

Postmortem: Vicious Cycle's Matt Hazard: Blood Bath and Beyond



By Eric Peterson

[Eric Peterson, president and CEO of Vicious Cycle, recounts the ups and downs of making the PSN and XBLA parody video game Blood Bath and Beyond, and explains important lessons learned in the development of the studio's first downloadable game.]

Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard (2009, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360) was an experiment in video game humor that had never really been tried before. Even though the game itself didn't turn out to be exactly what we wanted it to be, we were encouraged by the fact that many people "got" what we were trying to do with the story and Matt Hazard, a self-aware video game character who is the star of dozens of (made-up) games dating back to the earliest days of the video game industry.

We wanted to give Matt another chance to win gamers' hearts, so with *Blood Bath and Beyond* (BBB) we took him back to his side-scrolling roots and made a simpler, more action-oriented game that upped the ante on gameplay while retaining (and enhancing) the tongue-in-cheek approach that was the most creative and unique element in the previous game.

The critical response is definitely better this time around. But, even though we made great strides toward making Matt Hazard a household name (at least in gaming circles), the development of BBB had its ups and downs... just like every other game ever made.

What Went Right

1. Not Letting a Good Feature Slip Away

One of our early design ideas was to include the ability to take cover and then shoot into the background. We implemented a few test cases and started refining this mechanic, and tried numerous control schemes to make it feel fluid.

After a few months of trying out different ideas the concept just wasn't meshing well with the fast-paced action. Getting in and out of cover and avoiding so many enemies was frustrating and too sluggish.

What happened next probably happens to a lot of developers: you have to make a decision to continue to try and fix the issue or dump it altogether. Because we couldn't get this to fit into the game properly, we abandoned the concept and forged on with other important priorities.

Months later, when the game was feeling balanced, we revisited the original idea of cover and firing into the background. However, instead of trying to force the first idea we had back into the game, we decided to go with something more responsive and *Contra*-esque.



We simplified the idea and decided to use one button to allow you to shoot into the background. By implementing the mechanic this way, we were allowing the player to keep moving and avoid incoming fire while also attacking foes in the background.

By never losing sight of something we originally wanted to have in the game, we were able to add an extra dimension to our sidescrolling shooter to set it apart from the competition.



2. Bells and Whistles within the Tech

Since our goal was to create a fast-paced action game that was reminiscent of an old 2D coin-muncher, our technology needed to accomplish what it had never done in any of our previous games, run locked at 60 frames a second.

We needed it to behave like a sprite-based product and provide enough on-screen enemies and projectiles to be comparable to the games we were inspired by -- *Metal Slug* and *Contra*. If the game couldn't run at a high framerate then it just wouldn't cut it. The game would look sluggish and just not match up to its 2D predecessors.

Games like *Bionic Commando Rearmed* and *Shadow Complex* have recently raised the visual bar for downloadable games, which added yet another layer of difficulty to the equation. *BBB* needed cutting-edge graphics, lighting and post-processing effects in order to make the proper impact.

At the end of the day, *BBB* achieved its technological goals, we shipped with the framerate we desired, we avoided screen tearing, we had some of our best lighting to date, and we supported anti-aliasing.

3. Parody

One of the more obvious things that went right with *BBB* was including parody in the writing, the visuals, and the gameplay.

Eat Lead was a good first attempt at parody, but we didn't have the opportunity to include everything that we wanted in terms of visuals and in-game features.

The voiceover and writing covered a lot of ground, the enemy types and bosses were fun parodies of familiar game

archetypes, and even Matt Hazard's friends in the game paid homage to some of our favorite game characters.

However, we didn't really capture the environments the way we would have liked. We had one small hallway that was reminiscent of the original *Wolfenstein*, but that was about all we were able to do.

In *BBB*, we had the opportunity to add another layer to what we did in *Eat Lead*. We were able to emulate the art style of many of the games we paid homage to within each of our levels. There was a little *BioShock*, some *Team Fortress*, *Portal*, *Okami*, and more. We even parodied some gameplay this time around -- like the *Lunar Lander* mission, which goes back to the earliest days of video games.

Obviously, there's still a lot more we'd like to do to expand on the concept. Making a game where every level isn't in 3D would definitely be something that we would be up for. We'd also like to include even more varied types of gameplay mechanics. For example, we'd love to let people actually play some of Matt's games like *Hazmat Carts*, *Conflict of the Deities*, and *Soak 'Em*, so that every level had something different to experience.

It would be ambitious, but the inclusion of these elements and different game genres would make it be the ultimate parody game. Hopefully, we will get the opportunity to create a third title and bring this concept to fruition.



4. Difficulty, Old School Style

We created three levels of difficulty in this game: Wussy, Damn This is Hard, and Fuck This Shit. The preferred and recommended level of choice is Damn This is Hard. Wussy is for all you pansies out there that can't remember what a hard game was actually like, and FTS is for hardcore gamers who want the ultimate bragging rights on the leaderboards.

Every level was played countless times internally by our staff. We would take team members' suggestions, formulate comments, and tweak levels as needed. Then, after the modifications were done to sections or entire levels, we would play the game again and again and again. The game was played and balanced for both single player and co-op.

Once the game was near completion, we had the daunting task of proving that the game could be beaten on every mode and on every difficulty level. Beating the easy and normal modes weren't difficult, but beating Story Mode on the FTS difficulty level was the one that posed the greatest challenge.

In order to guarantee that we could beat the game on this mode, we had our best players on the staff battle it out and prove that it was indeed possible. Once that was confirmed, our job was done.

As of the time I'm writing this, I believe only one person has a leaderboard record on XBLA and PS3 on the FTS difficulty. The player on the XBLA board is one of our team members, who got his XBLA copy and raced to get his name up in the big lights. The PS3 champion is not a developer here at Vicious, but we are very impressed with the speed that he/she achieved this record along with their high score. These guys are truly hardcore, old school gamers.

5. Boss Fights

One thing that we really enjoyed doing with *BBB* was creating the boss fights and balancing them to feel like they were actually foes that were worth defeating. And after a few missteps on *Eat Lead's* bosses, we really wanted to make sure that none of the bosses in *BBB* were excruciating and frustrating. (Tentacle Beast of Tramm, anyone?)

We spent a lot of time discussing these boss fights from a design perspective, working out the boss behaviors and then playtesting the scenarios every few weeks. The entire studio would get the assignment to boot up the game on a Friday and play the latest boss fight. As with other playtesting we did, people offered positive and negative feedback that allowed us to tweak the necessary portions of the fight and ultimately create something that we felt was a satisfying experience.

Most of the boss encounters in *BBB* last just long enough where you anticipate that you might not have enough lives or ammunition left, but you just manage to squeak by and get to the next level. As in classic action games, the player eventually learns the patterns and is able to avoid the incoming attacks. When the player defeats a boss, it feels really rewarding.

What Went Wrong

1. Underestimating Downloadable Games

After making as many retail games as we have made in the past ten years, we figured making a downloadable game would be a snap. We were wrong in that assumption and we made quite a few mistakes as a result.

We assumed that since we were mimicking design elements from many titles before us, that it would be easy to replicate the gameplay and get the feel of the game right from the onset.

Because we made these assumptions -- and a few other mistakes -- the project that was supposed to be a breeze quickly turned into a game that nearly spun out of control.

Two months into an eight month project, we could see that things were slipping out of our grasp. People were overwhelmed with the tasks at hand, the game's vision was getting muddy, and progress was coming to a standstill.

Once we realized this was happening, we shuffled the deck a bit, added more people to the team, and tried to course correct the issues by going back to the basics. Fortunately, these course corrections were successful.

2. A Similar Title Hit the Market and Changed the Landscape

Many people may think that *BBB* drew inspiration from (or copied) *Shadow Complex*, but the reality was that we were developing *BBB* before we even heard about *Shadow Complex*. In fact, the original release dates were going to be very close to one another.

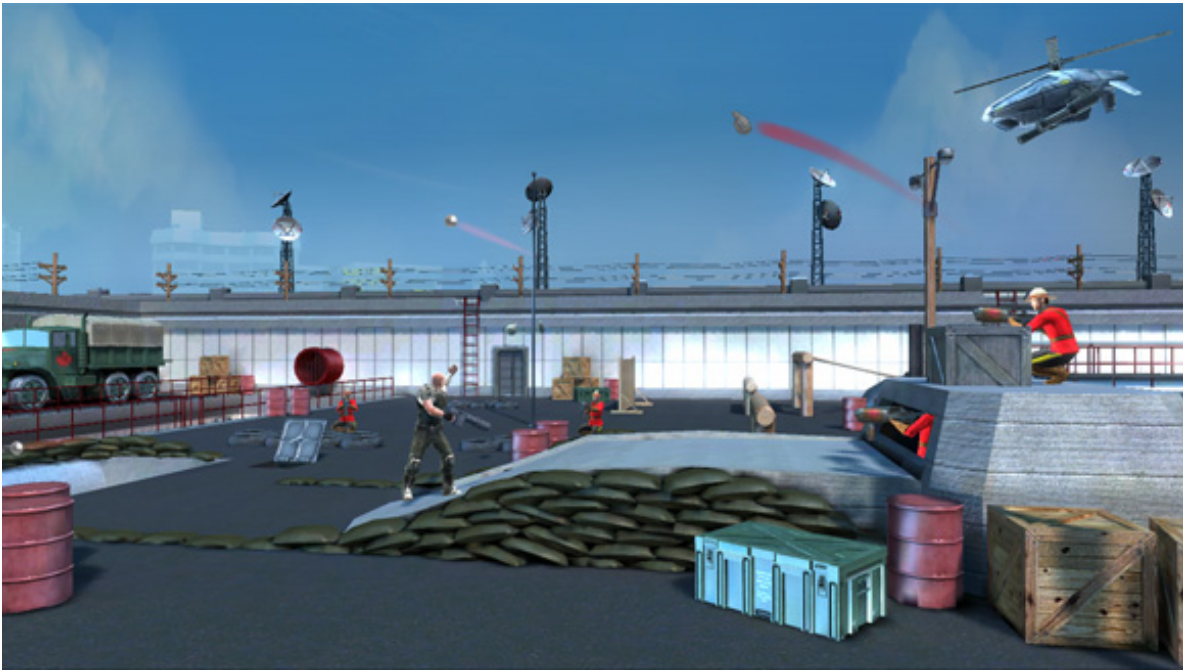
Initially, the concept to create *BBB* was similar to *Bionic Commando Rearmed*. We wanted to create a retro-style game with updated graphics on the current gen consoles. That was our goal.

Bionic Commando was, itself, based on its predecessors. We ended up following the example of classic arcade games like *Metal Slug* and *Contra*, which concentrated on fast-paced action. *Shadow Complex* went for a serious *Metroid* or *Castlevania* formula. All three products updated the visuals to the current 3D graphical standard.

BBB ended up being worked on for a few extra months after *Shadow Complex's* release and was held for a post-holiday launch. That decision led to some positive and negative effects.

The good news was that we were able to make co-op work smoothly, we got a few last-minute gameplay ideas incorporated, the technology performed great, and the entire product was more polished on both platforms (Xbox 360 and PS3). This was all thanks to the extra time and manpower that we dedicated to the game.

The bad news was that *Shadow Complex* upped the ante in areas that we weren't focusing on, like production values, such as cinematic quality, and the amount of voiceover work that was normally included in a downloadable product.



3. Pacing and Action -- Some False Starts

The pacing of the game was another area where we tripped and stumbled initially. After the first few months of development, the game just wasn't fun. We had to step back from what we were making and really dissect and analyze the core gameplay.

For example, all of our enemies were coming in from the right and left of the screen. No one was entering from the top or bottom. We isolated one level from the game and started making alterations to the enemy spawn points.

We added some in the background. We had enemies coming in from the foreground. Some jumped off of trees, others climbed down rocky surfaces, and so on. We even included enemies that flew in from above and from the sides of the screen while others lunged out of the water to attack the player. Whatever we could creatively think of as an entry point for an enemy, we used.

Another gradual change we made over the course of the development of *BBB* was the pace and rate the enemy bullets came at you. It was very important to capture the feel of past products so that players felt that they were getting a similar experience.

Eventually, we slowed down the bullets being shot by enemies to a more manageable speed so that the player could dodge them. This added the fun of dodging and weaving incoming fire. At the same time, we decided to increase the

speed of the player's shots so that your rate of fire was faster than the enemy's. This made the game more fun to play and felt more responsive.

4. Over Budget, and a Bit Late

Due to some of the mishaps described above, an increased scope, and the fact that it took longer to feel out the fun factor of our game than we had anticipated, we crept over our allotted budget on both time and money.

We always try to be extremely conscious of our schedule and our finances, but things just weren't clicking initially with *BBB*, and those issues had to be rectified in order to deliver a better *Matt Hazard* experience.

We were determined to make it work and deliver on what we initially set out to do. Fortunately for us, we had available resources to pile on the project in order get the game done to our level of satisfaction.

The team swelled more as we hit Alpha and Beta, but we were able to reduce the team size once we entered the Gold stretch, moving our resources onto other projects.

Thankfully, our publisher, D3, worked with us to get consumers a more polished experience. We are grateful that we had this opportunity to build a game that people enjoy and to give Matt Hazard another chance to strut his stuff.

5. Not Including Online Co-op

At the time that we started the project, there were only a handful of titles available for download that actually supported online co-op, and since we had limited time and budget, we needed to make decisions about the scope of the game and plan accordingly. We had to decide how we could deliver the best possible experience to the player, so we concentrated our efforts on core gameplay, level design, boss fights and local co-op.

The number of bugs that could have surfaced from this feature could have easily meant weeks of additional QA time as well. We would have needed more time to test and implement this feature for network play in order to work out all of the kinks. It is one thing to find a bug in a local multiplayer experience, but hunting down the cause for an online bug is more intense and time consuming.

In addition, we also knew that it would be a bit of an uphill battle because our game was a very fast paced game and required quick reaction times to win and complete levels. Network latency could have caused issues that are potentially hard to solve. We didn't want to have characters popping around the screen or bullets appearing right in front of you with no time to avoid them, and so on. Problems like these could make the game unplayable or, at the very least, frustrating.

However, even with all of the challenges I just described we should have worked to get the feature in. It would have been a very difficult endeavor but would have added a lot of value to the title. If we get the opportunity for a sequel, we guarantee that we will have it there.



Conclusion

Blood Bath and Beyond taught us a lot of lessons in downloadable game development that we've taken to heart. We now know what it takes to make a good downloadable game, and we hope to put that knowledge to use next time to make a *great* online game.

We feel that by combining fast-paced, compelling gameplay inspired by some of the classic arcade side-scrollers of the past; the unique, quirky storyline and characters of the *Matt Hazard* universe; and a healthy dose of parody makes *BBB* a fun and memorable game.

We're really happy with the way that *BBB* turned out in the end... and definitely hope that someday in the near future it will be Hazard Time again.

Data Box

Developer: Vicious Cycle Software, Inc.

Publisher: D3 Publisher

Release Date: January 6, 2010 (XBLA); January 7, 2010 (PSN)

Platforms: XBLA and PSN

Number of Developers (can split this into full-time and contractors): 63 (Vicious Cycle), 6 external contractors including voice actors, 54 (D3)

Length of Development: originally slated for 7 months, but it lasted about 10 months.

Lines of Code: 500,000

Development Tools: 3DS Max, Photoshop, Vicious Engine, ZBrush, Visual Studio, Perforce, Sound Forge, Protools, Waves Plugins, GRM Tools

Any other interesting information (pizzas consumed, hours crunched, project restarts, softball matches won, etc): During the development cycle, some of our team members played softball against Epic and lost 21-8. We are pretty sure Epic had some of the New York Yankees playing for them that day.

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