought in the same way by parrying before finishing with Zandatsu.

It may be easy to assume, based on *MGR*'s simplistic combat and short length, that there is not much to say beyond Zandatsu. However, the boss fights in *MGR* are some of the best displayed in a stylish action game yet. They carry the game extremely hard. It is not the design of the fights that make them exceptional, however. They are certainly enjoyable in terms of gameplay but the

nature of combat in *MGR* does limit what is possible. It is really the whole scenario that makes the bosses incredible: a combination of gameplay, spectacle, narrative, and especially music.

Discussions of music in stylish action games in the present research has remained limited but the music in *MGR* is so crucial to its boss battles and the game's identity that it cannot go unmentioned. There are a couple of reasons why the music is so impactful in *MGR*. Firstly the music increases in intensity as the fight progresses. Secondly, occurs when the fights reach their climax and lyrics are brought into the music to signify that the climax has begun – this all leads to the game's most iconic moments. The lyrics themselves are extremely important as every boss track either has thematic relevance to the situation or it expresses something about the character of the boss. The bosses only get a short amount of time to establish themselves before the battle, but adding lyrics to their battle themes communicates their stories without delaying the boss fight. As an example, Blade Wolf's theme, *I'm My Own Master Now*, foreshadows his character growth and desire for freedom. Created as an AI forced to follow orders or his memory would be wiped, he placed everything above self-preservation but later goes on to create his own directives, making himself his own master.

### [MGR Bosses](#)



The last battle against Jetstream Sam also subverts this by having lyrics present throughout the entire fight, suggesting that the entire battle is the climax. If Sam is disarmed during the fight the lyrics will stop and this reinforces the idea that it is his theme.

#### [MGR Jetstream Sam](#)



The narrative in *MGR* builds up to these boss battles in thought-provoking ways. An analysis on the game's narrative alone could be done, providing substantial depth. For the present research, however, it will only be briefly discussed. *MGR* establishes the focus of its narrative immediately as Raiden discusses with the African Prime Minister the nature of private military companies (PMC) and the moral complexities of killing. It is Raiden's belief that violence can be used to deter more violence. As Raiden's journey continues throughout the game his beliefs are challenged. This comes to a head when he discovers that Desperado and World Marshal, a major PMC, have been harvesting the brains of children and placing them into VR training – in order to turn them into cyborgs and create soldiers that know nothing but combat.

#### [MGR Cyborg Children](#)



At this point it becomes clear that the narrative in *MGR* is about doing what you believe is right, as Raiden abandons all legal proceedings to launch a one-man assault on World Marshal in the hopes of saving the children.

[MGR Raiden's Decision](#)



Of course, the game soon questions Raiden about those who do not have a choice, by having Raiden hear the thoughts of enemies as he battles them. A smart decision during this section was to have the player experience it as it reinforces the power differences between the basic enemies and Raiden and that, because of that strength, Raiden can then decide what he chooses to do (whereas the basic enemies cannot).

#### [MGR Enemy Thoughts](#)



After this section Raiden is toyed with by Monsoon, who taunts him over his belief that he is solely doing this to protect the weak and that everyone is subject to memes, ideas that are passed on from person to person.

[MGR Monsoon](#)



Eventually, the game reaches a climatic finale against the true mastermind, Senator Steven Armstrong, and although he and Raiden only meet at the very end the contrast between Armstrong and Balder is night and day. For one, the game did establish him earlier, albeit briefly, but more importantly the game has been thematically building towards someone like him.

[MGR Steven Armstrong](#)



There is no one better for Raiden to face off against as his final battle than an insane politician who believes in ‘might makes right’ and who desires to revive the war on terror so that he can be elected and rebuild America, using his charisma to sell his ideals. It is certainly not by accident that he performs various wrestling moves in battle. The fight itself, although simplistic, is almost indescribable in how epic it is, despite just being two people fighting over their beliefs to see who remains. To prevent the fight from being too easy, the game gives Raiden Sam’s sword so it does not have to account for how many upgrades have been purchased for Raiden’s sword. The music, expectedly, gives the fight a lot of its energy, pulling the same trick that Sam did with lyrics present all throughout the battle. To mirror the battle with Sam, if Raiden is disarmed the lyrics will fade out and this will reinforce it as Raiden’s theme, as opposed to all the other boss themes (which were either thematic or related to the boss). The lyrics perfectly convey that in the end. It has to be this way.

[MGR Final Boss](#)



*MGR* is a game where the peaks greatly exceed the lows. The boss battles and soundtrack elevate the game to heights that have not been reached yet, making it very easy to dismiss the combat's underwhelming aspects. These elements are also what make the game so great on a single playthrough with the game's flaws, such as the ranking system, becoming even more apparent on subsequent playthroughs. The narrative strongly commits to its core message and delivers some truly unforgettable moments, ending with arguably one of the greatest final boss fights in any stylish action game. The quality of these moments prove to be so great that *MGR* continues to persist through internet culture and, if anything, shows that *MGR* truly is a 'pretty meme'.

### **Bayonetta 2 “Less is More”**

A sequel to *Bayonetta* was about as unexpected as Nintendo, the publisher of the game – who opted to provide additional funding in exchange for console exclusivity. Considering how refined *Bayonetta*'s combat was, *Bayonetta 2* (PlatinumGames, 2014) should have been poised for success, improving upon the first in every aspect. However, Hideki Kamiya was not lead director on *Bayonetta 2*, simply a supervisor. It may be possible that not having him as the lead director

had a significant impact on the game, because *Bayonetta 2* does make some questionable changes to the gameplay formula.

The combat in *Bayonetta 2* remains largely similar to the first game, making it unnecessary to further discuss this aspect. Instead, the analysis here will centre on the new additions *Bayonetta 2* brings. The most obvious improvement is in the presentation of the game. Visually, *Bayonetta* had high quality character models, environments, and effects. But the colour palette was dull, consisting mostly of greys, browns, and yellows. *Bayonetta 2* retains the strength of the original but has replaced the uninspired colour choices with vibrant blues and reds, (seen in Figure 41 and Figure 42). The results are striking environments that look gorgeous.

### Figure 41

#### *Bayonetta 2 Vibrant Environment Part 1*



From *Bayonetta 2*, PlatinumGames, 2014.

### Figure 42

#### *Bayonetta 2 Vibrant Environment Part 2*



From *Bayonetta 2*, PlatinumGames, 2014.

The narrative in *Bayonetta 2* is more compelling. What is at stake for Bayonetta is more personal to her as she ventures down to Inferno to save Jeanne, this makes her story more compelling. *Bayonetta 2* also expands on Balder before he became a villain and reveals that he was trapping the soul of *Bayonetta 2*'s villain within himself - his story is consequently much more tragic. QTEs have been significantly reduced and the genre shifts are less abrupt and control much better. Enemy variety, which was already good in *Bayonetta*, has doubled with the introduction of new angels alongside new demons. The design of the demons appears almost mechanical in nature and appropriately strange and this does help to differentiate them from the angels.

[Bayonetta 2 Demons](#)



The original cast of angels also returns towards the end of the game to make smart use of existing enemies, without taking away from the new. Even although not a definitive improvement, *Bayonetta 2* has decided to relax the rule that states that enemies could not attack off-screen. By giving clear indicators for when attacks are incoming this increases the challenge of the game whilst remaining fair.

[Bayonetta 2 Offscreen Attack](#)



Although *Bayonetta 2* brings many welcome changes the new mechanics do affect the combat of the game and the most impactful is Umbran Climax. When one bar of the magic gauge is full Bayonetta can enter Umbran Climax, a Devil Trigger-like state where all her attacks are empowered to become wicked weaves, and combo enders will summon an infernal demon for massive damage.

[Bayonetta 2 Umbran Climax](#)



Umbran Climax is an extraordinarily powerful mechanic, consistently clearing out entire groups of enemies. Discussions of balance have never been a priority for the present research because it is almost inevitable that unintended strategies will exist and potentially invalidate certain aspects of a game. However, Umbran Climax is particularly problematic because it is so powerful that the entire combat system in *Bayonetta 2* is shaped around it. Enemies have their health inflated to compensate for the damage Umbran Climax provides and cannot be staggered as easily. This then leads to boring encounters where the player will be attacking enemies with the primary intention of gaining magic to then spend on Umbran Climax.

Torture attacks and other magic-based abilities are completely neglected because of the importance of Umbran Climax. There is no reason the player should spend their magic on a torture attack to defeat one enemy, then pick up their weapon to potentially defeat several more - as opposed to spending magic on Umbran Climax to clear out all enemies. Scoring is also built around this, and opting to forgo Umbran Climax will almost certainly result in a poor rank for time. Scoring itself has also received some strange changes: for one, items no longer detract from the player's rank. This makes sense for healing items because if the player has taken damage, they have already failed a perfect rank, and therefore an additional punishment was unnecessary. But for other items this change makes little sense and allows would-be challenge sections to be bypassed without

punishment, by using items that restore Bayonetta's magic or temporarily making her invincible. The game also badgers the player to use Umbran Climax. Whenever it is available, the game displays a pop-up to directly let the player know which is very distracting (as seen in Figure 43).

### Figure 43

*Umbran Climax Pop-up Add*



From *Bayonetta 2*, PlatinumGames, 2014.

A common response to overpowered strategies in single player video games is to simply not use them, which is true in the case of something like Air Raid in *DMC*, an optional move. However, it is impossible to ignore Umbran Climax. It certainly does make the player feel extraordinarily powerful, but the cost is that the rest of the game's combat does suffer as a result.

Umbran Climax is not the only issue with *Bayonetta 2's* combat. Although only appearing a handful of times throughout the game the new flight-based battles are very frustrating.

[Bayonetta 2 Flight Battle](#)



The intent of these flight-based battles was probably to increase the spectacle to ridiculous degrees whilst retaining the core gameplay. But the result is the exact opposite because the player has little control over Bayonetta's movement. It feels as if the game determines how close the player is to the enemy, and the player also cannot jump, removing an entire dimension of combat. Consequently, this makes these sections reliant on dodging, causing the player to play the same every time, mindlessly dodging in the hope of activating Witch Time before a small burst of offence. It just does not feel great, and the visuals of these fights also makes them disorientating. This loop applies to regular gameplay as well, where much of *Bayonetta 2* feels like small bursts of offence with Witch Time and Umbran Climax - they are the only reliable opportunities the player has to properly interact with enemies and bosses.

[Bayonetta 2 Reliance on Witch Time and Umbran Climax](#)



Witch Time is also not removed on *Bayonetta 2's* highest difficulty and this shows how much more important Witch Time is to the combat; if it was removed it is possible that some encounters might be far too difficult.

*Bayonetta 2* attempts to double down on the series spectacle but ultimately this results in an experience that, although still enjoyable, is worse than its predecessor. Umbran Climax, a lack of enemy interactions, and flight battles result in the combat system in *Bayonetta 2* failing to retain the pure satisfaction of *Bayonetta*. The core of combat in *Bayonetta 2* is still certainly *Bayonetta's* combat, and the game retains many of its strengths. But the new additions ultimately dilute what was, despite its flaws, a very focused and tight combat experience. The game shows how overindulging in spectacle and the power fantasy can potentially backfire if not given full consideration.

## The Current Era

### God of War (2018) “A Matured Approach”

*God of War (GoW 2018)* (Santa Monica Studio, 2018) presents a radically new tone and attitude for the series, abandoning the mindless violence the series had become known for, and now bringing a more mature and grounded story. *GoW 2018* sees Kratos, living as a man in hiding in Midgard, and his son Atreus embark on a journey across Norse mythology after the death of Kratos' second wife, Faye. Their mission is to fulfil her wish that her ashes be spread at the highest peak of the nine realms. The father-son dynamic between Kratos and Atreus is at the core of the narrative. For the most part, the game is successful at developing this narrative. Kratos strikes a good balance between his quick-to-anger nature whilst also genuinely caring for his son.

This matured approach and renewed emphasis on family makes sense given the time gap between *GoW 2018* and the first game. The original *GoW*'s target audience was undeniably teenage boys who may have grown up alongside the series, perhaps had families of their own and moved on from video games. Crafting a story about family and the struggles of Kratos as a father could potentially bring back that audience. Fans of the original presentation may lament this change in direction, but this change was absolutely necessary for the series to maintain its relevancy. Audiences were already tired of the series well before *GoW 2018* was released this is apparent in the critical and commercial reception of *God of War: Ascension* (Santa Monica Studio, 2013), the previous entry in the series, which sold only 570,000 copies in its first month compared with the 1.1 million sold of *God of War III* (Santa Monica Studio, 2010).

A common complaint with the game was that it simply felt tired and unsurprising compared to previous games. One review stated, "it's an enjoyable game, but one that doesn't quite live up to the pedigree of its predecessors." (Simmons, 2013) This change in direction is worth commending, especially for a series that had become so firmly rooted in its own style. However, the new direction of *GoW 2018* is not a particularly bold one because it applies many conventional design elements seen throughout many popular games. This then gives *GoW 2018* a very safe identity. That is not to say that *GoW 2018* is a betrayal of the previous goals of the series and saying so would be a mischaracterisation of previous games. *GoW 2018* obviously has more cinematic ambition than the original series - its presentation and tone are more comparable to a game like *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). But previous *God of War* games were also attempting to be big, cinematic, spectacle-driven experiences. It was what made the series stand out from *Devil May Cry* and *Ninja Gaiden* despite its more simplistic combat.

*GoW 2018* in comparison to other stylish action games discussed in the research, is a much larger game so this analysis is focused on the game's combat and how other areas of the game affect it and vice versa.

Those familiar with *GoW 2018* and the stylish action sub-genre might question its role in this discussion because *GoW 2018* does shift the series away from the likes of *Devil May Cry* (where combat is the appeal), to an experience where combat is part of a greater whole. However, comparison is still necessary in order to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the combat within *GoW 2018* and what it potentially brings to this sub-genre.

Of all the changes that the new direction of *GoW 2018* brings it is the camera perspective that is by far the most impactful. Specifically, the camera in *GoW 2018* completely does away with the detached camera view of older games. Instead, it chooses a third person over-the-shoulder viewpoint which has significant ramifications for gameplay. This much closer perspective intends to bring the player closer to Kratos and feel more attached to him.

To compensate for the player's now limited perspective in combat *GoW 2018* introduces a handful of features to assist the player's vision. However, the implementation of these features leaves much to be desired. Unlike the older games, *GoW 2018* features a dedicated lock-on to fix the camera on targets so the player does not have to worry about moving it. But unfortunately, *GoW 2018's* lock-on tends to break when enemies perform evasive manoeuvres and, because the player is typically engaged with several enemies at a time, this lock-on lacks purpose.

[GoW 2018 Lock on](#)



Because the player can no longer see behind Kratos the game uses a radial attack indicator to show incoming attacks to the player, but these are also unreliable. The timing on the indicators feels completely off: sometimes it warns of incoming attacks too soon, or too slow because attacks connect with the player as the indicator pops up. These indicators also tell the player nothing about the incoming attack, other than if it is either ranged or melee.

[GoW 2018 Radial Threat](#)



Many of the problems with the camera in *GoW 2018* are a natural consequence of choosing a third person perspective for an action game. But another stylish action game, *God Hand*, leverages the perspective far better. Although that game's camera was far from perfect, it did a significantly better job of conveying action to the player without getting in the way. Although it was very immersion breaking when the environment disappeared in *God Hand* it ensured that the player's visibility was almost always clear. The game's refusal to shift camera perspectives arises from its desire to be considered as a single camera shot - which the game does use to great effect at times, such as the first battle with the stranger, giving the fight a great sense of momentum.

[GoW 2018 Stranger](#)



This is still a superfluous feature, however, and it was not worth sacrificing the player's visibility during combat to accommodate it.

*GoW 2018* presents a much more grounded and realistic combat system. In terms of control, Kratos has changed substantially, having moved closer to FromSoftware's 'Souls' series. Light and heavy attacks are now on the right shoulder buttons, block/parry on L1, and dodge rolling has been moved to X (which now has two versions: a sidestep for tapping the button and a roll for pressing the button twice). For the first time in the series Kratos abandons his iconic blades and instead wields the Leviathan Axe as his primary weapon. He can now aim and throw the axe at enemies with L2, and throwing the axe with a heavy attack will freeze some enemies. The axe can also still perform launchers through its heavy attacks. Kratos can equip two Runic Attacks, powerful moves with a variety of effects depending on the equipped attack. Unlike other stylish action games, including the original *GoW* that uses a gauge to balance out powerful moves, Runic Attacks are based on cooldowns. Cooldowns determine how long the player must wait before the attacks can be used again.

[GoW 2018 Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Although they are a serviceable way to balance the power of runic attacks, cooldowns are ultimately less preferable than a gauge because they are very exploitable. There is nothing to prevent the player from deciding not to engage with enemies and instead wait for the cooldowns to end. Moves that require the resource from a gauge, like the magic in *GoW* by contrast, are less exploitable because the player can run out of the resource. This results in more interesting decision making on when to use their powerful moves. God mode returns in the form of Spartan Rage with much better implementation more akin to Devil Trigger as the player is invincible during Rage but taking damage will decrease the remaining time.

[GoW 2018 Spartan Rage](#)



*GoW 2018* has two other weapons, the Blades of Chaos and bare-handed. Later in the story, after Atreus falls ill, Kratos must venture to Helheim to retrieve the Bridge Keeper's heart. But his axe proves useless against the frost realm and he returns home to retrieve the Blades of Chaos. This moment is one of the game's strongest and a great example of the benefits this new camera perspective provides. The game brings the player into Kratos' mindset as he contemplates returning to his old ways to save his son. Upon acquiring the Blades, players of older games will find that they feel familiar, retaining many of the same combos as they did before.

[GoW 2018 Blades of Chaos](#)



Seeing the blades from this camera perspective is also quite novel, giving the player a much better idea of what Kratos has seen during combat across the entire series: fire and carnage. The blades do struggle to differentiate themselves from the axe, however, because they have very few unique interactions with enemies that the axe is not capable of. The primary strength of the Blades over the axe is their enormous range, as expected. Kratos can also fight bare-handed with his shield and, although fighting bare-handed does not have the same depth of options as the other two, it is valuable enough to consider it a third weapon. Fighting bare-handed also has a much more distinct advantage over the axe (unlike the blades) as it is capable of stunning enemies much faster.

[GoW 2018 Bare Handed](#)



Stunned enemies can be grabbed for a stun kill which can potentially cause an AoE status effect on nearby enemies, such as regular Draugrs applying burn.

#### [GoW 2018 Stun Kill](#)

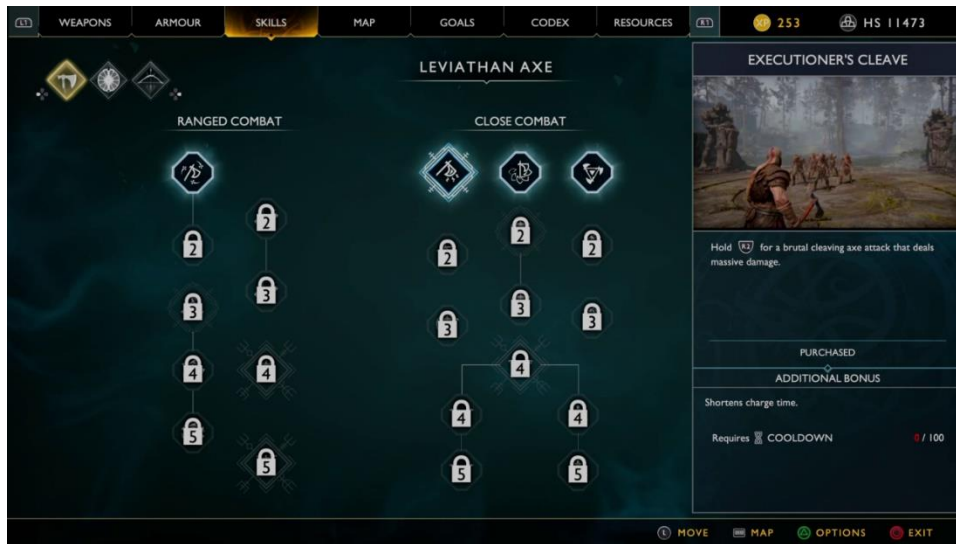


This is a very interesting mechanic that brings with it a lot of decision-making. Instead of always performing stun kills when they are available, the player can think about when they should stun and kill certain targets. Swapping between weapons is, sadly, far too slow to perform during combos (which was probably intentional because weapons materialising in Kratos' hands from this realistic perspective could look weird). The player can also command Atreus to shoot arrows at enemies, by manually by pressing the square button when aiming. The AI targeting is surprisingly reliable, but Atreus can sometimes shoot an enemy the player did not expect. Atreus starts with regular arrows that only deal damage but are later replaced by light and electric arrows which increase the enemy's stun gauge much more quickly or they can paralyze enemies. Atreus also has a Runic Summon that creates a spirit animal with different effects, such as a pack of wolves that attack enemies.

#### [GoW 2018 Atreus Runic Summon](#)



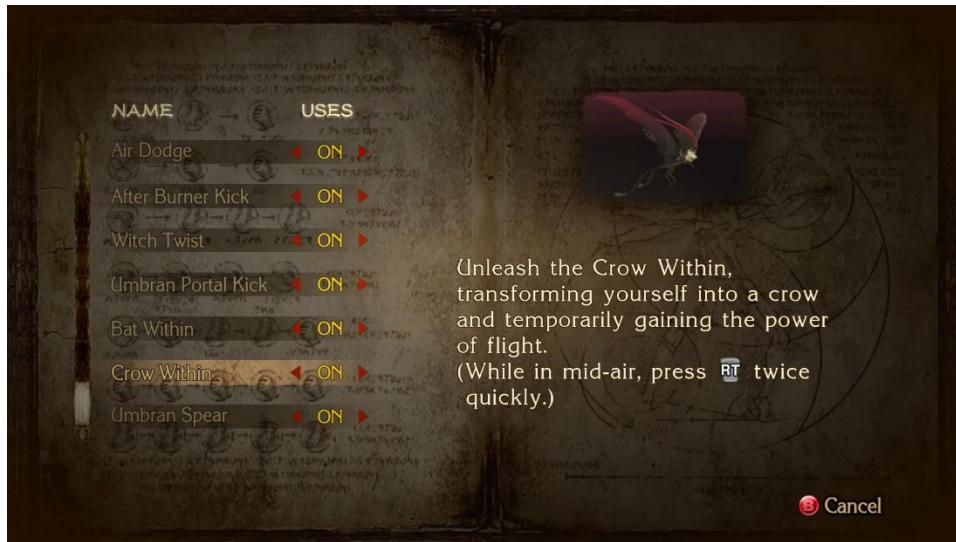
Weapons, Atreus, and Runic Attacks are all upgraded through the new Skill Tree, (shown in Figure 44), and experience system both of which are unremarkable. However, some unlockable moves are noticeably bad and prove to be actively detrimental to the player's gameplay.

**Figure 44***GoW 2018 Skill Tree*

From *God of War*, Santa Monica Studio, 2018.

Evasion Storm and Countering Clash are the most frustrating since they are counterintuitive to what the player typically wants to do. Evasion Storm is performed by holding back and doing a light attack after dodging to toss the axe like a boomerang and create more distance between the enemy and Kratos. This is counterintuitive to what the player likely wants to do because after evading the player wants to engage the enemy, not retreat further. Countering Clash is performed by pressing heavy attack after a parry to slam the shield into the ground. But this makes performing an Executioner's Cleave, one of the strongest moves in the game, after a parry more difficult because it is performed by holding down heavy attack and Countering Clash in fact overrides this. These issues would not be worth mentioning if *GoW 2018* let players disable unwanted purchased moves, as can be done in other stylish action games. But the game provides no option. Figure 45 shows that *Bayonetta* was one such example that let players disable moves.

**Figure 45***Bayonetta Disable Moves Screen*



From *Bayonetta*, PlatinumGames, 2009.

Like *Otogi* or *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence*, *GoW 2018* also contains an RPG equipment system where the player can select various armours and accessories to increase Kratos' stats and enable various passive effects (shown in Figure 46). One of those passive effects is giving Kratos his own Witch Time variation.

### Figure 46

*GoW 2018 Equipment Screen*



From *God of War*, Santa Monica Studio, 2018.

Although on paper an RPG-esque gear system like this is intended to provide depth, player choice, and extrinsic motivation it is almost impossible to notice the difference in stats. Considering strength, runic, defence, vitality, luck, and cooldown, strength and runic are the most impactful in determining the damage of regular and runic attacks. The remaining appear almost worthless. This is difficult to describe because the stats are so hidden that providing accurate examples are almost impossible. Defence provides little since players should ideally avoid being hit. Vitality is supposed to increase the amount of super armour on Kratos' attacks, but how much is needed for each attack is never disclosed. Luck increases currency earned, which is already easy to obtain. Finally, cooldown on runic attacks can only be reduced by a couple of seconds. The gear system also substantially contributes to the core problem with *GoW 2018's* combat: inconsistency.

*GoW 2018* gives Kratos an overall level that is determined by the strength of the currently equipped gear and weapon upgrades. Enemies also have designated levels, and their strength is determined by the level difference between the two. Enemies of a lower level are obviously weaker, enemies that are the same level as Kratos have similar strengths, and every enemy above is significantly stronger with most of their attacks killing Kratos in one hit. The worst aspect of the levelling system is that enemies of the same type will react differently to Kratos' attacks if at a higher level.

For example, if the player attempts to launch an enemy at the same level it will typically work but against the same enemy that is a higher level it will fail to launch.

### [GoW 2018 Launcher](#)



Like *Bayonetta* or *MGR*, *GoW 2018* also uses attack indicators to denote danger: yellow for attacks that can be parried and red for attacks that should be dodged. But because of the levelling it means the same attack on the same enemy at a higher level cannot be parried and must be dodged instead.

### [GoW 2018 Yellow Indicator Turned Red](#)



Because higher level enemies also kill Kratos in a single hit, safe and unengaging play is almost necessary to overcome higher level enemies without coming back later.

#### [GoW 2018 High Level Enemies](#)



Levelling also makes the game's hardest difficulty, Give Me God of War, tedious because enemies can level up during a battle if they are not interrupted. The levelling creates an awful feeling reality – going into every single enemy encounter the player cannot be entirely certain how their moves will interact with enemies, and vice versa. This leads to a lot of in-the-moment guesswork. Often the best way to begin an enemy encounter is to play safe to determine the enemy's levels, before deciding how aggressive the player wants to act. Kratos' level is also not permanently increased either - it will rise above certain thresholds with weapon upgrades but can still fluctuate by equipping different gear. Most players will overcome this by only equipping gear that provides the most amount of level, but it brings into question why you would include a gear system if experimentation is discouraged. Another strange aspect to the behaviour of attacks in *GoW 2018* is what has been dubbed 'move assist' by some, due to the similarities that can be drawn between aim assist. If Kratos initiates an attack but an enemy is just out of range, he will slide across the ground to ensure the attack connects, and the same also applies to enemies.

#### [GoW 2018 Move Assist](#)



This brings even more uncertainty into combat as the player can never be entirely sure if their attacks will reach and enemies who appear out of range can suddenly slide right over to Kratos.

Although consistent in behaviour, one of *GoW 2018*'s worst decisions are colour-coded enemies with almost identical implementation to *DmC DMC* before *DE* - meaning that the player cannot hit blue enemies with the axe and red enemies with the Blades.

### [GoW 2018 Blue Enemy](#)



Enemy design is notably weak in *GoW 2018*. This is due to frustrating and uninteresting enemies such as the Dark Elves who are almost always airborne and inflict blind on Kratos - preventing the player from seeing. There is also a severe lack of enemy variety and existing enemies are reskinned several times. The Troll boss is particularly egregious in this regard, appearing ten times throughout the game and not changing in any significant way. This deflates the enjoyability of exploration because the likelihood of fighting a troll is so high.

### [GoW 2018 Trolls](#)



These inconsistencies in the game's combat system are disappointing because apart from these issues Kratos' attacks and animations feel great with tons of power behind them. The stun kill animations in particular fit right in with the brutality of the older games.

[GoW 2018 Wulver Kill Animation](#)



The reality, though, is that move assist and levelling completely undermine the feel of Kratos' attacks and a lot of the satisfaction that could come from combat.

Another strength of the game's combat are the enemy interactions and *GoW 2018* features far more than the average stylish action game. One of the best is by freezing an enemy the player can then kick them into a wall to shatter them, or instantly do so if the axe throw sticks them to a wall.

[GoW 2018 Wall Shatter](#)



*GoW 2018* is a gorgeous game visually with incredibly detailed environments. But this detail does prove detrimental for gameplay at times. As mentioned, enemy interactions are one of *GoW 2018*'s greatest strengths in combat, and the wall interactions especially add a lot of depth to the combat by getting the player to think about the environment. But because these environments are so highly detailed not every single wall behaves as the player would hope. Even if a wall has a completely flat surface an enemy might not shatter or stick to it when the axe is thrown. Sometimes even if a wall is proven to interact with enemies, trying another angle will not cause the same interaction.

[GoW 2018 Wall Shatter Not Working](#)



Despite the primitive, undeniably ugly environments of *God Hand* their behaviour was almost always consistent. If any enemy collided with a wall, they would interact with it regardless of the angle. Ledges are another issue: sometimes enemies will be instantly killed by falling off them, other times enemies will be stopped by an invisible wall.

[GoW 2018 Ledge](#)



Again, this brings lots of inconsistency and guess work into combat because the player can never be certain how environmental interactions will work, if at all. Perhaps if the environment was less concerned with detail and realism, clearer boundaries could have been created. Of course, realism has never been a priority for this series. But the increased detail and closer camera distance now bring about questions like these, or why the God of war cannot jump over simple terrain.

The combat in *GoW 2018* exudes potential that it can never realise because the game limits itself in various ways: such as its unnecessary gear system, RPG elements, an underwhelming camera, and the innate inconsistencies of combat. Most disappointing, however, is that *GoW 2018* does not make the player feel like the God of war (apart from brief glimpses like the grab kill animations or the boss battle against the stranger). For all that could be said about *GoW's* simplistic combat, and its own faults, the player always felt like the God of war. *GoW 2018* arguably provides more depth, but it also lacks the distinct style that *GoW* had, transforming the series into a matured safe experience.

### **Assault Spy “Knowing Yourself”**

There is not much to discuss with *Assault Spy* (Wazen, 2018), not because the game is lacking but rather because *Assault Spy* is very clear in what it wants to achieve: a hyper focus on its combat. Every other aspect of *Assault Spy* is entirely superfluous. The game's narrative is more of a justification for gameplay scenarios, which it is completely aware of and does not take itself seriously at all, knowing what it wants to do and why the player is here. The game's level design is practically non-existent, making no effort to disguise that the game is a series of rooms with combat encounters. Any semblance of balance is thrown out the window in favour of giving the player powerful tools. What *Assault Spy* does have are two very fun characters, Asaru and Amelia.

Asaru is a business spy that fights with his briefcase and umbrella and his gameplay almost appears specifically built as a combination of Dante and Vergil, copying a lot of their mechanics and integrating them into one character. He also can slow down time and attack enemies and once the player leaves this state every attack detonates.

#### [Assault Spy Asaru Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Of course, because so much of his gameplay is informed by those two characters who are already well established, he is a very enjoyable character but he does lack a distinct identity. In terms of style, Asaru is supposed to sell the fantasy of being a savvy business spy and although he has a

few moves that make use of the briefcase and umbrella in clever ways they mostly function as sword alternatives. As an example of what this style could look like if the concept was executed much more strongly it would be the character Answer, (shown in Figure 47), from the fighting game *Guilty Gear Xrd* (Arc System Works, 2014). This is a literal business ninja that attacks with business cards in place of shuriken and is always on the phone.

### Figure 47

*Answer From Guilty Gear Xrd*



From *Guilty Gear Xrd*, Arc System Works, 2014.

*Assault Spy's* second character U.S.A. undercover agent, Amelia, is a more enjoyable character. This is not just because her gameplay is more distinct but also because it embodies style more, that being a hyperactive girl who punches hard. Amelia has a unique gauge called Tension that increases as the player attacks enemies and decreases when they are not. Tension can then be spent on attacks to enhance their impact. When her super gauge is full Amelia gains infinite tension and invincibility, as well as access to an extremely powerful tension attack. This results in the feeling

of incredibly powerful gameplay as every tension attack crushes enemies and perfectly expresses that Amelia is getting hyped as she fights.

[Assault Spy Amelia Gameplay Demonstration](#)



It is a missed opportunity that her taunts do not increase tension, which would have been a perfect fit. Amelia's move set is comparable to the CQC weapons Dante has but she also has enough of her own flair in conjunction with her tension gauge to remain distinct. She does have a second weapon which is a slow spear, but this feels very out of character and was likely only given a second weapon because Asaru has two.

*Assault Spy* is not the most impressive low budget stylish action game, but it does have real heart behind it. The game copies a lot of tried-and-true action game mechanics and can be rough around the edges. But the feel and style do pull through and result in a satisfying, albeit short stylish action experience.

### **Devil May Cry 5 "A Devil's Legacy"**

After *DmC DMC* the future of the Devil May Cry series looked uncertain as it laid dormant for years with fans unsure whether the original series after *DMC 4* or the reboot would see a continuation. However, Capcom were ultimately satisfied with the sales of the re-releases of *DMC 4* and *DmC DMC*. Hideaki Itsuno alleviated their concerns by saying, “I’m glad that the message is out there with Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition that the main series is not over, and that DMC: Devil May Cry did not kill it.” (Ramsay, 2015) Itsuno would later reveal *Devil May Cry 5 (DMC 5)* (Capcom, 2019) to the world with his goal being to make it his best game yet, aiming to satisfy both old and new fans, to retain the challenge of the series whilst also being accessible to newcomers. Itsuno also wanted to prove that pure action games still had a place after their relevancy waned during the seventh generation. He stated, “I wanted to prove that the genre could exist if you just focus on that.” (Webster, 2019) Itsuno was clearly determined to not let this sub-genre with so much history behind it fade into obscurity, *DMC 5* proves Itsuno’s determination with all the style imaginable.

*DMC 5* sees both Nero and Dante return as the game opens with Nero and a new mysterious character, V, arriving inside the Qliphoth as Dante is engaged in battle with a new demonic foe, Urizen. Nero’s motivation for challenging Urizen is that a cloaked figure took his demonic arm who V identifies as Urizen.

[DMC 5 Opening](#)



When Nero and V reach Dante he, Lady, and Trish are unable to defeat the demon king and Nero soon follows suit, Urizen proving far too powerful. Dante attempts to fend off Urizen as V and Nero retreat which causes Dante, for the first time in the series, to lose a battle against an enemy, massively raising the stakes of the game.

[DMC 5 Dante Loses](#)



One month later Nero returns to Red Grave city where the Qliphoth is located, outfitted with his new Devil Breaker made by new character Nico. He meets up with V to take the fight back to Urizen.

*DMC 5's* story involves three playable characters, first having the player return to Nero. In terms of gameplay, Nero is almost identical to how he played in *DMC 4*. He retains the same core mechanics with some new moves added to his arsenal. However, because his Devil Bringer was taken prior to the events of the game Nero has lost his ability to perform the iconic Buster attack and Devil Trigger although he does retain the Snatch ability. In place of the Devil Bringer Nero now has the Devil Breaker, a robotic arm with several different functions that Nero can swap between (in place of the Buster command).

[DMC 5 Nero Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Nero has eight different Devil Breakers, in order of acquisition: Overture a basic electric blast: Gerbera a shockwave dash: Punch Line which sends out a fist that hits enemies or can be ridden: Helter Skelter a piercing attack that breaks guards: Tomboy which empowers Blue Rose and Red Queen: Buster which enables the Buster technique again: Rawhide a long range whip and enhanced Snatch: and Ragtime a projectile that creates a bubble that slows down enemies. All breakers can be charged to unleash a powerful attack that destroys the breaker and swaps in the next one, and they can also be manually broken. There is no way to swap back and forth between breakers, the player must set the order before a mission or pick up a new one during a mission. All this feels like an unnecessary limitation because being able to swap between them freely would greatly increase Nero's depth. Perhaps this was done for balance purposes, but it is difficult to know.

Mission 2 is where proper gameplay begins and introduces a new feature that *DMC 5* brings to the original series: dynamic music, which fluctuates based on the player's current style rank and increases in intensity the closer to SSS they are.

#### [DMC 5 Dynamic Music](#)



This is a fantastic addition that brings the emphasis on style to its limit and makes the player feel as if they are performing a show for an audience. Previous Devil May Cry games had soundtracks that were a combination of rock and electronic styles. But the main themes for *DMC 5* are distinctly more pop rock. Nero's theme, Devil Trigger, is a killer track with a fantastic chorus drop for when the player reaches S rank or above. Like *MGR* the lyrics capture Nero's character perfectly, reflecting Nero's anger and desire for power by unleashing the devil that is inside him (which he has been holding back). *DMC 5* fixes the issues with Nero's presentation in *DMC 4*: his style and attitude now come through much more strongly in *DMC 5*, doubling down on his aggressive punk attitude and sharing much more confident banter with enemies.

[DMC 5 Nero Banter](#)



The more personal narrative also gives Nero proper motivation to take down Urizen, both so that he can take revenge and save the world in the process.

Regarding style grading, *DMC 5* presents the most direct grading yet, only checking the player's stylish points and nothing else (shown in Figure 48).

#### **Figure 48**

*DMC 5 Mission Results Screen*



From *Devil May Cry 5*, Capcom, 2019.

There are also a few penalties and bonuses that apply: a negative or positive multiplier to stylish points respectively. As an example, using a continue will detract while using no continues will multiply.

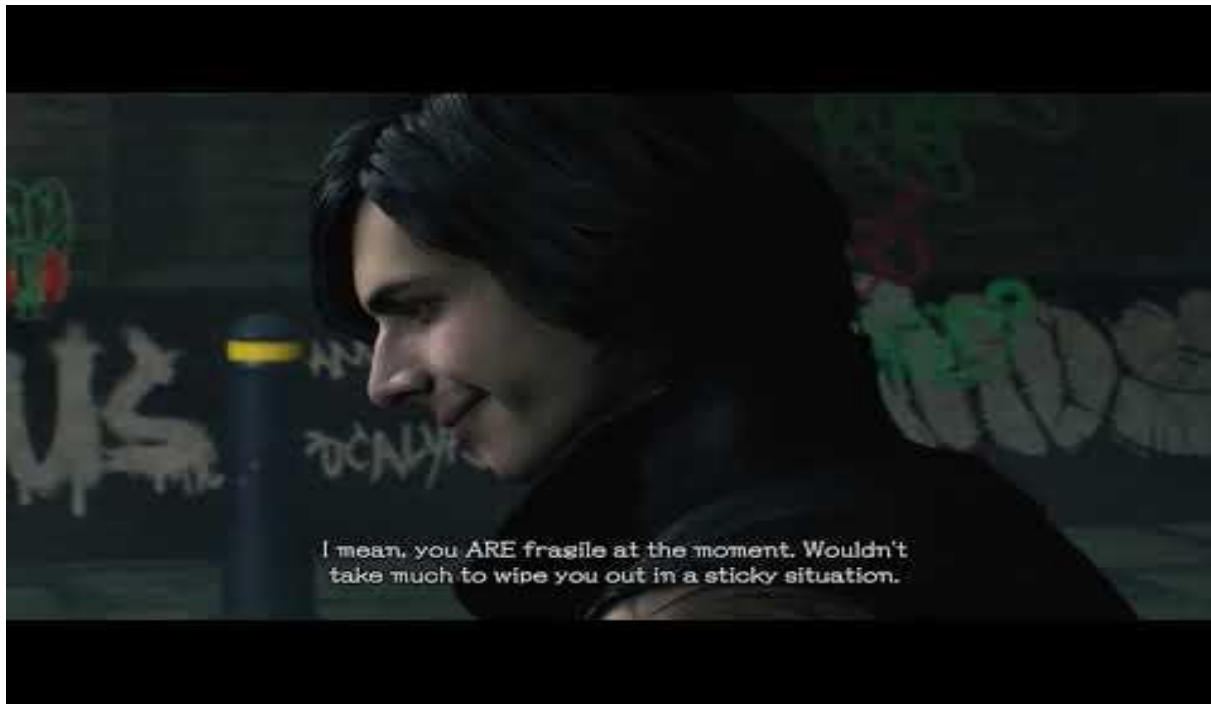
Taunts return and *DMC 5* continues to double down on their style as characters have the most taunts they have ever had. Taunts can now be performed in mid-air. Rather than build accessibility into various aspects of the game's combat as *DmC DMC* did, *DMC 5* now includes a feature called 'auto assist'. This is like the automatic modes of previous games which performs automatic combos for the player. To offset this, though, the game applies a x0.8 score penalty at the end of each mission, even if the player did not perform any moves. *DMC 5* also brings the training mode from *DmC DMC* to the original series to let players figure out character move sets and learn how to fight enemies.

[DMC 5 Training](#)



*DMC 5*'s second playable character is the new mysterious V who plays unlike any other Devil May Cry character, or almost any other stylish action game protagonist for that matter. V cannot directly attack enemies, instead he must rely on the strength of his three summons to fight enemies - Shadow, Griffon, and Nightmare, who return from *DMC*. Shadow functions as V's melee attacks, morphing its body to pierce, slash, and launch foes and sharing a lot of attacks from *DMC*. Loudmouth Griffon primarily shoots various projectiles, as he did back in *DMC*, and functions as V's firearm equivalent.

Finally, Nightmare also functions as V's Devil Trigger. The player cannot control Nightmare directly unless they hop onto his back otherwise it lumbers around dealing big damage. DT can also be spent to briefly empower Griffon or Shadow and can be gained by reading from V's book of poetry. If Griffon or Shadow are killed by enemies, they must regenerate before being summoned again, which can be sped up by standing close to their cores. When the health of enemies drops low enough from the combined attacks of the three, the enemies will enter a vulnerable state where V can execute them with his cane (his only method of killing enemies). An issue with V's gameplay comes from Griffon and Shadow occasionally not focusing an enemy the player did not expect. This is not a new issue for this sub-genre but feels more frustrating when it is a different character who the player does not have complete control over.

[DMC 5 V Gameplay Demonstration](#)

If Dante was rock, and Nero was punk, then V's sense of style is the Devil May Cry series take on goth. V broods in the background of combat and is so confident in his own abilities that he barely needs to pay attention in battle. It makes the player feel like they are a master strategist who does not even need to engage with enemies to completely dominate them. His theme, *Crimson Cloud*, also reflects this goth style with a metal, industrial edge and lyrics that foreshadow who he really is.

Finally, of course, there is Dante who, like Nero, retains a lot of his fundamental abilities from *DMC 4* - including style switching, albeit with an entirely new arsenal of devil arms as is tradition. Dante uses three swords over the course of the game: Rebellion, Sparda, and his new sword, Devil Sword Dante (DSD). The functionality of all three remains mostly the same but DSD is the most complete, featuring its own new attacks and almost every attack from previous swords. Balrog is Dante's new CQC weapon and follows in the footsteps of previous CQC weapons, containing moves from Ifrit, Beowulf, and Gilgamesh. Balrog also has two unique mechanics that let the weapon swap between fist and leg attacks. After a certain number of punches or swapping to legs with a longer animation, this causes the weapon to ignite and empower its attacks. Cavaliere is a

motorcycle that splits in half, which Dante swings around like massive clubs, or can combine them to ride straight through enemies.

Dante's last new devil arm is a throwback with King Cerberus, which is just how the original Cerberus was. But now it can be charged to electrify the weapon's attacks, or in sword master style transform into a flaming Bō staff. Dante also gets two new firearms alongside Ebony and Ivory and the shotgun: Dr. Faust is a demonic hat that costs red orbs to use, that then causes enemies to drop even more red orbs: and the returning Kalina Ann rocket launcher from *DMC 3*.

### [DMC 5 Dante Gameplay Demonstration](#)



Unfortunately, Dante's theme, Subhuman, is disappointing compared to Devil Trigger and Crimson Cloud. The core issue here is that the lyrics do not really make sense for Dante's character at this point in the series. The intention is supposed to reflect the impending situation and how Dante thinks that a stronger more demonic power may awaken from inside of him to overcome this and thus would result in the loss of his humanity. However, this does not fit Dante's outlook on himself or demon kind. Dante has in fact grown substantially from when he considered himself only a demon in *DMC 3*.

Halfway through the swap to Dante at the start of mission twelve, V reveals the truth of who he and Urizen are to Trish. The cloaked figure that took Nero's arm was Vergil, which he reclaimed the Yamato from and used to separate his demonic half from his human half. This was done at the Sparda family home which spawned Urizen and V respectively.

### [DMC 5 V's Origin](#)



Back in *DMC 3*, Vergil's motivation was power. But he did not really know what he wanted that power for because he had nothing tangible to protect with it. Now, several years later, after losing to Dante multiple times and being transformed into Nelo Angelo, Vergil has nothing except the desire to defeat Dante. This is what fuels Vergil's decision. When V emerges from Vergil his immediate reaction is fear and regret, Vergil not just discarding his human half but everything he considered weak, his fears, regrets, and memories of Nelo Angelo. This is why Griffon, Shadow, & Nightmare follow V. Later in mission sixteen, V divulges a significant amount about Vergil's thoughts and feelings and shows that Vergil, despite everything, ultimately wanted to be loved.

### [DMC 5 Vergil's Truth](#)



V carrying everything Vergil considered weak is likely the reason he is so quick to divulge this information to Nero. V brings an entirely new angle to Vergil and reveals that if the traumatic death of his mother did not occur, he would have been relatively normal. Urizen being only Vergil's demonic half also explains why, as an antagonist, he is so straightforward. He is effectively a caricature of Vergil talking about almost nothing other than power and how weak humans are.

[DMC 5 Urizen](#)



Enemy and boss designs in *DMC 5* are solid across the board with a good variety of demons new and old. Some of the highlights are the returning Death Scissors, the new Proto and Scudo Angelos as well as the Fury. Proto and Scudo Angelos are a great way to show how far the series has progressed in terms of complexity because Proto Angelo is very similar to Nelo Angelo. Nelo Angelo is arguably the most complex boss in *DMC*, but he can now be considered a regular enemy. The Fury feels like an attempt to correct the Blitz enemy from *DMC 4* - a challenging enemy that needs to be dealt with fast – but the player has far better options to combat the Fury, primarily by deflecting or parrying its attacks.

[DMC 5 Enemies](#)



Bosses also feel like a combination of new and old with bosses like Goliath, Artemis, Cavaliere Angelo, and King Cerberus providing some challenging but engaging battles. Goliath is fairly simplistic and he has a fight that is similar to Beowulf (although not as aggressive, given he is fought early). Artemis is another take on a ranged boss battle as she dashes around the arena with the primary goal being to chase her down. Cavaliere Angelo is a classic showdown between Dante and an Angelo with even more abilities to combat the player with. King Cerberus is significantly more involved than the previous Cerberus, swapping between three elemental states and no longer bound.

[DMC 5 Bosses](#)



The only notably weak bosses are V's, but this stems from his gameplay that is not well suited to bosses. This is probably why he has only two original fights. This is further proven in mission 14 where the player must defeat Goliath, Cavaliere Angelo, and Artemis again - bosses V did not fight. Alongside being unnecessary because these fights were not designed for V, a lot of their unique mechanics do not function, especially Artemis' grapple points.

[DMC 5 V Repeat Bosses](#)



Following in his brother's footsteps, after Dante returns home at the end of mission 12, he too stabs himself with his sword. This awakens his greater demonic power, his Sin Devil Trigger. Sin Devil Trigger is an incredibly powerful form that Dante transforms into for a short amount of time - its own gauge must be full before activation, which is filled by converting regular DT into Sin Devil Trigger.

[DMC 5 Sin Devil Trigger](#)



This is what keeps Sin Devil Trigger balanced, unlike Umbran Climax. The player has to decide between using regular DT or converting it to Sin Devil Trigger.

Dante, Nero, and V continue to descend the Qliphoth, Dante reaching the bottom first and confronts Urizen before he consumes the fruit of Qliphoth (which would grant him true power). Dante's attitude clearly changes during this moment with his brother as he reveals his genuine side, dropping the devil-may-care attitude to try and get through to Urizen and convince him that he was not abandoned before their mother was killed. However, Urizen who is unaware of anything Dante says, consumes the fruit and becomes all-powerful. This leads into a battle against this 'perfected' Urizen another intense fight as Urizen contains a variety of moves and deals a lot of damage. Yet despite the size difference, it is commendable how this is still a normal boss battle, unlike Mundus or Savior.

[DMC 5 Perfect Urizen](#)



Urizen, still unable to defeat Dante collapses as Nero and V arrive, V explaining to Nero why the two must fight. But Nero cannot help but find the whole situation ridiculous, likely because he is someone that has never had a family, and thus values those he loves so much. Before Urizen can die however, V climbs atop him and reconnects with Urizen, causing Vergil to be reborn and Dante finally confirms to Nero that Vergil is indeed his father. After this Vergil ascends to the top of the Qliphoth and waits for Dante to heal as he pontificates on his and Dante's lives and whether they would have been different if they switched positions the day their mother died.

[DMC 5 Vergil's Return](#)



This moment feels as if V's character growth did indeed carry over to Vergil, in *DMC 3* he was so focused on his goals that he never even considered how his life could be different. Not everything returns to Vergil however as Griffon, Shadow, and Nightmare remain and challenge Dante as the last boss before Vergil. Griffon describes him and the other familiars as the discarded thoughts from when Vergil was Nelo Angelo, Vergil wanted everything back except the trauma of being Nelo Angelo. The three choosing to confront Dante may initially seem like them trying to get revenge for Dante beating them back on Mallet Island. But Dante recognises that they could not beat him when they were at full strength so they certainly cannot beat him now. The real reason is that they want Dante to defeat them, so that they will cease to exist and end Vergil's nightmares. This is a genuine send off to these characters who were so important in helping the series establish its sense of challenge.

### [DMC 5 Familiars](#)



Dante reaches Vergil and the two have a brief talk before the final battle, with both visibly excited that they get to face off against each other again. Not as Nelo Angelo, not as Urizen, but as Dante versus Vergil. The final boss battle against Vergil is essentially a rematch from *DMC 3* because he shares many similarities to that battle. But Vergil also has some new tools to match Dante's, including his own Sin Devil Trigger and the Doppelganger ability.

[DMC 5 Dante vs Vergil](#)



As the sons of Sparda showdown for the last time Nero, before he reaches the summit, talks to Kyrie over the phone to find reassurance before he confronts his father and uncle. This scene also continues to show that Kyrie, and by extension humanity, is what Nero draws his strength from. Unlike his father he has always had something to protect. This motivation is what enables Nero to fully awaken his Devil Trigger (which like Credo's is more angelic) as he literally ascends to stop his family from killing each other. The track that plays during this scene, Legacy, like most of the game's vocal tracks perfectly captures the thematic intent of this scene because Nero is the next son of Sparda to continue his legacy and unite humans and demons. In a scene that speaks for itself, Nero stops Dante and Vergil from fighting before accepting Vergil's challenge to a final duel.

[DMC 5 Nero's Resolve](#)



The fight against Vergil as Nero is significantly easier however this is sensible as Vergil was weakened by the fight with Dante and Nero, just as Vergil once was, is extremely motivated, proven by a regenerating DT the first time this fight occurs. Nero regaining his DT means the full functionality of it from *DMC 4* returns, including Showdown, Maximum Bet, and Buster (without the need for the Devil Breaker). The music that plays in this fight, like the rest of the game, is perfect starting with solemn strings that almost lament the current reality. But after activating Nero's DT they are rudely interrupted by a remix of Devil Trigger, Silver Bullet.

[DMC 5 Nero vs Vergil](#)



Nero, expectedly, defeats Vergil and respecting Nero's win travels to the underworld with Dante to cut down the Qliphoth and the sons of Sparda pass the torch to Nero, presumably leaving the future of Devil May Cry to him. This is the perfect ending for the sons of Sparda story, it could never have been resolved by either Dante or Vergil, too stubborn in their own ways to ever put aside their differences. But Nero, an outsider to their conflict, who understands the value of family and has the motivation to protect those he loves is the perfect character to end the familial conflict that has persisted throughout the entire series. Transforming it into something new, love.

### [DMC 5 Ending](#)



*DMC 5* is not just a triumph for its series but the entire stylish action sub-genre, after a lull period during the seventh generation where the future of both the sub-genre and Devil May Cry series looked dire. *DMC 5* swings back with a perfect style ranking to prove that stylish action games are not going anywhere. The game continues to expand the depth, style, and satisfaction of combat as every entry in the series (except *DMC 2*) has done. Giving new mechanics to every character and making style more prominent through its music. The game redefines style for the third time with V, representing an incredibly different approach to action with style that matches it. The narrative is the perfect sendoff to the sons of Sparda story whilst also redeeming Nero and even if Dante never returns, the future of both Devil May Cry and the stylish action sub-genre appears to be a prosperous one.

### **Closing Section**

I believe this thesis has revealed the stylish action sub-genre's greatest strength in notions of style. The sub-genre has a substantial history behind it and, as the sub-genre changed overtime, it did maintain its focus on style. When starting this process, it became obvious that there is a lack of

existing research in this sub-genre, with no scholarship covering many of the games I have discussed here. Gameplay has also been neglected.

This thesis establishes a clear starting point for further scholarship that covers the stylish action sub-genre, considered knowledge that can be utilised for more specific discussions on how the sub-genre plays. A future extension of this thesis research could be the shift to the Western appeal during the seventh generation, a focus I merely scratched the surface of in this thesis. Because this is an area that still provokes, the lingering impact of the seventh generation warrants much more thorough examination. Seeing that this sub-genre is one that still sees new releases even into the current year, a more thorough examination of recent stylish action games could be taken, and speculating on where the sub-genre might head in the future. The idea of style is not exclusive to this sub-genre and that focus could potentially be applied to other genres.

The research process for this thesis went extremely well with my approach proving to be appropriate and successful for every game analysed. Playing through each game while taking notes, before returning to record footage, revealed that indeed the foundation and mechanics of combat within *DMC* were in fact applied elsewhere. But importantly also, the game's emphasis on style was a much more apparent influence. Micro case studies were then drafted from this focus and the notes I collected. This was unlike the expected results which suspected that mechanical similarities to *DMC* would have been the most apparent similarities. Ultimately, the number of games analysed far exceeded the amount needed to support the influence of *DMC* because several games were played and analysed for this thesis but excluded from the present research. The games I chose to leave out provided little to the overall discussion, despite the quality they presented. I wanted to prove how big the influence of *DMC* was. But when it came to the final discussion there was already more than enough evidence to support that.

The influence of *DMC* on the stylish action sub-genre is clearly demonstrated. It is without doubt that the focus was on defeating enemies stylishly, not simply because the game's combat was unlike anything that came before it. *DMC* asked players to think about combat in a completely different way that would also reinforce the character's attitude in gameplay (as cutscenes did before the existence of *DMC*), creating a stronger relationship between the player and character. It was this focus on style and character that appeared to resonate strongly with other creators, perhaps more so than the excellent foundation of *DMC's* gameplay. The idea of style was morphed

into the creation of a variety of different stylish action experiences. From the Ninja fantasy of Hotsuma and Ryu to Kratos' rage, Gene's moxie, or Bayonetta's grace, these examples show how it is not enough to make just a great stylish action game. To craft a truly iconic game it must have some sense of style. The Devil May Cry series itself would establish new style sensibilities with Vergil, Lady, Nero, and V. Each game after *DMC 2* continuing to solidify Dante's style by gaining crazy new weapons and his four iconic styles.

A point of contention within the sub-genre however is the role of narrative within stylish action games. Narrative stands at a complex crossroads for stylish action games because it is a valuable aspect of game design but simultaneously, the sub-genre is not largely concerned with narrative. Dedicating time to the narrative and establishing character motivations, relationships, and the game's identity may increase motivation within players and make the game more memorable. The Devil May Cry series itself embodies this concept: *DMC 5* would not have the narrative payoff it does for the Sons of Sparda story if time was not spent developing the relationship between Dante and Vergil.

Despite this, most stylish action games are light on traditional narrative, focused instead on player experience, such as *Shinobi*, *Bujingai*, and *God Hand*. Narrative is not what defines the sub-genre either as the player's experience is the main driver of stylish action. Despite their lack of narrative, the games listed above are all excellent stylish action games purely on the merits of their gameplay, as was discussed in each case study.

A potential solution to this paradoxical issue is the idea of 'style' demonstrated throughout this thesis as it presents potentially the most ideal narrative approach for the sub-genre. As mentioned above, the most iconic and beloved games within this sub-genre carry incredibly strong stylistic sensibilities that define their gameplay and characters. This shows how stylish action games with light narratives can still benefit from the inclusion of a story by expressing it through gameplay. Dante and Vergil's rivalry is one of the strongest examples, as was shown in the case studies of *DMC 3* and *DMC 5*. While the Sons of Sparda are given ample time to express their characters and relationship through cutscenes, their playstyles and the boss fights against Vergil convey a significant amount of their personalities and relationship.

Stylish action games released soon after *DMC* did not share the same combat foundations because of their proximity to the release of *DMC*. This resulted in a group of stylish action games that

attempted to create compelling action in 3D in their unique ways. Even though *Shinobi*, *Bujingai*, or *Otogi* only share superficial elements with *DMC* (such as rankings) and their combat did not catch on, they do show how interesting and diverse the early 2000s were for the sub-genre. The mid 2000s was a time when this sub-genre exploded in popularity with the release of *Ninja Gaiden*, *DMC 3*, and *GoW*. It also spawned a variety of clones. The clones bluntly showed how publishers and developers attempted to capitalise on the sub-genre's popularity by copying the foundations of *Devil May Cry* and *GoW*.

The evolution of the sub-genre was never smooth, however. The transition to HD development proved to be a challenge for Japanese development teams (for a variety of reasons). This saw opinion on Japanese games turn in a toxic way as a result of the decline in quality. This decline saw Capcom and other Japanese developers abandon what made their games special, in the false belief that it was their Japanese identity that turned audiences away. Consequently, their decision to shift to a Western focus backfired completely, *DmC DMC* proved to be the most infamous game from this period. PlatinumGames kept the spirit of the sub-genre alive and, although recently they have not been looked upon with the same reverence, there are many talented developers making games in this sub-genre currently. Platinum absolutely carried it through the seventh generation, but they no longer need to be looked upon as a beacon of hope for the sub-genre, as indeed they once were.

To evaluate how the sub-genre has impacted the medium of video games more broadly we can look at recently released games and witness how they have been influenced by the development of stylish action games. Recent releases such as *Sifu* (Sloclap, 2022), *Soulstice* (Reply Game Studios, 2022), *Hi-Fi RUSH* (Tango Gameworks, 2023) and the previously mentioned *Final Fantasy XVI* are all games that have been shaped by stylish action games and how the sub-genre has developed. *Hi-Fi RUSH* and *Final Fantasy XVI* are perhaps the most direct evidence of the sub-genre's influence. *Hi-Fi RUSH* clearly understands what made so many stylish action games iconic and beloved among players. *Hi-Fi RUSH* blends stylish action and rhythm game mechanics to characterise its protagonist as a wannabe rock star and incentivise performing combos to the beat of the music. *Final Fantasy XVI* made an ambitious move for the series by shifting from the turn-based battle system, utilised by most *Final Fantasy* games, which gives minimal control over characters, to stylish action gameplay. This shift in gameplay allows players to directly control

iconic Final Fantasy summons and harness their power through the protagonist. A significant focus of the marketing behind *Final Fantasy XVI* was also to ensure audiences were aware that one of the combat designers for *DMC 5*, Suzuki Ryota, was involved with the game. In a live letter for *Final Fantasy XVI*, Suzuki Ryota said that he felt the game was “[his] own personal masterpiece” (Aitai Kimochi, 2023).

This shows how Devil May Cry has come to influence Final Fantasy, one of the longest-running series in the history of gaming. Examples such as these show how developers, perhaps more than ever, recognise the appeal of stylish action games and incorporate some of the most successful aspects of the sub-genre that have been seen throughout its development. The Devil May Cry series itself is responsible for much of the sub-genre's development and influence. By marrying style to action, the Devil May Cry series created a sub-genre that other games are increasingly interested in because of its ability to create engaging gameplay that develops character and creates a unique resonance between player and protagonist. That resonance is perhaps why the sub-genre remains so beloved, the ability to place oneself within a character whose gameplay perfectly captures their identity exemplifies what video games as a medium best represent and, in the case of Dante, the innate desire to show off and behave stylishly.

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