DOOM

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Eva! Auf Wiedersehen!

The Birth of a Genre

We need to consider the context into which *DOOM* arrived. The very first FPS game was *Maze War,* created by Steve Colley, Howard Palmer, and Greg Thompson (and other contributors) at the NASA Ames Research Center. Colley estimates that the first version was built during 1973,[1] as an extension of the earlier game *Maze,* which offered a first-person exploration of a basic wireframe environment. At some point during '73 or '74, networked capability was added, enabling multiplayer FPS play. The genre was born out of networked deathmatching. After Thompson moved to MIT, he continued to develop *Maze War,* adding a server offering personalized games, increasing the number of players to eight, and adding simple bots to the mix. Twenty years before *DOOM,* all of the prototypical features of the FPS were in place: a 3D real-time environment, simple ludic activity (look, move, shoot, take damage), and a basic set of goals and win/lose conditions—all this and multiplayer networked combat.

Around the same time, Jim Bowery developed *Spasim* (1974), which he has claimed to be the very first 3D networked multiplayer game.[2] *Spasim* pitted up to thirty-two players (eight players in four planetary systems) against one another over a network, with each taking control of a space ship, viewed to other players as a wireframe. A second version expanded the gameplay from simple combat to include resource management and more strategic elements. Whether or not Bowery's argument that *Spasim* precurses *Maze War* and represents the first FPS holds water, its importance as a game is undiminished—even if for no other reason than because *Spa-*

sim is a clear spiritual ancestor of *Elite* (Braben and Bell 1984) and its many derivatives. It perhaps even prototypes a game concept that would later spin out into combat-oriented real-time strategy (RTS) or even massively multi-player online (MMO) gaming.

What certainly differentiates *Spasim* from *Maze War* is the perspective. Like other early first-person games, such as *BattleZone* (Atari 1980) and id's *Hovertank 3D* (1991), the game is essentially vehicular, with no representation of the avatar onscreen other than a crosshair. It is interesting that, aside from occasional titles such as *Descent* (Parallax 1995) and *Forsaken* (Probe Entertainment 1998), the genre very swiftly settled down into the avatar-based perspective, abandoning vehicular combat more or less completely. It's also interesting that contemporary shooters often opt for a shift to third-person when including vehicles, such as with *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie 2002) or *Rage* (id Software 2011). *Half-Life 2*'s (Valve Software 2004) first-person car sequences are actually quite unusual.

In 1992, Blue Sky Productions released *DOOM*'s calmer, more reasonable sibling, a first-person role-playing game called *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*. The *Ultima* RPG series had been around since 1981 and was already part of a tradition opting for first-person perspective in a much more complex game. *Akalabeth* (Richard Garriott 1980) used wireframe graphics, in the manner of *Maze War,* alternated with top-down gameplay. This style became more prevalent as games shifted to tiled graphics, but the inclusion of first-person perspective remained constant (e.g., through the embedded window in Sir-Tech's *Wizardry* series or Jagware's 1986 *Alien Fires: 2199 AD*). RPGs began to return to first-person in greater numbers as the technology caught up with the aspirations of early titles. *Dungeon Master* (FTL Games 1987) leapt the genre forward in terms of real-time 3D action, and others soon followed. What marks these games out, however, is the retention of predominantly RPG-flavored gameplay, based on complex controls, resource gathering, and stat management. *Ultima Underworld* broke new ground in the responsiveness of controls, the degrees of perceptual freedom and movement, and a renewed emphasis for combat in real time. If it wasn't for the fact that an upstart little company called id had released their own first-person dungeon crawler, featuring radically stripped-back gameplay and a push toward frantic, fast-paced action that made *Stygian Abyss* feel positively sluggish by comparison, *Ultima* would be in a strong position to claim rights to igniting the modern FPS powder keg. As is, the debts owed by RPG/FPS crossovers from *Deus Ex* (Ion

Storm 2000) to *Borderlands* (Gearbox 2009) and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda 2008) are clear, and while less explicit, most FPS games of anything other than the most basic twitch shooters trace their genealogy back to somewhere in the *Ultima* family. But *Catacomb 3D* (id Software 1991) was different (fig. 1). It was bloody. It was basic. It was fast. It was fun.

Catacomb started out as a 2D shooter with an RPG-flavored world in 1989 and went through a couple of variations before it went 3D in 1991. The template for *DOOM* is set here. The representation of the avatar is limited to the form of a hand at the bottom of the screen. There's a familiar heads-up display (HUD), which really didn't evolve that much between the two titles. There are multiple means of attacking enemies (basic fireball, stream of fireballs, and a short-range area effect centered on the avatar) and an evolving succession of fantasy enemies to fight. This all takes place in a maze that the player progresses through using required colored keys, normally found by identifying and destroying secret passages in weakened wall sections. *Catacomb 3D*'s story was pure RPG hack and more or less completely superfluous to the action. While id has never really invested that much in its plots, we can see with both *Wolfenstein 3D* and *DOOM* that even if you don't really care about story, setting is a powerful tool in game design. In *Catacomb 3D,* the player explores a series of more or less identikit fantasy settings: a graveyard, a mausoleum, a garden, all of which use a basic set of square wall textures and occasional props in the exploratory space to distinguish between them. Agents are preplaced in the maze and do not respawn once an area is cleared. Critically, although *Catacomb 3D*'s world is straightforward Dungeons & Dragons guff, the gameplay itself has nothing to do with RPGs, the odd obsessive fan aside. Configuration is completely abandoned. The player starts with access to three combat abilities. New areas are exposed by shooting away walls that are visually (and textually) announced to be different (weak). You can pick up treasure, health, or potions (the equivalent of ammo). There is practically no avatar representation, characterization, or development. This is an arcade game bolted onto an RPG-styled HUD and world. John Romero comments,

> When we made *Catacomb 3D,* the game didn't feel as cool as it should—it was very interesting in its technology and what we were trying to do. . . . At the same time we released *Commander Keen,* which was way more fun than *Catacomb 3D,* but [*Catacomb 3D*] looked like it had a direction, a promise we could go after. (JR)[3]

Fig 1. *Catacomb 3D*

The follow-up to *Catacomb 3D* discarded any notion of the RPG. Whereas *Catacomb 3D* could potentially be described (if you really wanted to) as an arcade-style RPG-lite game, *Wolfenstein 3D,* released as shareware on May 5, 1992, is a shooter, pure and simple. Goodbye ghouls, healing potions, and crypts. Hello chainguns, pseudo-supernaturalized sci-fi, and, most important, blasting Nazis. *Wolfenstein 3D* not only offered a radical break from the normal deployment of first-person perspective in gaming; it stalked the RPG through the corridors of the medium, blasted it at short-range with a shotgun, and planted a flag in the sucking chest wound of the corpse. The FPS had arrived. Romero recalls,

> On the home computer, we had a major drought of any fast play . . . because everything on the computer had to go through CPUs, so the PC had all these plodding, turn-based titles. . . . So when we were making *Wolfenstein 3D,* getting rid of anything that slowed it down made it feel truer to the arcade skill that we were used to. (JR)

Wolfenstein 3D was loosely based on the side-scrolling arcade game *Wolfenstein,* created by Silas Warner in 1981. Taking the basic premise of escape from a Nazi castle, id dispensed largely with the stealth approach

that formed much of the gameplay of Warner's game. Rather than encouraging the player to avoid detection, *Wolfenstein 3D* is a straightforward shooter. Environments are simple and clean, with level-to-level progression based around finding the elevator to the next floor, which usually requires the player to find at least one key to get through locked doors. There are no variations in room heights, and textures are only applied to walls. This is simpler than the environments offered by *Ultima Underworld,* but the compromise enabled the game to run at a greater speed, effectively sacrificing complexity for performance. Likewise, *Wolfenstein 3D* offers fewer agents, with very simple behavior. It is possible to sneak up on soldiers, for example, but the core gameplay is fast, furious, bloody. Romero's vision was clear.

> Originally *Wolfenstein 3D* had all that—dragging bodies, picking locks. But when we started playing it, we figured . . . what use is there in trying to hide stuff or drag it round when all I'm doing is just blowing stuff up anyway? So let's get rid of all of the things that stop us in our tracks and pretty much force the player to just mow everything down—just make the player destroy stuff constantly. (JR)

Treasure is available for *Wolfenstein 3D* players to collect, the HUD features a score counter (dispensed with in *DOOM*), and there are secret areas leading to ammo, health, and treasure. But exploration is really only there for completionist players, rather than being essential or even particularly advantageous.

Wolfenstein 3D is split into six episodes, each comprised of ten levels. The story is an exercise in brutal simplicity. In the first episode, B. J. Blazkowicz, an allied spy, must escape from a Nazi stronghold. The player fights through the prison, eventually reaching the final boss, Hans Grosse. Episode two sees Blazkowicz return to stop a new biological warfare threat, represented by zombie agents with machine guns implanted in their chests and a syringe-hurling boss, Dr. Schabbs. The final episode culminates with a battle with Adolf Hitler, complete with robot exoskeleton, in the bunker beneath the Reichstag. The second batch of three episodes involves further chemical war shenanigans but is largely indistinguishable from the first, and to be fair, a player looking for fulfillment in *Wolfenstein 3D*'s story is probably going to miss the point and would likely get a more engaging experience reading the back of a cigarette packet. There's little going on apart from a very basic exercise in scene setting and establishing a premise: shoot as many Nazis as possible while running about a series of similar-looking environments, collecting treasure as you go (if that's your thing).

The *Wolfenstein 3D* player has access to only four weapons: a knife, a pistol, a machine gun, and a chaingun. There is a single health counter that can be topped up with health kits, stolen Nazi dinners, and dog food. There is a limited range of objects—tables, torture gibbets, and green barrels (not exploding yet, we had to wait until *DOOM* for that). The secret areas in the levels are rarely signposted, so for every door lurking behind a portrait of Hitler, there are two triggered by attempting to open otherwise indistinguishable walls. The lack of dynamic lighting and the basic texture set means that progress through the levels is often a result of trial and error and of exhausting the environment using a trail of bodies to work out where you have previously been. While it's important not to be overly critical of *Wolfenstein 3D*'s simplicity or lack of signposting, it does demonstrate how the technological advances of *DOOM* suddenly threw such devices into general usage.

Wolfenstein 3D was a critical and commercial success. It won the People's Choice and Best Entertainment Software categories at the 1993 Shareware Industry Awards, Best Arcade Game from *Compute!* (1992), Most Innovative Game and Best Action Game from *Videogames and Computer Entertainment* (1992), the Reader's Choice—Action/Arcade Game award from *Game Bytes* (1992), and Best Action Game from *Computer Gaming World* (1993). It was ported to Mac, Acorn, the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, Game Boy, Jaguar, and others, still enjoying life on contemporary platforms such as iPhone and PlayStation 3. A follow-up, *Spear of Destiny,* released later in 1992 by id, carried on the rich tradition of pure Nazi hokum and tongue-in-cheek graphic violence. The series was reinvented by Gray Matter Interactive in 2001. Less frantic than the original, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* placed more emphasis on story and exploration and diversified the gameplay, as might be expected of a development in the post-*Quake* (id Software 1996), post-*Half-Life* era. Nerve Software developed the multiplayer aspect of the game, and this was then spun off into *Enemy Territory* (Splash Damage 2003), a free multiplayer-only game. In 2009, id collaborated with Raven Software and Pi Studios to release *Wolfenstein,* a reboot that added the equivalent of magic powers and upgrades to the expected mix of supernatural cyborg Nazis. It was generally favorably received, with many critics noting that, it delivered in terms of competent gameplay what it lacked in inspiration or originality. It also proved that blasting undead Nazis had lost none of its charm in the seventeen-year interim.

To understand *DOOM,* you really have to understand *Wolfenstein 3D* and the seeds that were planted within its development. In essence, *Wolfenstein 3D* established a set of conceptual design constraints, in its refusal to

be counted alongside games like *Ultima Underworld. DOOM* might add complexity in the form of lighting, shifting environments with a vastly bigger range of textures, switches and lifts, and a bevy of demonic enemies to battle, but *Wolfenstein 3D* set the ground rules. This was 3D arcade gaming without compromise. Everything else was disposable. A conflict around this lack of compromise set the ground for id's first major split and, arguably, its transition into a grown-up company.