

Postmortem: Vlambeer's Gun Godz



By Rami Ismail, Jan Willem Nijman

[Created as a Kickstarter bonus for indie website Venus Patrol supporters, Gun Godz marks the first entry of Super Crate Box developer Vlambeer into the first person shooter genre -- and with one inspired by gangster rap at that. In this postmortem, Rami Ismail & Jan Willem Nijman explain how the project got its genesis and what went right and wrong as it was developed.]

When our good friend Brandon Boyer asked us to make a small game for his [Venus Patrol Kickstarter](#), we knew we couldn't say no. The idea of a new Offworld -- a website about the cultural relevance of video games -- is something we consider of extreme value to the medium.

What we didn't know is that we'd end up making a gangster rap-inspired first person shooter. Neither did we expect that we'd end up spending five months of part-time work on [Gun Godz](#) -- a game that will be played by at best 1500 people and a lot of pirates. Not for money, but for cultural literacy. For Venus Patrol.

Two things brought us to the design of *Gun Godz*. The first was a fascination with aggressive culture that our designer, Jan Willem Nijman, had. The two of us over here at Vlambeer have seen an increase of violence in our neighborhoods lately.

The business guy and programmer, Rami Ismail, was confronted with a mall shooting and was robbed at knifepoint just last year, and we realized that the world around us seems to have roughened up a bit. It's not something we can easily ignore or keep out of our heads. Violence -- mainly fake aggression -- is something we weren't used to seeing.

For Jan Willem, that violence turned into a fascination, which in turn led to him listening to a lot of 50 Cent and better, older gangster rap. We both agreed that that was a quite disturbing development. Either way, we decided to take what was once part of popular culture and throw it on a big pile of influences to make a game that we'd use to express our position in all of this.

So what form did that game take? An old-school first person shooter that takes place in the only building on Venus -- in a world in which rappers really are gods. We were suddenly making a gangster game. We didn't need to justify the violence in our game, like modern shooters try to with some pretentious nonsense scene where they take away player control and launch a nuke in the background, or kill a kid.

A true gangster rap-inspired first person shooter in the vein of the classics. If we wanted to pull this one, we would need to be dead serious about our theme: No jokes, all gangster.

What Went Right

1. Iterative Design and Instant Prototyping

At Vlambeer, we believe a game isn't a game unless it's being played. Without that, a game is a bunch of code and



assets and an icon. So when we have an idea, we prototype it. We whip up a really, really crude prototype in a few hours at most and we check whether the core design ideas work.

For this project, the first thing we came up with was a top-down roguelike shooter. People would play through the game as one of three *Gun Godz* -- machine gun god, shotgun god or bazooka god. They would be chased through the one building on Venus by the cops and have to race to the next floor while killing as many enemies as possible.

We had planned to have lots of diverse, stacking powerups that would allow players to forge their own playing style. We had traditional powerups -- rate of fire, reload time, damage -- but also more ridiculous ones. Some powerups would make your projectiles circle you, or make bullets bounce off the walls, or wrap around the screen. It was pretty fun coming up with more ideas.



(Click to expand)

The core idea worked, so we worked on it for two days every week for three weeks. At that point, the prototype quickly ran into trouble, though. The game could potentially be fun if we pumped it full of content, but we couldn't know for sure that the design would work if we did that. We scrapped everything and started anew.

After a lot of creative projects and experimenting with new gameplay, we started working on making a really good first person shooter that could outdo the classics. The machine gun god turned into the antagonist. The story quickly solidified from escaping from the cops into a Prometheus story in which the player brought guns to mankind and was being chased by the wrath of the Gun Godz. In the end, it turned into the story of the prisoner of a malign rap label owner. Obviously, everything fell into place.



A prototype screenshot of the FPS version of *Gun Godz*.

2. Having a Simple Game

We tried to keep the game simple. The reason is twofold -- we had limited resources, as this was a free project, but we also believe in minimalist game design. The fewer rules your ruleset has, the more responsibility you can give every single one of those rules, and the easier it is to make small, incremental improvements.

Simplicity does not exclude depth, as a strong combination of simple rules can make for incredibly deep gameplay. We've applied this philosophy to most of our games, with the most obvious example being *Super Crate Box*. The thing is, this simple game could solely be about really good shooting.

3. Gameplay

While *Gun Godz* looks like a game from the *Wolfenstein 3-D* generation, it doesn't play like one. We took the simplicity of old-school shooters and tried to approach such a design from the perspective of modern game design. We decided to base the game on just three things: guns, enemies, and levels. We would tell our story through these things. Our game is the story.

Games like *Quake* and *Outlaws* are some of the best we've ever played. *Quake* (and more recently *Rage*, to an extent) manages to get extremely intense gameplay down right from the start. Put the player in a level; give them a weapon and something to shoot. It's simple and elegant -- it's beautiful gameplay.

We liked that approach, so we decided to limit ourselves in terms of level design. We have walls, door and bars. Bars obstruct player movement but allow bullets to pass through.

These three level elements turned out being all we needed. The levels in *Gun Godz* tell the story, host ammo and health pickups, have some secrets and the rare explosive barrel -- mainly, they shape the way the player interacts with the enemies. That's what the level design in *Gun Godz* does: shape battles.

Enemies are designed around making battles exciting, slightly unpredictable, and fast. They all have very specific roles and are designed to work well together in any combination. Most enemies are weak but dangerous -- something we used to keep up the pace.

4. Weapons

We spent weeks making the guns perfect. Jan Willem spent days tweaking the screen-shake just to make the minigun feel right. We have an all-purpose but never-useless pistol, a short-range death-dealing shotgun, a rapid-fire, room-clearing minigun, and a deadly bazooka. Speed runners will love their right mouse button, used to "shank" enemies quickly with their knife.

Being good at *Gun Godz* involves switching weapons constantly. Every weapon is useful for a different situation and firing every weapon feels good. *Gun Godz* is about firing every weapon; hell, firing every weapon **is** *Gun Godz*. That's what our fiction is about, that's what our game is about.



5. Style

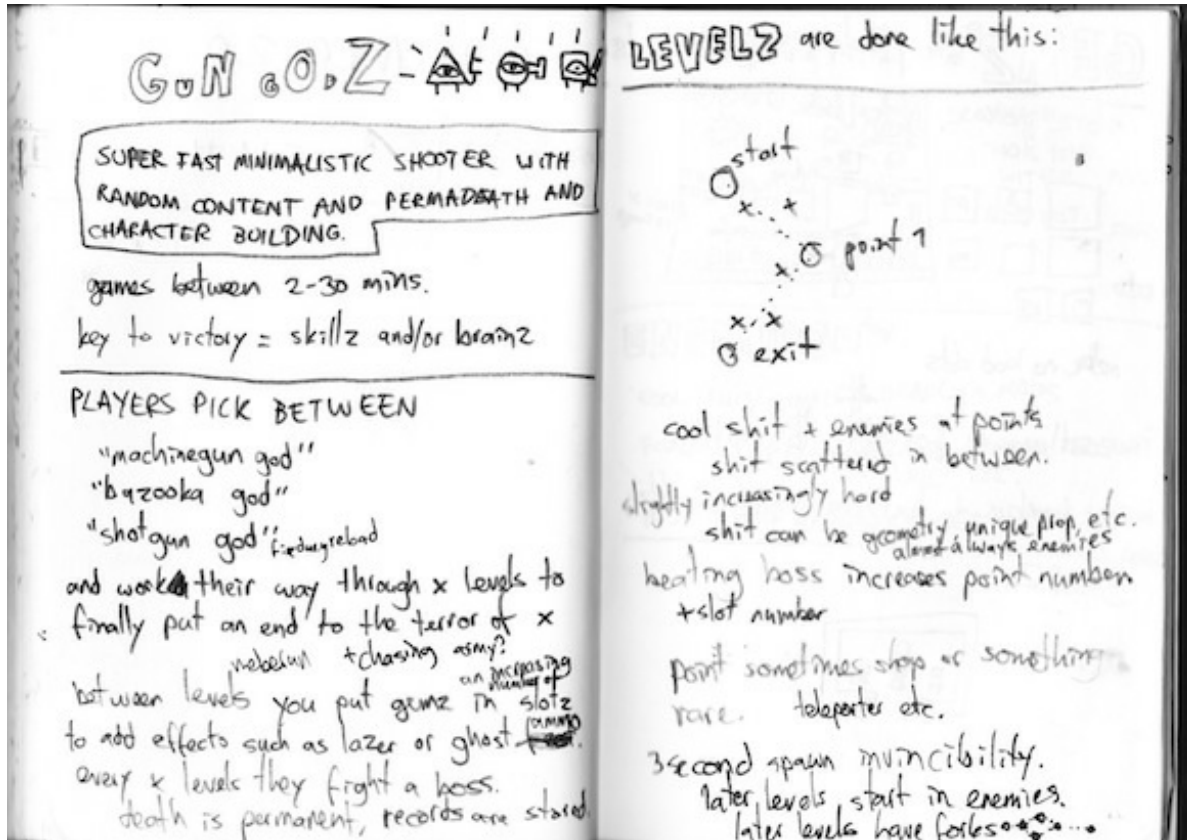
Gun Godz has more swag than you or we will ever have. Vlambeer has always existed due to a sort of dynamic of disagreement between the two of us -- Rami being a bit of a triple-A gamer, coder and business-minded person, and Jan Willem more of an artistic game designer. That dynamic is what -- in the end -- leads to what we make.

With *Gun Godz*, we tried to magnify this "do what you do best" attitude in the style of the game. We brought together a diverse set of influences: our artist-in-crime, Dutch pixel artist and shooter-hater Paul "Pietepiet" Veer, Finnish "wrong but lovely electro" music wonder Jukio "KOZILEK" Kallio, and finally, American rapper Adam "Doseone" Drucker.

Instead of wasting this diversity by telling them what to do, we gave all of them a general idea of what we were going to create and the technical limitations. We really believe that if you get freelancers to work on a game, you should allow them to have total creative freedom. They're better at what they do than we are -- otherwise we wouldn't have needed them.

Paul's dislike for shooters allowed him to create a truly fresh style -- it's a bit *Wolfenstein 3-D* but way more intricate,

vibrant and alive. Jukio started making gangster raps in a non-existent Venusian language, which turned out to fit the mood perfectly. Adam ended up rapping an amazing theme song and doing all the sound effects and voice acting.



What Went Wrong

1. The First World

Most of the levels in *Gun Godz* were made chronologically. Work started with the first level in the first area, and the last level we put our hands on was the secret level of the final area. While working, we got better at making levels, going all out with the tools we had; the final area has some of the most intense battles and interesting uses of enemies.

We decided to go with the old-school "introduce a new weapon or enemy in pretty much every level" -- which also allowed us to work with tools we knew as we started a new level. The basic enemies were in the game from day one, so by the time we had finished the first levels, we knew how to place them for cool battles.

While the early levels all have limited possibilities when it comes to enemies and weapons, we made a few mistakes. The first area in the game is the jail environment, where players have just escaped from their imprisonment. Players fight their way through the sewers, past the basements of the hotel, and finally to the top of the hotel of the hip-hop executive and Gun God for a final confrontation. The only thing is that in the first world, we used the bar elements to make cells. This makes it seem like the first three levels have a lot of corridors.

In hindsight, we probably should have given players a chance to get used to the game in a super-basic environment, not in a place where it looks like you could get lost easily. The cells slow down movement in the first world a bit and make people expect a different pace from the rest of the game.

One might argue that it's not bad to start the game slowly, but our game is about going fast. The game picks up speed once the player gets to second world, a sewer -- even though we designed the worlds in packs of three and

made the first level of a new world easier than the last level of the previous world.

This caused a notable difficulty spike in the second level of the sewer world -- instead of running into rooms guns blazing, which is exactly the optimal strategy, people carefully peek around corners to see if the cell is empty.

2. The Rat King

The Rat King Baby is the first boss in *Gun Godz*. It's the first time any enemy sprite is bigger than 16 by 16 pixels. We really wanted to put a nice spectacular finish to the first half of the game and make sure that people who kill the Rat King are invested in playing through until the end of the game.

The Rat King shoots beams of fireballs at you, and spawns two tentacles with rocket launchers that go underwater and chase you down sewer corridors. Every now and the Rat King Baby dives under the dirty water, sending huge shockwaves of sewage to chase you as he reemerges.

Our issue with the Rat King is that it is the only enemy that has an invulnerable state. Players are supposed to shoot and destroy the tentacles, after which the Rat King Baby starts crying, allowing the player to damage him. After a short while of vulnerability, the Rat King dives under water, comes back up and spawns two new tentacles. That pattern repeats until either the player or the Rat King dies.

Communicating this turned out to be tough. We tried giving him two big eyes in his belly, which fit the mutant/Total Recall style our artist, Paul, went for. These eyes open up when he is vulnerable -- eyes being a classic weak spot.

That turned out to be rather ineffective. When the Rat King appears, playtesting revealed that people don't take a good look at the Rat King when they first encounter it. They panic. We lowered its damage and health to counter that and got Adam to create clear sound effects for damage, and used a lack of sound effects to indicate the Rat King was in its invulnerable state.

While it isn't perfect, in the current state people will figure out the invulnerability state as soon as they reach it for the first time -- but they might still hug the corners and waste all their ammo on an invulnerable enemy for a few tries before figuring the whole thing out.

This might not sound like a big problem for an old-school shooter, but player expectations have shifted. Nowadays, players often expect big, glowy weak spots and contextual popups that explain the pattern.

We're lucky that the people pledging to Venus Patrol are people that appreciate the type of game we were making. They had invested not just in our game, but in the ideas behind Venus Patrol. They are willing to deal with our game. They even have the attention span of gamers from 10 years ago. We love the Venus Patrol supporters for that.

Still, we shouldn't have used this one-off invulnerability system.



3. Scope

Gun Godz was something we did for free to support *Venus Patrol*, so we had scoped the top-down roguelike to be done in October. Of course, at that point, *Vlambeer* happened and we suddenly found ourselves working on a full-scale old-school first person shooter.

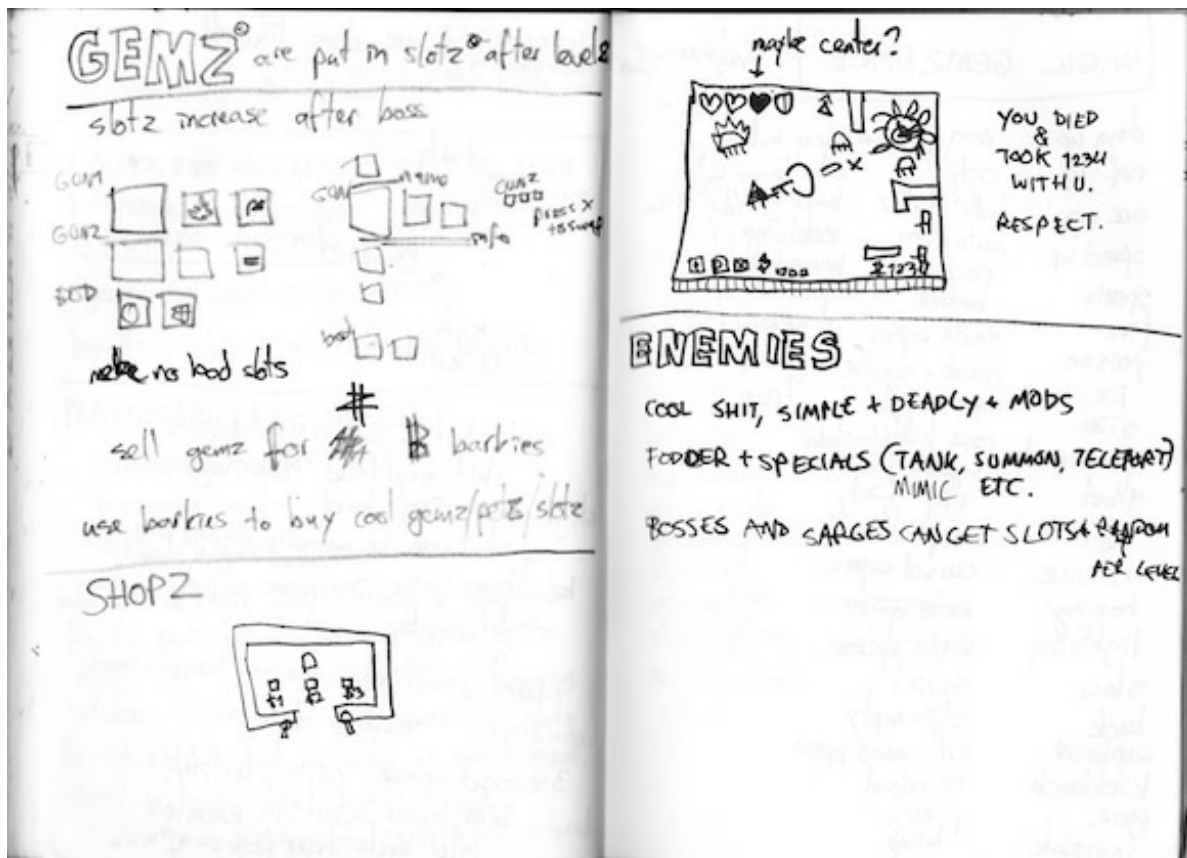
That switch was a tough one. We needed to convince the team and the people around us that we didn't need to do new things with the gameplay on this one -- we were going to focus on doing good things with gameplay on this one. There's tons of forced innovation. In such an environment, taking a step back and just making a really good shooter felt like a refreshing thing to do.

When we were done and the dust had settled, we tried to run through the game and perfect it, collecting every of the 52 triangles hidden in the game. It took Jan Willem three hours to do so. Rami is still trying to get his hands on the last few.

4. Running Too Many Projects at Once

Gun Godz happened right in the wake of a cloning controversy, in which our game *Radical Fishing* was cloned and rushed to the App Store by some San Francisco company. That entire episode demotivated us, putting our own iOS version of *Radical Fishing*, *Ridiculous Fishing*, on hold. Sadly, that demotivation echoed through in our other projects, delaying *Super Crate Box* iOS, *Serious Sam: The Random Encounter* and *Gun Godz*.

As things started to pick up again and our motivation started returning, we were suddenly working on four big projects at once. That turned out to be too much.



5. It Made Us Listen to Tupac

Before we made *Gun Godz* we rarely used the word "yo", never picked up the phone with the Venusian "wakkala", and we most certainly never replied to text messages with "aight". This is something we'll have to live with for the rest of our lives -- or probably until the end of this year.

We strive to leave a little mark in culture -- and with *Gun Godz*, we did that. Quite unexpectedly, it was our own.

Conclusion

Jan Willem had a dream during development where Vlambeer was invited to a barbeque for young, talented people at 50 Cent's huge crib. He thoroughly enjoyed that dream.

Making *Gun Godz* was a blast -- but a blast to the face. Development went smoothly, but we ended up making a way bigger game than we expected. Making a big game like this for only 1500 outspoken people takes a lot of effort and does not get you all the standard "nice reviews everywhere" instant reward. Development, as usual, killed us.

We spent the first five minutes today watching the [first video](#) of *Gun Godz* on YouTube. Someone did a speed run and completely crushed our par times. Simple things like that make it all worth it.

Gun Godz is probably one of the coolest games we have ever made. We love it. We are still dead serious about what this is all about. We believe it still stands strong as the best hip hop-inspired shooter since *50 Cent: Bulletproof*.

Peace out, bitches.

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