The Evolution of Breakout

Since the creation of the genius game Breakout created in 1976 there have been many iterations of the famous Atari 2600 game. Even though many changes have been made to Breakout the core game play of destroying bricks with a bouncing ball while saving it with a player controlled “bat” still remains. So why is it then that brick breaking type games are continuing to be very successful in spite of Breakout being created three and a half decades ago? To explain why I will compare this to one of my favorite modern Breakout style games – Shatter. Shatter was an immensely successful hit when it was released on the PlayStation Network by Sidhe on July 23, 2009[[1]](#footnote-1) and continues to be one of the top selling brick breaking games of this generation.

The reason Shatter continues to sell so well is because it takes the good from Breakout and makes it better. But that is not all; it also deals with some of the main issues with the original Breakout very well. Take for example the issue in Breakout where the game would seem to take forever when trying to break the last brick because the player’s control of where the ball would go was quite limited. Shatter fixed this by adding in a method to change to physics of the game during game play by allowing the player to either “suck” or “blow” from the bat causing the direction of the ball to change (as along with changing the trajectory of certain other objects as well). This helped alleviate the issue of a boring end to most brick breaking games by quickening the pace of the overall game. Along with solving issues such as this Sidhe also added new features to the game to make Shatter feel like an entirely new experience.

In Shatter the player has the ability to launch multiple balls at once to a have a maximum of 4 balls in play at once. If two balls have the same trajectory they can combine to create an “unbreakaball”. An unbreakaball is one of the three types of balls (the first type is the standard ball which is the same as the original Breakout ball) which can penetrate through bricks instead of bouncing off of them to destroy them allowing the player to destroy more bricks in a shorter period of time. There is also another type of ball appropriately named “moveaball” as the player’s suck and blow effects affect the ball with much more force. Not only did Shatter change the type of balls in the game but it also added a slew of new features to the bricks themselves such as “bomb bricks”, “magnetic bricks”, “fan bricks” and many, many more (which I will allow you to discover yourself when you play this masterpiece game as I could write an entire novel on the amount of features and secret techniques in this game alone).

All though I did mention that I won’t tell you everything about Shatter I feel it necessary to divulge into a few major aspects of this game – story and bosses. When most people hear the words “brick breaker” the last thing most people think of is story and bosses. But Sidhe has done the unimaginable and taken brick breaking to an entirely new level. Admittedly the story in Shatter may not be very deep, but the simple fact that is has one, and tells it beautifully through sight and sound goes to show the amount of work put into the game the developers. Not only does Shatter have a story it also added in an interesting concept, bosses. With the inclusion of special techniques that can be used in game such as Shard Storm[[2]](#footnote-2), shielding[[3]](#footnote-3), shard deflecting[[4]](#footnote-4) and more the way each person plays the game is different and can be customized based on personal play style which extends through the games multiple modes (story, boss and bonus).

Lastly, the music is awe-inspiring and the visuals are stunning. With a soundtrack created by the electric musician Module and unbelievably beautiful graphics working in tandem the experience felt while playing Shatter is like none other. The 8-bit music influence in combination with gorgeous 3D backdrops and seamless 3D transitions between levels shows how far the inspiration of Breakout has taken Sidhe into creating their masterpiece.

Coming back to the core game play elements the issue of with today’s ability to use 3D technology in our games brings up an interesting discussion of whether 3D should be used whenever possible or not and I believe the developers at Sidhe made the correct decision to keep the game play of Shatter 2D[[5]](#footnote-5) due to the factor of game speed. Shatter is a very fast paced game and adding in a z-axis to the game play makes it much more difficult for the player to control a bat in 3D space (not to mention changes the entire feel of the game and makes the suck and blow physics of the game exponentially more difficult to program) therefore keeping the game play 2D allows for a faster paced game focusing more on enjoyment rather than difficulty. Sure Shatter may not be the most difficult game out there but Sidhe focused on the most important part of the game – the fun factor and nailed it perfectly. Keeping the game play 2D makes the Shatter experience much more enjoyable.

Interestingly enough one of the most under discussed aspects of games nowadays is the theme behind them and in brick breaking games there are almost no boundaries on what the theme can be. Shatter chose a space theme which makes sense naturally due to the futuristic Matrix-style[[6]](#footnote-6) story it has. If I were to create a brick breaking game I too would choose a space/futuristic theme as it allows for an easier explanation of special in game mechanics that wouldn’t typically make sense in any other time period so that I could add more functions to my game such as teleporting and whatnot.

Overall I absolutely love Shatter and highly suggest anyone who even remotely enjoys video games should give it a try as it ties in the past, present and future of video games very well.

1. A PC port was released on March 15, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shard Storm is a special technique that can be casted once the player’s power gauge has filled by collecting shard pieces through the use of either gravity or the suck technique. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The player can create a shield on their bat by holding down the shield button which slowly drains the power gauge but protects the bat from incoming blocks or enemy attacks. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An advanced technique where the player can deflect back incoming shard pieces by shielding while catching incoming shards to deal a scatter shot of damage. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The backgrounds being 3D do not affect the game play and are purely a visual. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Matrix is a 1999 science-fiction action film written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)