

Deer hunting game is a surprise hit


Big Buck Hunter Pro is popular with urbanites in liberal areas

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 NEW YORK - Alexandra Broseus grabs a shotgun, lifts it to her slender shoulder, pumps, and readies her aim.

Seconds later, she's firing furiously, gunning down the animated deer darting across the screen of this video game inside a popular, hipster bar in Manhattan called Horseshoe.

When the shooting ends and the adrenaline wanes, Broseus — wearing a zebra-striped dress — brings the plastic barrel to her lips and blows the imaginary smoke into the air.

"Yeah (expletive)," Broseus says, reaching for a nearby can of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Called Big Buck Hunter Pro, the coin-operated machine has evolved into the hottest-selling, biggest-moneymaking video game in bars and arcades across the country thanks to youthful urbanites like Broseus.

And the game has become surprisingly popular in liberal bastions like New York City that have strict gun laws and where the idea of real hunting repulses many residents.

"It's very strange, and I've been doing games for about 24 years. There's some kind of hipness to it," said George Petro, president of Play Mechanix Inc., the Chicago-area company that designed the game.

While older versions of the game have always done fairly well in the Midwest and other deer-hunting regions, the newest line

— Big Buck Hunter Pro — has caught fire everywhere, mainly because of changes in the design.

Petro said the fifth and latest version of Big Buck uses a PC platform, an upgrade that let designers install modern graphics, giving the game more lifelike features. Petro also added a second shotgun, so two players could fire away simultaneously, raising the competitive stakes and bragging rights.

"The pro came out and I was hooked," said 25-year-old Sebastian Baumer of New York City, who has been playing Big Buck for about a year and has spent about \$2,000 refining his skills.

Baumer is one of the most lethal shots on the East Side.

"I've been beaten obviously — but on a consistent basis? No," Baumer asserts from a bar in the East Village, which has four of the games within several blocks of one another.

Big Buck players score points for accuracy, distance and the animal's weight. There are different hunting adventures in several states such as Montana, Idaho, Nevada and Wyoming. There, players can stalk elk, antelope, big horn sheep, moose and, of course, bucks.

Just like in real life, a head or neck shot instantly brings down the animal. Gut shots take two or three rounds.

Slaying an innocent ewe or doe is forbidden. The gun locks up and the other player gains the advantage.

"That's the kiss of death," said John L. Less, a 35-year-old consultant who played the game for the first time recently at ACE bar.

When blasted, the deer tumble to the ground; the birds explode into billows of feathers, the bunny rabbits into a cloud

of fur. Bonus rounds include shooting frenetic turkey, rampaging boar, thick cow paddies, whiskey jugs and ducks.

The machines spit out endearing lines like this one: "That's some nice shootin'" and other catchy commentary.

But more importantly, this form of hunting is relatively easy. The hunter doesn't have to shiver outside in the cold for hours waiting for a trophy buck to arrive. And favorite hipster pastimes such as drinking beer are permitted, making this an urban draw.

"It's distilled to the cool part, the shooting," Petro said. "The thrill is getting the kill. That's what we distilled in the game."

The fine-tuning of Big Buck has led to some unexpected success in this tough business that has been squeezed with the rapid technological advancement of home video games, said Bob Boals, executive vice president of Betson Enterprises Inc., which distributes and markets Big Buck worldwide.

"We are very stunned," Boals said. "It's doing extremely well in the Northeast and West Coast. It's been so well received in all the different locations. We did not see this in the prior buck hunters."

Big Buck came out in 2000 and sold a modest 6,200 machines in about six years, Boals said. But when the pro version hit bars and arcades in February 2006, the game started going the competition.

Betson expects to unload 6,000 pro machines this year, and Boals projects he'll easily move a total of 10,000 over time. Betson is the only company that sells pro hunter _ either directly or through distribution partners.

According to the July edition of RePlay Magazine, which tracks the industry, distributors voted Big Buck the best upright video game, 12 spots above bar-legend Golden Tee.

The machines sell for \$6,000, earning \$350 week on average, 80 percent more than rival Golden Tee, Boals said. One of the country's top Big Buck machines generates nearly \$3,000 a month at a Connecticut casino, he said.

Broseus says there's no mystery to why New Yorkers crave Big Buck.

"It makes perfect sense," she said. "It's the whole thing of going out and hunting in the city. Part of the appeal of New York is going out and doing anything. In the same night, you can go hunting and smoke a hookah."

But not every city dweller approves.

"I am a friend of the animals," said Lucy Knight, a vegetarian, who has worked as ACE's manager for two years. "I find it disturbing for people to get so much pleasure out of it."

Will this start a trend? Will hipsters start taking to the woods en masse with Remingtons and Mossbergs?

Hunting purists hope not.

"I thank god they are doing it in a bar," said Russell Thornberry, Editor in Chief of Buckmasters Whitetail Magazine in Montgomery, Ala. "I'm not sure I'd want them hunting anywhere near where I was hunting. They'd be a danger to me and the deer."

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