



PROJECT MUSE®

## DOOM

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## Introduction

*There Are a Lot of People Totally Opposed to  
Violence. They're All Dead.*

It was early 1994, and the core, as I remember it, was me and my friends Tom and Andy. Tom was the one with the PC. We used to get together in his room in the halls of residence, with the lights off, and play this new game he'd just got. Usually, he was a freak for role-playing games—most recently, a top-down steampunk set on Mars—and a group of us would occasionally pull an all-nighter on *Civilization* (MicroProse 1991), but that winter, there was really only one game: id's seminal shooter *DOOM*. It's difficult to overstate the impact *DOOM* had on us all. We'd all thoroughly enjoyed *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992), of course, but for a bunch of nineteen-year-olds in the pre-PlayStation era, *DOOM* just blew everything else into bloody gibs.

This is a book about the most important first-person game ever made, about the blueprint that has defined one of the most successful genres of digital gaming. It is about a controversial, hyperviolent, scary, funny, exciting game that manages to be both profoundly, self-congratulatory dumb and exceptionally clever at the same time. All this and a chaingun—what more could you ask for?

I love first-person games: I think they are the most engaging, furious, immersive digital game form, even when they deviate from the basic run-and-gun model carved out by *DOOM* and typified by recent shooters like *Bulletstorm* (People Can Fly 2011) and *Killzone 3* (Guerilla Games 2011). There is something absolutely unique about the direct mapping of your per-

ception onto an avatar's, something really wonderful about how, in many ways, these games extend the rewarding simplicity of early arcade gaming into the most high-end edges of technological implementation. The contemporary first-person shooter *Crysis 2* (Crytek 2011) may look like an oil painting (if not actually better), but at heart, it's just first-person *Defender* (Williams Electronics 1981). Lurking just below the dystopian musings on free will and capitalism that give *Bioshock* (2K Boston + 2K Australia 2007) its unique flavor is *Wolfenstein 3D* with water and a wrench.

*DOOM*'s legacy includes some of the finest moments in gaming yet produced. Without it, *Half-Life* (Valve Software 1998) wouldn't have pushed how story is delivered in games seismically forward or set the crowbar at a new high for level design. There would be no *Portal* (Valve Software 2007), no *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009), no *F.E.A.R.: First Encounter Assault Recon* (Monolith 2005), no *Mirror's Edge* (DICE 2008). The technological advances of *DOOM* cast an equally long, dynamically rendered shadow. Then there's the creation of the online multiplayer gaming scene, via id embracing the idea of players playing against one another over LANs and online networks. You could argue that maybe the entirety of the massively multiplayer economy owes something to *DOOM*. Finally, id's championing of the open-source ethos—not just through the adoption of the Apogee model but through opening up of build tools to fan communities—effectively created the modding scene, which has had a huge impact on gaming as a movement.

Enough hyperbole. I've made some pretty big claims here, and though I suspect that you don't really need convincing if you know anything about games, duty calls me to offer some evidence to back them up. So this is what we're going to do: examine the context that *DOOM* crawled into, bloody and triumphant; talk a little about id, the dark heart of the enterprise; and try to paint a picture of the game's impact on release. We're going to take a tour under the hood to look at what made *DOOM* so important as a piece of software engineering. Then it will be time to get down and dirty on Phobos, Deimos, and Hell itself and discuss level and experience design. In case all that isn't enough, there's some other work to do. We have to look into multiplayer in a little more detail, and we need to discuss mods. We need to talk about the ports, sequels, and reboots: *DOOM II* and particularly *DOOM 3*. So that's enough introduction: strap on your ammo bandolier, power up the plasma gun, grab some blue armor, and, in the immortal words of *DOOM*'s

hilariously succinct intro, put a “couple of pellets in the forehead” of whatever killed your buddies.

Assuming, for just a minute, that you may have been living in a bunker for the last nineteen years, I need to make a formal introduction. *DOOM* is a first-person shooter. Its minimal heads-up display contains an ammo counter, a health and armor bar, a picture of your avatar’s head (visually showing what kind of physical state you are in), and a keycard indicator. Above this, you can see a hand holding a variety of weapons. You can move about horizontally (including strafing),<sup>1</sup> look freely around,<sup>2</sup> use a generic action key to open doors and press buttons, collect objects such as health kits and ammo and armor lying around the place, and shoot—there’s lots of shooting. In academic terms, *DOOM* is based around the core activity of lining up objects with the center of the screen and removing them by pressing the shoot button. You start in a complex environment, and you simplify it by removing agents and pressing all the buttons there are to press and collecting all the objects there are to collect. You can cut part of the simplification process out by just running for the exit (normally impossible without first finding a keycard or two), but although this is possible—and we’ll return to speedruns in subsequent chapters—the game is all about simplifying the environment, with extreme prejudice.

*DOOM* takes place in an industrial base on a Martian moon that has been invaded by demons from Hell. You are the last survivor, and gameplay takes the form of you battling onward through a variety of locations, exterminating anything that moves. The demons are intent on reducing you to a bloody smear on the corporate carpet, and attempt to do so by clawing, biting, and rending you at close range and by blasting you with shotguns and fireballs from a distance. If you haven’t played *DOOM* but have played any first-person shooter, you already know this is fast, simple gameplay, alternating between tense exploration and adrenaline-fueled gunfights. If you haven’t played either *DOOM* or any other FPS, your life is poorer as a result, and you should stop reading this and get in on the action immediately. That’s the basic overview; we’ll go into more detail later on, but from here on in, I’m going to assume you have, at the least, an awareness of a product called *DOOM* out there in the world and some inkling of what playing it entails.

The first release of *DOOM* occurred on December 10, 1993, in the form

of a free shareware episode available for download, plus two further episodes requiring payment. The fact that id used the embryonic Internet as a distribution channel, co-opting the emerging online communities, speaks volumes about just how cleverly they understood the context into which their game was going to launch. Netscape was founded in October 1994, the Mosaic web browser (National Center for Supercomputing Applications) in January 1993. These were the glory days of the Gopher protocol, computerized bulletin board systems, and Usenet. Networked games were not necessarily new. MUSE had launched *MUD1* via CompuServe and CompuNet in the United States and the United Kingdom in 1985, and the ancient equivalent of LAN battles had actually been hardwired into the genre from its very conception, with networked games being established through the 1970s. The idea of using modem-to-modem networks to support multiplayer globally was a hugely ambitious goal. Bear in mind, this is all before Steam and other online game stores, way before any general idea of mass digital distribution of games was in the offing. Users were used to file sharing, of course, but the idea of inviting mass, user-driven distribution of a full third of a game as a marketing exercise was quite brilliant, and as we shall see, id co-opted Scott Miller's brilliance to propel *DOOM* sales sky-high.

It's next to impossible to accurately capture sales data for *DOOM* (for reasons we will explore later on), let alone figures for the shareware distribution. Kushner estimates that orders amounting to \$100,000 a day hit id in the days just after release (Kushner 2003). In the 2000 edition of *The Complete Wargames Handbook*, combined sales for *DOOM* and *Ultimate DOOM* (version 1.9, released in 1995 and the first traditional retail release) from 1993 to 2000 come in at over 1.8 million units (Dunnigan 2000, 8). VGChartz gives a total figure of 2.85 million as of 2011.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the impossibility of verification, the fact that community sites claim over ten million installations by 1995 gives some sense, at least, of what a phenomenon it was.<sup>4</sup>

*DOOM* was an instant, if controversial, critical smash. While players lapped it up, some form of media backlash was pretty inevitable, and the game was attacked for its graphic violence and content. This may look faintly ridiculous now, in the era of *Manhunt* (Rockstar North 2007), *[PROTOTYPE]* (Radical 2009), and *Saw: The Videogame* (Zombie Studios 2009) (let alone the *Saw* movie franchise), but anti-*DOOM* hysteria bubbled into the press with all the vigor of ichor bubbling up from a shotgunned Imp's neck stump. David Grossman famously described it as a "mass murder simulator" (*60 Minutes*, CBS, 1997), and the game was at the center of attempts

to push through compulsory licensing of virtual realities. This was driven up to fever pitch with the disclosure that Eric Harris, one of the Columbine shooters, was a keen *DOOM* player and had created his own mods—both of which were linked directly to the shooting by the *Rocky Mountain News* (August 22, 1999), among others. Rumors even circulated that Harris had modded Columbine levels. Regardless of the truth or fiction of media stories, one thing is certain: controversy sells. The hype and the horror stories catapulted *DOOM* even further into the public sphere. Perhaps as much because of this reception as because of how efficiently the content works in a ludic setting, hell, industrial sci-fi, conspiracies involving military-industrial complexes, and shooters were fused together, and this combination still represents the spine of the overwhelming majority of FPS content.

But *DOOM* is not just about the game itself. Pumping away within the shattered rib cage of the Phobos Anomaly was an engine that broke new ground technologically and sat at the top of one of the first true engine dynasties. It's not just the case of id finding a gameplay model that worked for them with *Wolfenstein 3D*, via *Catacomb 3D* (id Software 1991), and then refining this for *DOOM*; it's about coding solutions. From texture mapping to lighting, id took the current boundaries of game technology and drove them forward. It wasn't so much that *DOOM* did things that no one had done before. *Ultima Underworld* (Blue Sky Productions 1992) let the user freely look around using the mouse and pushed the envelope on texture mapping, for example, but *DOOM* pushed these capabilities further and married them to fast, seamless, responsive gameplay. It had everything that was developing in the first-person RPG scene, but it stripped back the complexity of the gameplay and shoved everything into performance. The result was a Formula One car of a game, next to *Ultima's* camper van. It may not have been complicated or diverse and may not have offered such a range of customization, characterization, story, affordances, and dramatic range, but it was fast. It stands as a brilliant exercise in engine optimization—or gameplay optimization, depending on your stance—with everything serving an experience that shoved the player through an affective pipe at a breakneck pace, only letting up on them to replace action with tension and a pause to admire the scenery. *DOOM* was built for speed.

One last thing: If you haven't played *DOOM* in a while, hunt down and dust off your copy. You know it's lurking around somewhere, hissing like a Cacodemon. Play it all over again. Because it's just, quite simply, a really bloody good game.