



A hunting arcade challenges boundaries with bullets

BIG BUCK HUNTER

BY JASON FAGONE
PHOTO BY FRED BENENSON

“In the latter part of my school life I became passionately fond of shooting; I do not believe that any one could have shown more zeal for the most holy cause than I did for shooting birds. How well I remember killing my first snipe, and my excitement was so great that I had much difficulty in reloading my gun from the trembling of my hands. This taste long continued, and I became a very good shot.”

— Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*

Big *Buck Hunter Pro* is an arcade game with no characters, no mythology, no lush video, very little mission, and no story. What there is is a gun. On the screen, photorealistic animals—bucks, elk, white-tail deer, prong-horned antelope, big-horn sheep, moose, blackbirds, bluebirds, skunks, foxes, rabbits, wolves, squirrels, possums, and raccoons—scurry back and forth and wait for you to shoot them with the gun.

That's pretty much it. *Big Buck Hunter Pro* is exactly what it appears to be: a hunting simulator, a more varied and lushly rendered version of the NES classic *Duck Hunt*. And yet, over the last four years alone, gamers have fed more than \$50 million into *Big Buck Hunter Pro* machines, a few crumpled dollar bills at a time. It may well be the most lucrative arcade shooter the world has ever seen. When you factor in the other versions of

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the game—in addition to *Big Buck Hunter Pro*, there's the original *Big Buck Hunter*, plus *Big Buck Hunter II*, *Big Buck Hunter 2006: Call of the Wild*, and *Big Buck Hunter Safari*, together comprising about 40,000 deployed consoles across the 50 states—you're talking "a quarter of a billion dollars, probably, in coin drop," says George Petro, the game's creator. "That's conservative."

It's worth asking why Americans are so crazy about such a simple videogame, and an arcade game at that. And maybe the best place to start is with the *Buck Hunter* gun, because the gun is the first thing you notice when you walk up to the nearly seven-foot-tall *Buck Hunter* cabinet—probably in a bar, probably having just set down

your Brooklyn Lager on the rim of the pool table. (The game's design is simple because it has to be; now that there are virtually no more arcades, the main players of arcade games are people in bars, who are apt to be playing while drunk.)

So: the gun.

It's large, as these things go. You feed in your dollar bill and pick it up, feel its heft. And it feels nice. Sort of the way your iPhone feels nice. You're immediately aware of its plastic friendliness. Even if you're not a hunter, even if you've never shot a gun before in your life—and if you're the median *Buck Hunter* player, this describes you accurately, a phenomenon we'll get to in a minute—you instantly understand that some serious thought has gone into this gun. It's a good feel for your trigger hand, the way it rests on the palm. There's a kind of curvature on the back of the gun that your thumb and forefinger wrap around. The front-to-back

balance is right. It doesn't feel chintzy or cheap. And in fact it has been designed to be virtually indestructible; the same way that AK-47s are built to shoot cleanly even if the stock is caked with mud, this gun has been assembled with an eye to the rigors of the American bar environment (as Petro says, "Who knows *what* people will do to the gun").

But of course all you want to do with the gun right now is shoot it, expertly. You want to hold it steady, pull the trigger, and watch the screen flash as it registers your bullet hitting home, the

buck slumping over dead on the grass. Then again. And again. When you pull back on the pump to reload, it clicks just so, and there's actually some tension, which means that the spring is calibrated beautifully. "It feels just good enough so that it feels like you actually *did* something," says Petro.

There's a reason the gun is such a pleasing object. Petro, 44, used to work at Midway, the king of arcade manufacturers, maker of all the great monopolizers of '80s-era youthful evenings: *Tron*, *Ms. Pac Man*, *Rampage*, and on and on.

"Gun games are kind of my forte," he says. He'd made a bunch prior to *Buck Hunter*, including *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*; and his current company, Play Mechanix, which he founded, is full

of old arcade and pinball guys who understand weight and actuator switches. They're gamers, not hunters; "We just knew that hunting is popular."

In 1999, Petro and colleagues dummied up about 25 percent of a *Buck Hunter* prototype and wheeled that first cabinet into a bar in Aurora, Ill. near the Play Mechanix office called Pocket's. "It was like instant freak-out," Petro says. If you believe Petro, guys in the bar were lined up to play it before he'd even unloaded it from the hand truck. "It's a strange thing with a coin-operated game," he says. "It's not like home games. We actually get a chance to see people playing it." Petro stood in the bar and watched the first guy pump in his first quarter (the game only cost 25 cents back then). "The game abruptly ended, because we didn't have a lot in there. It said, 'Thanks for playing, sneak preview.' And then, all of a sudden, the guy looks around, puts more money in, starts playing it again." Petro called Midway to see if it'd be interested in manufacturing *Buck Hunter*, but Midway didn't return his call. So he heaved the *Buck Hunter* cabinet into a minivan, jingling coins and all, and drove it straight to Incredible Technologies, maker of *Golden Tee Golf*. "I showed 'em the cash box. 'This is like two days right here.' There was like 250 bucks in coins."

Incredible Technologies bought the game, helped Play Mechanix put out three or four versions of increasing refinement, and crammed thousands of consoles into bars across the American South—in hunting country. But it wasn't until Petro hooked up with another distributor, Betson Enterprises, and added a second gun to the console for head-to-head gameplay, that the game really took off. Betson was "very good at getting it placed in urban locations," says Petro. "All of a sudden, it doesn't just have to be in a hick bar. It can be in Manhattan. And it can earn gangbusters. Once it hit the mainstream, everybody got on board."

The new cabinet, now called *Big Buck Hunter Pro*, wedded the tension of two-player combat to a fresh set of graphics: lush digital vistas of Montana, West Virginia, Texas, New Mexico, and Saskatchewan had been rendered with a "painterly-type feel," inspired by the artwork in fantasy novels and Petro's desire to make a game that would be more "appealing to women." There were now no barriers to enjoyment. Play Mechanix had replicated the experience of hunting without all the un-fun parts: the schlepping to the camp, the spraying yourself with deer urine, the canned food and farty tents. This was hunting perfectly

distilled and democratized, which is why Petro wasn't necessarily surprised when he began to get reports of vegan chicks in Brooklyn blowing the shit out of prong-horned antelope between sips of PBRs. The game was wish fulfillment, and it worked both ways. It let Americans who liked to hunt get pumped about actually hunting, which explained why hunting-supply company Cabela's had a giant 15-foot version of *Buck Hunter* in its stores, and it let Americans who would never hunt in real life step into a costume and experience how the other half lives. It's not that you get to be Sarah Palin for 10 minutes; it's that you get to connect to an activity that you've been predisposed—*selected*, really—to experience as pleasure. "The bottom line is, certainly, we're all hunters," Petro told me. "There's something deep in our brain that that sort of thrill is there. If you go out and really hunt, it's an adrenaline-filled experience. If you talk to guys that hunt, there comes a time when your target is out there, and you have to shoot that target—it's a very tense moment, and I think you almost get that same kind of feel with our game.... We work hard at keeping that tension there." And when your heart leaps into your throat as that *fucking ram* darts behind that tree, when your whole world for this split second is the size of the squirt of dopamine and the clipped breath and the fluttering hand and the warmth in the cheeks, you feel it, the thing that Darwin felt when he killed those wonderfully evolved birds, the creatures that would one day disclose to him the origin of life. This is why there are 200 million guns in private hands in America. It's why you'll never get them back.

Yes, sure, the game has its wacky, outlandish elements: the busy chicks in safari hats and short shorts who appear between rounds, the disembodied voice of George Petro himself that cuts in every so often to drawl encouragement or scorn ("Hope you got a big freezer!"), and the bonus rounds that let you shoot at windmills, frogs, UFOs, and moonshine jugs. But the core gameplay is earnest and serious. It's actually hard to play *Big Buck Hunter* like a jackass. There are ground rules. For instance, before you can rack up points by shooting a "critter," one of the tinier animals that bound across the screen, you have to shoot a bigger male animal. Also, if you shoot a female—say, a doe—your gun locks up. There is a proper order to things in *Big Buck Hunter*, a hierarchy of allowable violence, and if you don't respect the hierarchy you will have wasted your dollar. The animals move quickly and duck out of



Big Buck Hunter Open Season at Hi Fi in the East Village, NYC.

range behind trees and hills, making it crucial to narrow your aim to the “vitals”: the animal’s head and heart. “We’re trying to pull accuracy out of the player,” says Mark Ritchie, a *Buck Hunter* project manager with Play Mechanix.

Ritchie happens to be the only person on the *Buck Hunter* team who hunts deer in real life: twice a year, up in Wisconsin. Ritchie, 51, started designing pinball games straight out of high school, but found it hard to make a living after a while. He fell in with Play Mechanix, where he quickly became the go-to guy for questions about *Big Buck Hunter*’s realism and sporting appropriateness. “I was a pretty good guideline for them in doing things that were ethical,” Ritchie says. “They had an idea for a [bonus] game early on—shooting a street sign. I pooped all over that idea. That would be bad for hunting. Things like that, I would step in. Like shooting a protected animal ... I’d say, well, that’s a horrible thing to do. That just says hunters are maniacs, and we’re not.”

Indeed, aside from the critter bonuses, which reward you for overkill—strictly speaking, it’s not necessary to use a shotgun to kill a beetle—there is nothing maniacal about *Big Buck Hunter*. You don’t shred deer with Uzis and you don’t see any blood. “When you look at these other violent games,” Ritchie says, “where you’re exploding people’s guts and hanging them out to dry, this is like *Romper Room*.” But this is why *Big Buck Hunter* is potentially conscience-pricking in a way that more graphic games aren’t. *Buck Hunter* presents your quarry intact, the bucks expiring serenely, like Victorian ladies fainting on couches. While in another game, the gore of an annihilated body can seem to retroactively degrade it, making its slaughter seem justified, *Buck Hunter* doesn’t grant you this moral distance; it takes pains to present the animals as innocent creatures that were minding their own business before you showed up. Before you get to shoot at them, you have to stare for a few seconds at an image of the buck or the ram or the antelope standing frozen on a kickass bluff, looking all majestic. Then, after you take your shots, the game pauses, and on a trophy screen each painterly buck is briefly reanimated to show you, with a red dot, where you’ve hit him. The ghost buck’s legs pump and churn while your score climbs by the thousands, and the look on his face as he’s suspended in midair is faraway and blank and genuinely creepy. The game doesn’t just simulate the physiological experience of hunting, it simulates the psychological of the confrontation, the

power imbalance between predator and prey. *Buck Hunter* is the rare game that works to reinforce a one-to-one relationship with something kind of fraught and dubious and sticky that you can also do in the real world. The feeling of killing a buck in *Buck Hunter* is less like the feeling of killing something in a videogame than the feeling of telling someone you love a lie. You don’t have to. You do anyway. There’s a tiny thrill of getting away with it, followed by a mostly subconscious regret. You justify it in your own mind and move on.

A lot of innovative game designers are striving these days to create morally complex videogames, and they’re mostly doing it narratively, by crafting little Sophie’s Choices in game worlds—choices that engage the players’ ethical brains and make them question the consequences of their game-world decisions. The holy grail of the more artistically ambitious side of the profession is to make the gamer experience sophisticated emotions in a one-on-one confrontation with a piece of art. But *Big Buck Hunter* is a morally complex game without even trying to be, because it’s something unique in the game world, a powerful combination of visual style, gameplay, tactile feedback, and environment. It’s a social game embedded in the ultimate social environment: the bar. “We didn’t want to make this game something that was—how do I want to put it? —something that required all your attention,” says George Petro. “The old-school games, they require all your attention. You’re antisocial. But we wanted a game that won’t overtake the group and can fit in with the party.” This is what gives *Big Buck Hunter* its under-the-skin power: the gap between what you’re being asked to do and where you find yourself doing it. Here’s a game that simulates a violent act against an innocent life, recreates the tension that makes that act enjoyable, and then turns it into casual mid-bar-chat entertainment. It plunges you into an older, weirder human experience, then yanks you back out to your beer and your buddies. For just as long as it takes to discharge your dark wish from a distance, but no longer, it loans you a gorgeous gun. **KS**