

Postmortem: Capcom/GRIN's Bionic Commando Rearmed

By Ben Judd

[In this in-depth Gamasutra postmortem, Capcom's Ben Judd analyzes work on 2D downloadable update [Bionic Commando Rearmed](#), which debuted on Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network and PC in 2008, examining everything from pricing to online play decisions.]

Bringing a franchise back from the dead is never an easy thing. There are probably more cases of games that have gone horribly wrong than games that have done it right. In the case of *Bionic Commando*, we knew it was a franchise that had a small cult following but wasn't even really financially lucrative back in the late '80s when it was originally released in the arcades and on the NES.

Before development on the 3D game even began I know there would be two major groups of consumers that we needed to consider:

1) Hardcore fans

By "hardcore" I mean people who would be so caught up in the nostalgia of the original game that any minor change from the original scenario, design, or graphics would immediately incur their wrath on message boards and throughout the gaming community.

2) Average (not-so-super) Joe gamer

Since the series is over 20 years old, most gamers who started gaming in the PlayStation era would have no idea what *Bionic Commando* was or why the people in the first group were so fond of it. Trying to convince these consumers that *Bionic Commando* would be a great experience would be very similar to pushing an original title (i.e. the name brand value wouldn't help out much).

Unfortunately, there just aren't enough fans of the original to make a full-fledged AAA 3D *Bionic Commando* a "can't miss" success, so we needed to make choices that would get someone excited about the game from the ground up.

Too many inside jokes would alienate the people who were considering picking up *Bionic Commando*. Too few would alienate the fans. So the big question was "what line do we walk in order to get both sides excited?"



The answer ended up being a very reasonably-priced digital download title based totally on the original game -- *Bionic Commando: Rearmed*.

What Went Right

1. The Announcement Trailer

Sometimes if a trailer is good enough, it can get everyone excited about a game right from day one. It was the perfect example of Capcom Japan and GRIN working together in the best way possible. Ideas on both ends were considered and in the end I still think it is one of the best digital download trailers you will find.

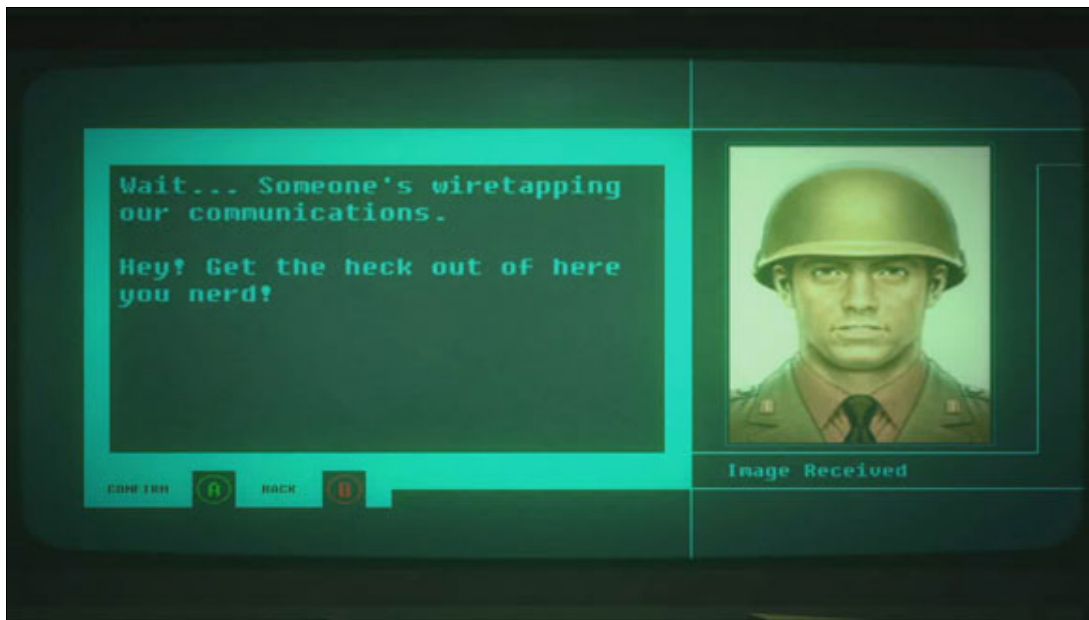
We started with the key idea of showing a transition of the original game into *Rearmed*. The obvious thing that makes *Bionic Commando* special is the swing mechanic so we asked GRIN if they would be able to do a transition from the original game into *Rearmed* in mid-swing.

Not only did they pull it off with flying colors, but Simon Viklund, the director and sound director, blended the original music into the new remixed music so well that we received requests from fans asking for that version of the stage 1 music.

Also, I'd like to say that even though we made the initial game announcement at IGN, both 1UP (bows head in moment of silence), and GameSpot allowed us to put the taglines from their reviews of the original game into the trailer as well which really helped the trailer stand out.

Of course, the other thing I'm happy about is the final communicator text, which talks about being able to use the retro costume in the 3D version if you own *Bionic Commando Rearmed*. We knew the trailer was going to get a lot of views, so we wanted to get the word out that for those fans who were having a problem with the 3D version's character design that there was a way to play as the classic Spencer.

Ultimately, if you are a fan of the original game then you would most likely buy *Rearmed*, since it is total fan service. So this way, if you bought the 3D version you'd get to play it "retro-style" as well. Getting that information out to all of the *Bionic Commando* fans was key, and this trailer allowed us to do it in a really great way, including the classic "Get the heck out of here you nerd" line.



2. Release Price

With *BCR*, the concept was to make the game something people who weren't familiar with the original game would want to buy on impulse. While I know the game could have been priced at \$15 and still sold to the hardcore *Bionic Commando* fans, I'd like to emphasize that the original 1988 game was not successful, so we didn't think we could outright ignore consumers who hadn't played the original.

These are people who were used to paying \$10 for a downloadable title and we were sure they would hold reservations about a \$15 price tag.

After seeing the initial reaction of people to *Braid's* price, the \$10 price seemed to be the right choice (although, as it turns out, *Braid* has sold well even at the \$15 price point -- a lot of that has been due to the game's high quality and accolades that it continues to pull in).

As the game continued to improve in quality, several people, both internal and external, began to suggest that we charge \$15 instead of \$10. In my little experience as a producer who was constantly trying to bring people into our community site, I decided to open up the idea of pricing to the consumers.

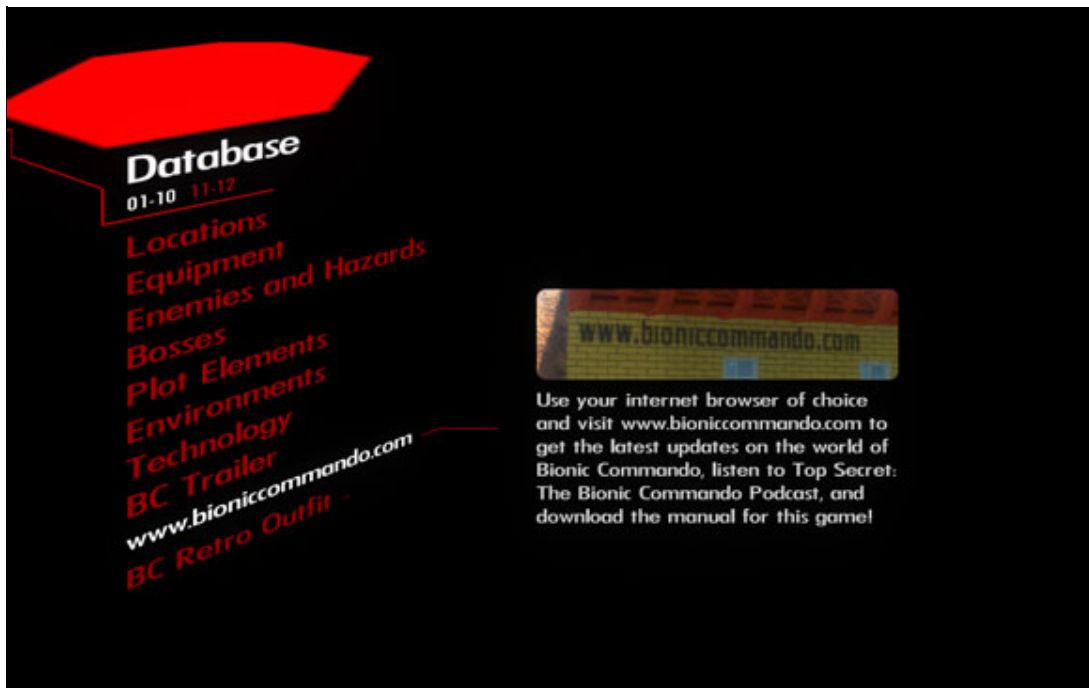
Yes, I realize that people will generally choose the cheaper price. But if enough people had selected \$15, that is what we would have gone with.

In the end I think the price, coupled with the high quality of the game, is what helped push the game into the top 10 XBLA titles and gained us not only some respect from the *Bionic Commando* fans but also created a lot of goodwill for the 3D *Bionic Commando*, also created by GRIN.

3. The Database

This, like the announcement trailer and release price, is also one of the points that I feel was both a major success and a major failure. The reason it was a success was that it provided a way for us to not only introduce some "story hooks" for the 3D game, but also to tie up all of the various story inconsistencies from the original game into one official cohesive storyline.

We all like a good action game, but adding a little motivation in the form of story never hurts. What made it even better (in my eyes) was that the database was never forced upon the player. If they didn't want to read it, they didn't have to. Of course, linking an achievement to it didn't hurt motivation...



4. Not Including Online Play

As frustrating as all the "no online play = no buy" comments were to read, in hindsight, this was the right choice. After seeing the large amount of headaches, additional production time, and cost that comes with adding online, I'm glad we made the choice not to include it.

Bugs in online play have created a great amount of frustration in other popular digital titles and even have plagued our own titles before. Yes, I understand that your average consumer wants everything they want and they want it for free. But, it's a huge balancing act and I'm convinced that the amount of additional sales would not have been equivalent to the additional pains.

To give GRIN credit, even though I initially put pressure on them to add in online co-op, they gave it to me straight. They knew that adding online would be a huge amount of risk, and as we got into the arduous submission phase, I realized how right they were.

As a producer, even if the company is an outside developer, you have to know when to listen. This is one time I'm glad I did.



5. Making It Into The 360 "Summer Of Arcade" Program... Barely

When I say, "barely", I don't mean "by a matter of days"; it was more like a matter of hours. The number of meals I skipped and sleep I missed worrying whether we would be able to pass or not has probably shaved a good three years off my life.

But, much to Microsoft's credit, they really gave us a lot of leeway to slide into home plate during the final stretch. I had dreaded the submission process because of all of the bad rumors I had heard, but in the end it was probably one of the best parts of the production.

You got a sense that Microsoft knew a good game when they saw it and they were determined to make this campaign work.

Also, 2008 was the year that digital titles really started to shine, and come into their own as a truly viable game category alongside packaged products. Microsoft definitely struck when the iron was hot and I think it paid off for everyone in the program.

Marketing is a huge part of the puzzle of selling a popular game, and since you can't really utilize TV to sell a smaller digital title, getting that online space is key. This program made that happen and it's one of the major things I attribute to the success of *Rearmed*.

What Went Wrong

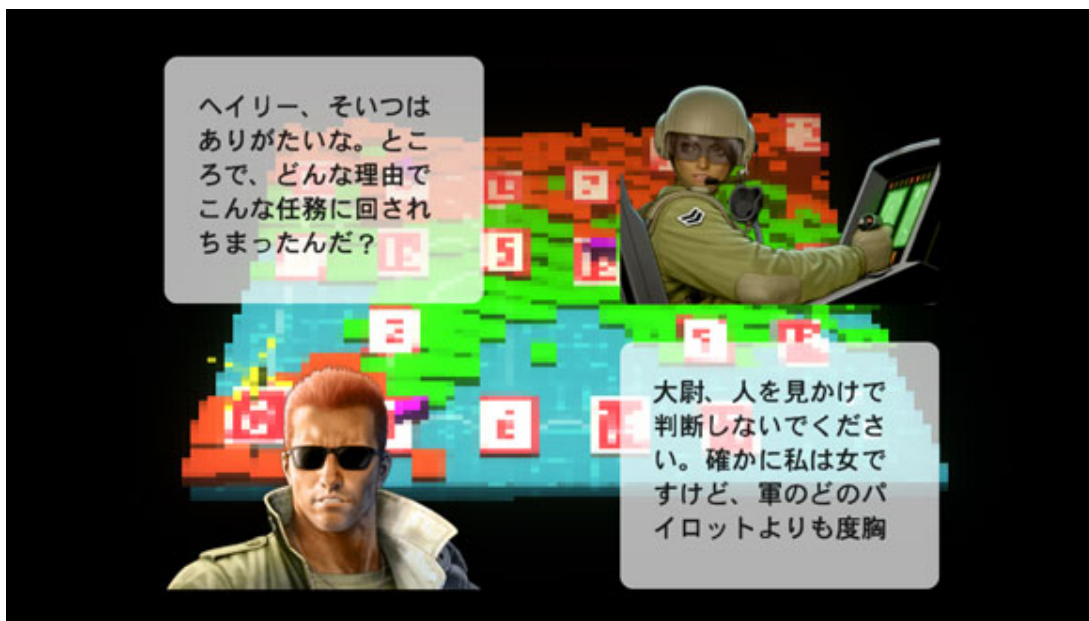
1. The Announcement Trailer

As with everything in this industry, you have to take the negatives with the positives. So, while the announcement trailer was definitely one of our brightest moments, it also created a major problem.

I'm a big proponent of presenting something fully translated. Maybe it's due to my localization roots, but at any rate, for the trailer we decided to create versions for every language the game was going to be released in. That's six. Unfortunately, that means submitting six different versions.

Add to that the fact that you need an ESRB rating on the North American version, shouldn't have it on the European version, and that there is a different logo for the Japanese version and you end up having to encode lots of trailers. Submitting the various metadata was also no easy task.

Although I'm proud of the end result, when I think about the amount of work we put into it, I don't think the end-result necessarily justified all the extra work for all involved. From now on, I'll stick with English and Japanese only.



2. Release Price

The dilemma with this one had to do with the process we took when deciding the release price. Let's just say that I should have crossed my Ts and dotted my Is before opening up the "price poll" for *BCR*. After the fact, I was told that several internal and external people thought that \$10 was too cheap.

While I stand by the decision in price, I should have definitely done some more internal groundwork before moving forward with the decision.

Being a producer is a political game, and you need to have people that support you internally. In the end, I think this choice may have burned some bridges for me that may not be easily fixed.

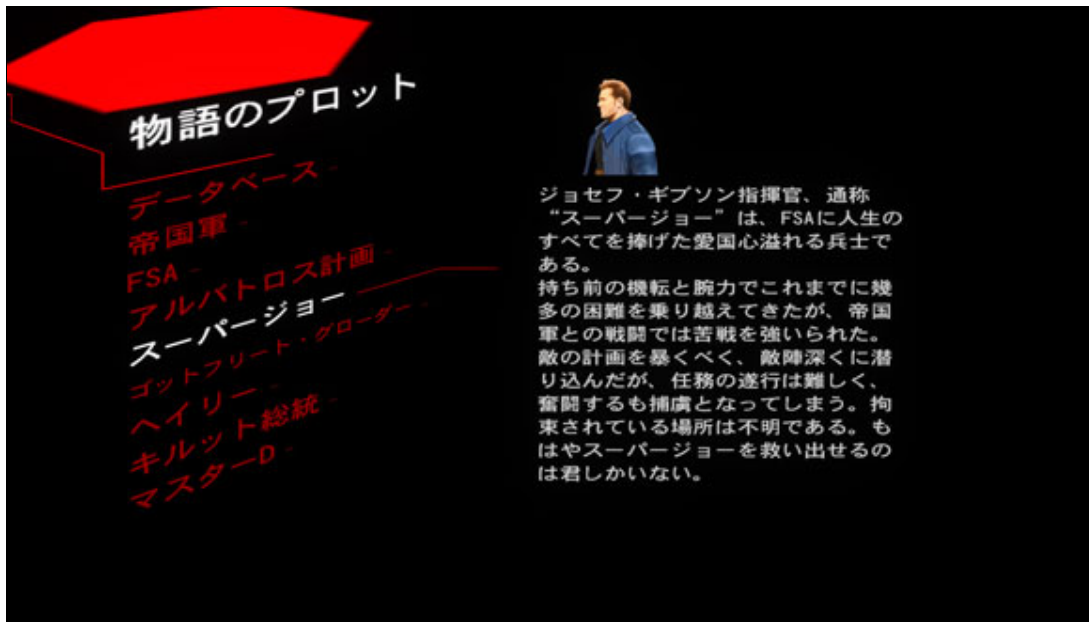
3. The Database

In the end, text is a slippery slope. The amount of localization, planning, and programming is no easy task. I know the programmers on the title thought this was a bad idea from the start, and certainly it's not the type of feature that will sell a lot of additional units, but we went forward with it anyways.

It created a lot of page break mistakes and of course the Japanese localization was a colossal headache. It's funny, but even though I worked in localization for several years, I never did it the other way around (English into Japanese). All of the games I worked on were Japanese into English.

With Japanese you basically have to code in where each line breaks by hand. English and other Western languages allow for automatic line breaks quite easily, but Japanese is incredibly time consuming.

Capcom is a Japanese publisher, so we needed to have a Japanese version, but what a huge amount of work to put into a single language when compared to the other languages!



4. Creating A Censored Version

The original game ends with a classic image of last boss Master D's head exploding. The money shot. It had to be in there or the fans would be extremely disappointed. But at what cost?

The cost was a censored version. I can't think of any other game that would be a teen-rated game with the exception of three seconds at the end.

Had we not included the over-the-top head popping last scene, then we would have only needed one version, and could have saved bug-checking an entire new version of the game.

This is another area where I wonder if the amount of time and money we put into creating a censored version was really equivalent to the sales that version achieved.

It could also be said that not including the final scene would have been the right financial choice... But as many people in this industry will tell you, sometimes making a game is about doing something you love and doing it because you think it will be fun.

This was the one part of the game that I allowed the "gamer" within to make the final call. Yes... we need to see that head explode!

...and it still puts a smile on my face.



5. The Schedule

This is probably a trap that many other publishers have fallen into as well. There is a tendency to think of digital titles as much smaller than their packaged brethren but in the end, they can be just as much work.

The initial schedule we started out with was quite aggressive but something we thought was manageable. In the end we underestimated the submission process, number of bugs, and multiple versions that needed to be submitted and missed our mark by about four months.

That wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't opened my big mouth and stated that we were releasing in May... something that could also easily be listed as another big "mistake"... fortunately, we only have to list 5.

Swinging into the Digital Age

I would say that you can view a project in a great number of ways. Financially. Critically. Staff management. Etc. Etc. But one of most important things is that we achieved our goals of satisfying most of the old-school *Bionic Commando* fans, generating some hype and recognition for the franchise, and, most importantly, we brought back a great series that otherwise would not have seen the light of day ever again.

Personally, I learned that some of your greatest successes can also be your greatest failures, so it's never a bad thing to try out new ideas... you just need to think about each and every risk involved in each choice you make.

Although, in the end, it's not nearly as risky as swinging with a bionic arm over a pit of lava... That's one risk best left in the world of games.



Game Data

Developer: GRIN

Publisher: Capcom

Platform: XBLA, PSN, PC

Release date: August 13, 2008

Development time: 12 months

Number of full time developers at peak:27 (Average 15)

Hardware: Intel PC platforms, Nvidia GeForce cards, X360 development platforms, Sony PS3 development platforms.

Software: Max, Maya, Photoshop, MotionBuilder.

Technology: Diesel Engine, Bink, Nvidia PhysX

Number of files: 10 209

Lines of native C++ code: 335,975

Lines of script code: 158,203

Lines of XML code: 1,902,987

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