

Double Dragon Revisited

by ALM

Introduction

Remakes are common practice in video games. When a proper sequel hasn't been made in some time old favorites which were forgotten suddenly get updated for current-generation systems. This year alone we have seen (or can expect to see):

- *1942: Joint Strike*, Capcom (PS3 & 360)
- *Bionic Commando Rearmed*, Capcom (PS3 & 360)
- *Wolf of the Battlefield: Commando 3*, Capcom (PS3 & 360)
- *Nights: Journey of Dreams*, Sega (Wii)
- *Rygar: The Battle for Argus*, Tecmo (Wii)
- *Samba De Amigo*, Sega (Wii)
- *Tecmo Super Bowl*, Tecmo (DS)

One could quibble about the distinction between a very delayed sequel versus a remake. On the good side, a perfectly useful bit of jargon has already been coined for these situations: *requel*.

All this is beside the point of this article, however, and that is to make fun of trends in game design in the early 21st century. This commentary will be framed in relation to a hypothetical *requel* to a classic game series from the mid-80's to the early 90's of the 20th century (the 8- to 16-bit eras), *Double Dragon*.

Background

Double Dragon was an early arcade beat-em-up, released before such classics as *Final Fight* and *Streets of Rage* defined the genre. A paragon of simplicity, you only got one playable character (plus his inverse-colored—but otherwise identical—brother if you were the second player) to punch and kick (actually this game used a unique control scheme ignored by many other classic brawlers; you had different buttons for fists and feet) your way through nigh-endless waves of generic thugs with a unique, tougher thug at the end of each stage. This was a setup that would be seen many, many times throughout the 90's, when the genre reigned supreme after sports titles and fighters. Other staples seen in this game include weapons that could be knocked out of enemies' hands and used by your character, barrels that could be picked up & thrown, and a damsel in distress.

With that quick introduction out of the way, we can move on to the meat of this article: the kind of game that *Double Dragon* would be made into today. First, consideration must be given to ...

Title

A simple *Double Dragon* won't do. The numbering scheme is generally considered *passé* and simply titling it the same as the original will leave many confused as to which game is being referred to during conversation. Just as *Metroid* became *Metroid Prime*, *Sonic the Hedgehog* became *Sonic Adventure* or *Rush*, and the *Castlevanias*, *Zeldas*, & *Marios* ditched numbering entirely, you need to have some sort of subtitle to distinguish this game from all the others. If we were talking about a game for the Nintendo DS, we would be limited to subtitles that have “D” and “S” for its abbreviation (such as *Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow*, *Advance Wars: Dual Strike*, or *Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword*) to show potential buyers how very witty the developers are ... wait, this is a stupid tangent and why on earth would we port the awesomeness of our hypothetical *Double Dragon* title to the weak little Nintendo DS? That piddly system couldn't possibly hold the unbridled ... power of ... waitaminute ...

Double Dragon Unleashed

Unleashed is a word that communicates uncontrollable power and it sounds so very cool. So cool that it quickly became the “extreme” of the oughts. It's been tagged to recent games for *Sonic*, *Star Wars*, *Godzilla*, *Destroy All Humans* and the *NFL*.

Characters

Billy and Jimmy Lee are an inexplicable duo for sure. Despite being twin brothers, Billy is a classic Aryan while Jimmy is a muscular, vaguely Asian guy, similar to Kenshiro from *Fist of the North Star* (even the much maligned film adaptation couldn't do away with this incongruity). Presumably there's some mixed parentage involved. Considering the Lee surname is almost certainly a reference to Bruce Lee, and the fictional martial arts style of the Lees' is a parody of Bruce Lee's style's name, I suppose these two could be considered hypothetical children of Bruce Lee and his Caucasian wife. Sure, the red or blue denim vest (with matching jeans) and white t-shirt and boots ensemble was undeniably intimidating in the late 80's, but it just doesn't send the endless swarms of city street scum running to the suburbs like it used to. No, these two boys are going to need some serious updating!

First, their background. These days, it's never enough to just say “this is the hero and he's tough” then leave it at that. Hell, backgrounds usually end up being the main thrust of the storyline. Look at the recent *Devil May Cry 4*, where Nero spends all the time trying to learn how and why he has his powers. *Sonic Adventure 2* was devoted entirely to exploring the origin of Shadow the Hedgehog. *Final Fantasy VII* was all about Cloud's past, so much so that they even made a separate game (ten years after *FF7*'s release) exploring it in depth, *Crisis Core*.

Speaking of Cloud, he gives us our first character element to lift: amnesia, the bad writer's go-to cheap trick. It also gives us a chance to sidestep the whole “they don't look at all related” thing; they're brothers only in that they've grown up together. From the start, they were in an orphanage, a tough inner-city one, where they learned to fight. Neither of them can remember their lives from before the orphanage ... but they think they're connected somehow. More on that later.

Because we're throwing originality to the wind—this is a video game after all—the brothers' personalities are determined by their races (or, more to the point, stereotypes of their races.) Jimmy is the reserved, well-mannered martial arts master who spouts fortune cookie-like wisdom in lieu of real dialog. Billy is the hot-tempered, loud “American” who gets by on good looks, fast talk, and brute force. Sound familiar? Then you've played *Street Fighter*, or watched *Shanghai Noon*, or *Rush Hour*.

Okay, so now that their personalities and backgrounds are established. Next we take care of their appearance. First off, that matching outfit stuff has got to go. It worked back when we had to conserve game memory by recoloring sprites, but these boys need some more unique looks. Now, bearing in mind that this is being done from the perspective of making the worst possible choices, that probably means basing it on out-of-date fashions or ones that were too stupid to ever exist. Maybe just painfully unoriginal.

Jimmy, being the streetwise, high-kicking Confucius that he is, will be clad in a dark hoodie (Mark Ecko branded, of course) which is the modern-day equivalent of a robe without seeming like a Jesus freak. Add in some baggy jeans and sneakers (Nike) and you've got your dark and mysterious Asian martial arts expert.

Billy, being the “main” character of the game will require more work. Standing in as the avatar for the

mighty Caucasian ego, we need to make him buff. He'll be much more muscular than his brother. We're also going to show off those muscles by putting him in a much less covering tight (slightly too tight, in fact) white t-shirt, short cargo pants (we'll go with a camouflage coloring,) and boots (Doc Martens.) His arms and legs? Covered in tattoos ... because tattoos prove he's badass! Asian characters, tribal symbols, and even some barbed wire. Tough people have tattoos and we want the game players to know Billy is one bad dude ... wait, wrong game.

There's also Marian to consider. All we really know about her is that she was stated to be Billy's girlfriend but is totally willing to hook up with Jimmy if he rescues her, instead. She's brunette (or blond, as she was in the ending of *Double Dragon II: The Revenge*) and wears short pink dresses. That's about it. We'll make her Italian or "some kind of Spanish," vaguely ethnic so that we can have the politically correct rainbow brigade going here. Otherwise she'll be like your typical game heroine these days; spunky.

Also note the need to have branded clothes. These days, that becomes a selling point in games: "Customize your character with the complete ecko hoodie catalog for 2008!" the box will proclaim. Oddly, this kind of crass marketing never cuts down on the cost to the consumer. Hell, they'll probably make it downloadable content, that players have to pay for, to get more up-to-date fashions. Yes, I realize it makes no sense to combine the virtual spirit of badassery with the option to play dress up with the characters like they're Barbie dolls, but that juxtaposition amuses me. Besides, when you combine peoples' love of customizing characters' appearances (i.e., *GTA IV*, *Rock Band*, and *Nintendo's Miis*) with their slavish devotion to the "real" (When was the last time an unlicensed sports game did well? Is *Guitar Hero* all that well known for its track list of **original** songs?) you have one hell of a money making scheme as the labels will pay you to push their product on to the game players (even virtually) and the game players will pay for the periodic download-able content to keep their characters' clothes current!

Storyline

People love a good story. Even people who play video games. Inexplicably, people who play video games have actually grown to collectively love stories **more** than playing games. This is a terrible trend that really kicked off during the 32-bit era with the likes of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Metal Gear Solid*, where characters could spend surprising amounts of time emoting while they ruminated about their history and current predicament. Instead of hurrying through what is, otherwise, an in-game excuse to play the game, players convinced themselves they should be enthralled by such shenanigans because they believed it somehow legitimized the games as some form of art (after all, if movies can be art by having deep characterization and storyline, why not video games).

Ever since then it has not been uncommon for the pseudo intellectual gamers to complain when a game lacks narrative; from classic twitch-fests like first-person shooters and one-on-one fighters to racing games (every *Need for Speed* for the past three years has been bogged down by a story mode which comes off like a bad *Fast and the Furious* sequel.) Surprisingly, most other sports games have pretty much been spared this indignity, although there have been attempts at it in the past.

With all this in mind it is simply not enough to have some band of thugs run up to Marian, sock her in the stomach, and run off with her to function as the motivation for the main characters to do what they do. The storyline needs to be made much more convoluted and consist of considerable melodrama in order to appeal to today's video game players.

Some of this has already been hinted at when I talked briefly about Billy and Jimmy Lee's origins:

orphanage, inner-city, amnesia, and some weird connection between the two. How will this all tie together? How about this:

Billy and Jimmy Lee grew up together in an orphanage. To the best of their knowledge they were abandoned by their parents at roughly the same time and very early in their lives, as all they've ever known were each other and the orphanage ... and women whose first names began with the letter "M." First, there was one of the caretakers in the orphanage, later a teacher in their school who kept an eye on them, and most recently as the boys' neighbor. These glimpses at the boys' lives growing up can all be shown through a montage, interspersed with the opening credits and accompanied by the latest hit single (available on the game's soundtrack in stores and iTunes now.)

So now we're in present day and Billy and Jimmy Lee are sharing a small, run-down apartment in the city. Pan across their place, showing the differences between how they run their lives: Billy's stuff is strewn all over the place while Jimmy has everything neat and organized. The brothers step outside in the morning, heading for work (they work in a garage.) Along the way they meet Marian, who is talking to a bunch of guys in suits. They start getting grabby with her, so she knocks them out (this is the 21st century, we have to make her tough otherwise the game will be labeled as sexist.) Billy and Jimmy race to her side, at which point the requisite tutorial sequence kicks in as the player is taught the basics of combat by Marian while taking on the suited enemies (we have to do away with the street gangs of yesteryear for fear of being labeled racist or classist by portraying the Urban crowd as violent; but yes, these guys are the modern-day equivalent of the Black Warriors.)

After routing her suited assailants, the boys retreat with Marian to their place. There, she tells them that they need to be especially careful because the men were looking for them. Billy and Jimmy are incredulous; they're regarded quite highly in their neighborhood and have always lived above-board ... there's no reason they'd be somebody's target. Nonetheless, if trouble is coming for them they'll face it head on. Ready for anything, they head out into the city.

Without going into detail on how the game will be played and the way it ties into the storyline being revealed, here's a quick rundown of how things will turn out:

1. The boys proceed to traipse through the city, combating the many branches of the Black Warriors as they go.
2. The boys learn that the Black Warriors are at the center of a lot of strife in the city, and seem to be pulling a lot of strings in the background. There's even some indication that the name ties back to the government ("black," in this context, meaning "dark" or "hidden") and an ancient cult (another popular cliché, shades of The DaVinci Code.)
3. Throughout all this, Marian always seems to know more than she's letting on.
4. Finally, having been pushed too far, the Black Warriors kidnap Marian and the boys head out to rescue her (this is when the hardcore geeks cream their pants due to the allusions to the original *Double Dragon* game.)
5. The boys race back to their home with Marian. At this point she tells them everything she knows:
 - The boys are a second generation of genetically engineered super soldiers using nanotechnology (another cliché). They were taken from their parents around the age of eight and subjected to a series of experiments which made them physically superior but had a side-effect of wiping out their minds.
 - Marian is the only surviving subject from the first generation of the experiment. Her aging process was significantly slowed, however she does not have the combative gifts of the boys.

- The experiment was run by the government, maybe even a part of the Black Warriors, although she's unsure of that. The project was found out and then shut down; the boys were placed in an orphanage to try and sweep what happened under the carpet. Marian took it upon herself to keep track of them growing up.
 - The Black Warriors want to resurrect the nanomachine augmentation program to develop its own soldiers, however they need the boys in order to do it, which is why the Black Warrior has not been using aggressively lethal methods.
6. At this point Willy, who we thought was dead before, sneaks into the scene and manages to shoot Marian to death (the geeks go nuts again; this is the opening for *Double Dragon II: The Revenge*.)
 7. Now the boys have a new mission: to avenge Marian (who, as she dies, reveals that some of her genetics were used to augment the boys, making her something of a mother to them; this is another cliché, the deathbed revelation) by destroying the Black Warriors.
 8. The final showdown sees the boys combating Duke. First, he has them face off against clones of each other. After that they face him. Upon Duke's death, however, he activates a failsafe that causes the nanomachines in one of the brothers to go haywire, making the affected brother perceive the other as his enemy.
 9. After the brothers have fought, they head back into a city free of the tyranny of the Black Warriors, but a little lonelier without Marian (cue latest sad ballad from a major label while the credits roll.)

Of course, all of this will be interspersed with the kind of melodramatics, angst, and ruminations that pass as depth these days. Yeah, learning way too much about the bosses before you fight them and then sitting through a half-hour soliloquy where they ponder being beaten after you beat them doesn't do a whole hell of a lot to progress the actual story or enhance the game play ... but the characterizations, man; they'll blow the audience away!

Gameplay

Okay, so we've kicked off this relaunch with an awesome title, redesigned the characters to present plenty of opportunities for additional cash flow through branding and downloadable content, and given the game a compelling and convoluted narrative. Just like with a lot of games these days, it's time to think of game play last and gone it done as quickly as possible. Heck, any problems with the game can be corrected with patches later on.

Free roaming is all the rage, now. Unfortunately, the kind of mission-based action you find in *Grand Theft Auto IV* would be too much of a divergence from the classic *Double Dragon* game play. It would probably be best if the game followed a model more like *No More Heroes* on the wii, and has the city function more like a glorified stage select. Yeah, the boys can wander the city and pick up random missions to complete, but most of the action will take place in warehouses or parks where they proceed to pound the crap out of seemingly endless waves of thugs. At the end of each area will be a boss. Even the missions would have to take place somewhere in the action stages, like returning the park or something (where the thugs have mysteriously reappeared) to find a kidnapped kid, or go back to some tenement to destroy a meth lab.

The whole trick is to give the illusion of an open world. The illusion is all that matters. *Final Fantasy* fans have been under the impression that those games aren't painfully linear for ages now. As long as you can advertise that the game presents an "open environment," you'll draw in a lot of people who don't really know what that's supposed to mean but know they've been told it's a good thing.

Systems

Following the lead made by the upcoming *Ghostbusters* game, the Playstation 3 and XBOX 360 will both get the “real” game while the wii will get a dumbed-down party game only vaguely related to the other consoles' versions (help Billy and Jimmy Lee unclog a toilet by thrusting your wiimote up and down!) Finally, the DS would get a traditional side-scrolling beat-em-up very similar to the original game which will floor everyone with its old-school awesomeness (like what happened with the Gameboy Advance version of the *TMNT* video game.)