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Levels May Vary: The Immense Yet Underutilized Potential of Devil May Cry 5's Level Design

The *Devil May Cry* series, developed by Capcom, is a Hack-and-Slash game where you play as the half-demon, half-human demon hunter Dante as he hunts demons throughout the series for both personal and professional reasons. It is a game series renowned for its dynamic and complex combat system that sets the standard for other combat-oriented action games. These types of games had a very distinct focus on player combat and how the rest of the game centers around it. From the actual abilities of the characters, the animations of their attacks and even just the movement given to the player, all of these form crucial parts of the experience that these games provide.

The level design in *Devil May Cry 5*, Capcom's newest entry in the series, has shown its great potential in both the levels and the bosses leading up to the game's end but then fails to deliver that same standard of level design after a certain point in the game. This level of thought and design is certainly noticeable in the game itself, but it is also directly stated in the "Level Design of *Devil May Cry 5*" on how this game was posed to look and feel like a movie in and out of gameplay. This potential is clearly also shown off fairly early in the first boss of *Devil May Cry 5*, Goliath. This boss and stage were impressive enough to be shown off as the sole level on the free playable demo of the game, released months ahead of the game itself. The way this boss works is he will start off in one area, the top of a church, where he begins his fight with the

player. Once the player does enough damage, he will jump up and crash through the roof of the church to now be inside said church. This is an interesting change of the level as you are now forced to engage this large boss in a much smaller space as he throws out attacks that are now much harder for the player to dodge. Finally, Goliath will activate an attack that will force the player to leave the church and into the courtyard in order to avoid damage as he demolishes the rest of the building. The player, now seemingly safe from the boss, gets notified of their opponent's survival as the camera pans to show Goliath jump outside into the church courtyard as the final arena to finish this fight. This is an effective way to make the player adapt during the fight, thinking on their feet on how to attack and evade, all while making the boss level much more active and dynamic.

<https://youtu.be/2Z2RW7R47zU?si=4WzNSQY90bhMbaOH>



It all comes out in a very stylish display where the boss will continue to interact with the level. Even after the final change he will constantly throw objects scattered around the arena like cars and building debris as he anything he can to surprise you. You can also use the environment to your advantage, an example being able to trick him into destroying a statue in the center of the courtyard to reveal a health item. By far the most impressive level interaction you can pull off is the fact that using a certain item in the game, you are able to grab this demon by the tail and throw him, much like a certain red plumber with his turtle rival. When you do this, you can use the camera to aim the general area you would like to launch your foe, and if this happens to be the clock tower that's entirely within your line of sight, it does major damage on the boss as you throw him into it, smashing the tower into pieces. This is a detail that remains consistent in the level, even with the following cutscene after the defeat of the boss. This is a very impressive display on how the level is expertly designed to show off how powerful both you and the boss are to each other, transitioning from simple backdrop to major feature in this boss fight. This boss fight is now highlighted even among the rest of the series because it takes what you know about the typical boss arena and goes beyond what you expect in ways that are extremely fitting to the style of the series as a whole.



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Now, with this example in mind, one can wonder why I might have used the word “underutilized” in my title and what that alludes to regarding Devil May Cry 5’s level design. While the praise for the new standard of boss level design based on this opening boss is plentiful, the use of said standard is not. This glorious example of excellent level design is only used once in the game, at the beginning. This means that this display of higher game design and new standard for the series ends just as soon as it begins. The bosses of the later game, while having somewhat interesting arenas of their own, are unable to compare with the level of area interaction that the very first boss had. While it was unintentional, it had felt as though the game had misled its players (especially those who got hooked on the playable demo) and had the disappointing revelation that this new standard of level design was nothing more than the exception to the status quo that we will not see again.

This sad revelation is also worsened when paired with the fact that the level design outside of the boss arenas steadily devolve as well. Devil May Cry 5 starts off interestingly enough with an impressive starting area of a city under attack by demons. This isn't anything especially unique mind you, but the first level does well enough to start off the game with the excitement of a demonic invasion. Any excitement on where the level design could be taken is slowly decayed after you enter one specific area in the game, known as the Qliphoth, a demonic tree fortress that is being used by the game's villain to acquire ultimate power to rule hell and earth. The problem with this tree can be stated from this short excerpt from Steve Wright's review of the game: "While it's relatively enjoyable to replay missions to find secret missions that reside within, the levels themselves are very linear and exceptionally repetitive. You'll find yourself running down a corridor into an open area that gets fenced off for combat more times than you'll be able to count. Near the end, you'll be looking at the same demonic wall and floor texture for hours on end as you fall from platform to platform."(Wright, *Stevvivor*). In this, he accurately pinpoints why this demonic tree serves as such a problem for the game. It's dull, confusing, and majorly overstays its welcome as you play the entire rest of game within it.

The attempt to make the game feel like a movie with its dynamic cutscenes have not gone unnoticed by the players of Devil May Cry 5 with Nick Mccaskey from Dsogaming specifically noting the style of these cutscenes playing into the excellent gameplay in his review. The problem of the level design, however, remained a forefront highlight as he declares "Sadly, it was hard for me to get a strong sense of place when playing DMC 5 because the levels seem thrown together haphazardly, rather than connecting to form a plausible world. It feels like the developers picked from a grab-bag of video game levels to be backdrops for their insanely good cutscenes." (Mccaskey, *Dsogaming*). This is an important aspect I notice in this review as it

highlights how the bad level design actively takes away from some of the best aspects of the game, the gameplay and cutscenes. There are even articles, like *The Gamer's* “5 things *DMC: Devil May Cry* Does Better Than *DMC5* (& 5 Things It Does Worse)” that compares the level design from *Devil May Cry 5* (considered the best in the series, top picture) to the level design of *DMC: Devil May Cry* (A reboot that is considered the worst in the series, bottom picture) and specifically making note that the disliked reboot game still had more over the beloved new entry.



My insight on the level design of Devil May Cry 5 would start with moving away from the demonic tree level to make something more unique. The idea of a demonic invasion of earth is an interesting starting point that could have led into a metaphorical gold mine of level design ideas. You could show various locations on earth changed because of this invasion, perhaps certain demons have taken control over certain parts of earth in a turf war and now have drastically different themes to reflect this. You could also make the game have a counter-

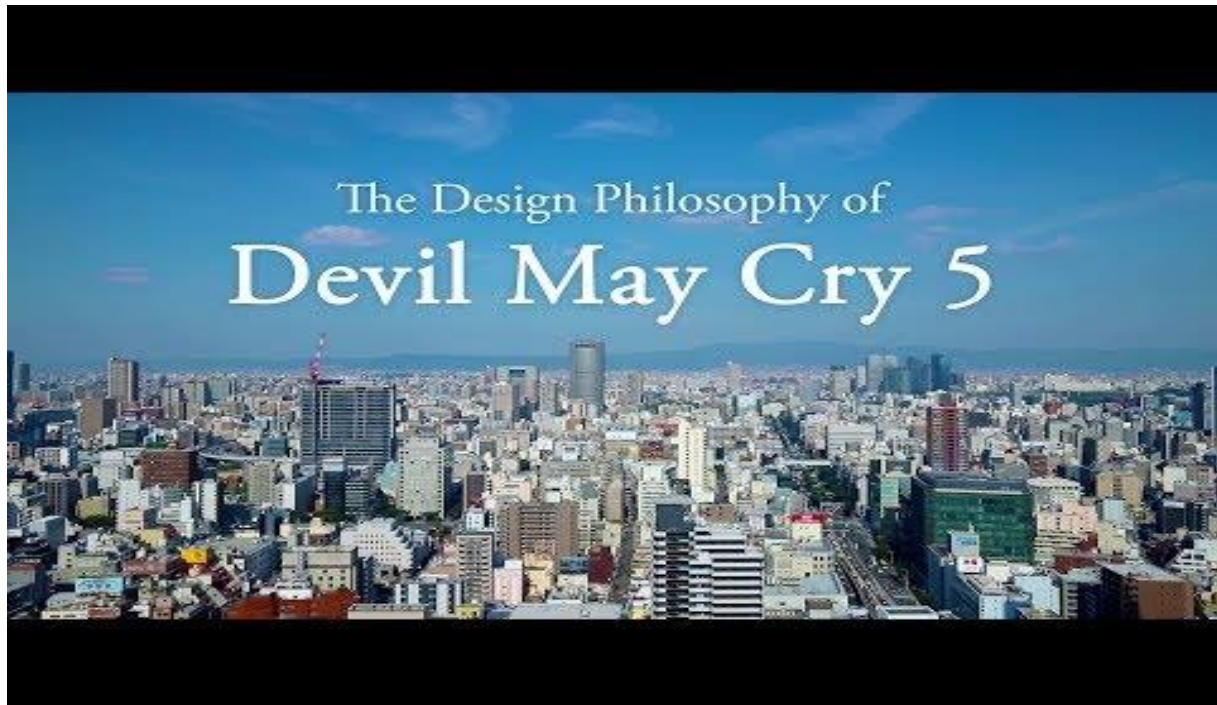
invasion where our heroes' journey into hell itself to stop this madness, allowing an ever-changing interpretation of hell only limited to the creativity of the level designers. We can actually see something like this in the earlier installment of the franchise, *Devil May Cry 3*, where protagonist Dante travels into various locations of Hell in an impressive display of level design artistry that makes you feel you have entered the uniquely unsettling pits of hell. I believe it is a matter of creativity, not functionality, that truly holds *Devil May Cry 5* back in terms of the stage level design.

As for the boss arenas, I think abandoning the interactive nature of the first boss was a disappointing move to say the least as it really would have been a bigger point of praise to all that have played this game, if it was given the proper amount of implementation. Even if it takes a longer time to develop, I think the further implementation of this game mechanic would have been an excellent way to establish this game even more as a pioneer in the field of combat-oriented games, the level interaction being a perfect companion to the highly praised combat. It could have really helped *Devil May Cry 5* finally cross that ever elusive threshold that lies between a good game and the great games that become household legends in their own right. *Devil May Cry 5* has nearly perfected its combat system, controls, and mechanics, but it still has much more room to grow in terms of level design. It has made its own path in this regard, but now must be willing to walk it if it ever hopes to strive for further greatness.

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