

# Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard

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Have you ever been suckered by a timeshare salesman? Well, if you've yet to experience this all too common occurrence it goes a little something like this... There you are walking down a street, probably in a hot, sunny location and a seemingly very friendly, enthusiastic character will vie for your attention. Most of us choose to pass-by these unnervingly over-familiar encounters, but occasionally it all sounds too good to be true. So you listen, and to your bemusement you've somehow won a fantastic prize. The next thing you know you're sharing a taxi ride back to 'Dodgycastle' HQ to collect your spoils. Once ensnared in the snake-pit of salesmen, you're forced to endure hours of 'tenderising' from a wide boy who could sell a treadmill to a lame worm. Your interrogator will probably have a name something like 'Matt Hazard'. It's quite fitting to have started this review with a bit of parody, Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard is quite literally parody digitised. Vicious Cycle Software has clearly intended for this game not to be taken seriously, and on this front they've succeeded. It starts with a genuinely funny introduction, mocking the games we know and love with subtle references to classics like Duke Nukem, Tomb Raider and Bioshock. Matt Hazard is a fictional character shown to have started life as a small 2D, blocky, 8-bit sprite. His rise through the generations of gaming is detailed through to current day in an amusing tongue-in-cheek manner. However, a few recent flops have seen Matt Hazard wane in the popularity stakes, with titles like 'Haz-Matt Carts' proving to be disastrous. So in you step to take Matt Hazard back to where he belongs; in the biggest and best video game releases. As always there's the requisite anti-hero doing his darnedest to prevent this from happening. Wally Wellesley the boss of 'Marathon Megasoft' has an unhealthy desire to see Matt Hazard eliminated from videogame history forever. So, as Eat Lead's protagonist would say "It's Hazard time!" (Good grief!)

No sooner than you start the game then 'bang', you get an achievement for simply 'buying the game' (there's your timeshare salesman giving you your first reward). There's nothing like a nice touch of satire to get things going. If you then pause the game to check the achievement detail then you get another for 'pausing the game'. Let's not forget Eat Lead is not just about Gamerscore boosting though, at its heart it's a fairly typical 3rd person shooter. The viewpoint is a bit closer to your character than Gears of War but the cover system is similar. Matt can crouch or hide behind most bits of scenery (although oddly not all), this generally comprises of doorways and crate shaped objects. As with Gears, Matt can peek out round from cover and take pot shots with whatever weapon he may be equipped with. If you don't fancy sticking your head out into a rain of bullets, then blind firing gives a less accurate but safer option. Once crouched behind a piece of scenery you can even barrel roll over the top of it and run to the next bit of cover. Should you be feeling particularly feisty you can move in close-quarters to the opposition and administer a drubbing bare-knuckle style. Although the combat and cover system is competent enough, it doesn't feel as intuitive and slick as the titles it borrows the mechanic from.

The first level progresses with you battling your way through various rooms, cleaning out the bad guys. The enemy are hardly challenging, although they use the same duck and cover system as Matt, rarely do they surprise. So long as you use the cover and systematically 'cap' your foes then clearing an area is straightforward enough. As with most shooters, ammunition is not limitless, although never in short supply as your despatched foes always leave pick-ups behind. Not only can you replenish your much-needed supply of bullets but also collect the residual weapons of battle. Initially the assortment of firearms doesn't stray further than machine guns and shotguns, but things do improve as the game goes on. Matt can only carry 2 weapons at any one time and switching between them is through a simple tap of the D-pad. Rather bizarrely you don't have grenades even though the enemy do; it's almost as if Vicious Cycle ran out of time to put the animation in. Anyway, before you know it you're having a confrontation with the boss of the level. He's a 70's throwback with big hair and a mighty bad attitude, giving you all the 'you're so gonna die punk'. Once again this gives a good opportunity for the game to throw in a bit of satire and humour. With the dialogue done all that remains is a quicktime event to see off the villain with the Afro for good.

Getting to the end of the first level, you think 'yeah, this isn't too bad', the shooting is pretty bog-standard but fun enough. As you move on the finer points like a blue digitised effect replacing the standard blood spurts are noticed and appreciated. Then when you start getting into tougher battles, with more in the way of artillery flying in your direction, you'll notice that the cover is not permanent. As you're crouched behind a block of scenery weathering the incoming fire it starts 'de-stabilising'. The crate or container that was once solid starts phasing with blue grid lines as it soaks up the fire. Before you know it the once life saving inanimate object you hunkered down behind is gone. In its absence is a 'gash' in the gaming world, displaying the very framework of the map. These little touches greatly enhance your perception of playing a videogame character in a virtual gameworld. Matt Hazard himself also demonstrates a de-phasing as damage as taken, much in the same way as the Gears of War health indicator. When everything goes grey and the sound is muffled like your ears have been blown off, you know it's time to get your head down and dodge the flak.

As you work your way through the game the enemy become more diverse with space marines, soldiers with 'super-soakers' (yup, that's water pistols) and even 2D German WWII soldiers. This is where you get to try a bit of the weirder weaponry, but the overall premise is still the same; hide behind block, shoot bad guys. Soon you find yourself just wanting to steam through the level so you can get to the funny cutscene at the end. The cutscenes are great; they're satirical, witty and really do a good job of taking the Mick out of popular game characters and genres. You've got a 'Marioesque' Captain Carpenter, Master Chef in a camo-green armoured apron and an up-levelling Arnie

Schwarzenegger crossed with a Sam Fischer character plus others. All this is very entertaining but let's not forget this is a game, not an 'Airplane' remake.

As you've probably noticed I've made quite a few comparisons to Gears of War, and most games would be honoured to be mentioned in the same breath. However, it's always a case of 'like Gears, but not as good', and unfortunately the same applies graphically. Eat Lead has some very good character models but the environments are mostly dull and uninspiring. The levels of render are pretty low in places and could be confused with a last-gen title if not studied carefully, and it's not as if the game engine makes up for the lack of detail with an eye-melting pace. Eat Lead at best breaks into a gentle saunter, but never enough to test the Xbox 360 hardware. The level design is bland and linear, I know it's having a laugh at the 'warehouse levels' that appear in most games, but it's just too much. Oh, then there's a dock level, and a few office levels. Even the sudden spawning of zombies doesn't do much to relieve the monotony. Ultimately you find yourself working through samey levels, ducking, shooting, then rinse and repeat. On a plus note the soundtrack is very good, it's suitably rocky and ups the tempo nicely when the action hots-up. Matt chucks in a few nice one-liners as you take out your adversaries, and the sound effects are pretty much as expected for a shooter.

Rather fundamental to current shooters is the multiplayer aspect, unless you deliver a truly epic experience like Bioshock or Fallout, it's got to be in there. Unfortunately Eat Lead doesn't even offer split-screen on the same console, let alone online play. Are you going to come back for a re-run of the game and watch the same jokes again and re-endure the monotonous campaign? I think not.

To sum-up Eat Lead, you've got a mechanically sound if not outstanding 3rd person shooter, however it never progresses past the first level. The entire game virtually comprises of you ducking behind cover and peeking out to eliminate the enemy. The humour's great, it gets you chuckling with good scripts that are voiced well. However, it's like our timeshare salesman, it sucks you in with wit and enthusiasm and then traps you for a good few hours. At the end of it all you'll be left feeling like you've spent money on something that you didn't really want. I would suggest if you want a healthy slice of parody then watch a few episodes of 'Spaced', playing through the repetitive levels of Eat Lead isn't worth it.

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