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DOOM

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The Speed of Light Sucks

The Rise of id

The meteoric rise of id Software is the stuff of gaming legend, a larger-than-life tale of ambition, ego, and raw talent. In what is likely to remain the definitive book on early id, *Masters of DOOM: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture*, Kushner (2003) argues that what ultimately catapulted id to fame was the collision of two exceptional talents—John Carmack and John Romero—coming together at a hinge point in the development of gaming as a medium. Without underplaying the equally exceptional supporting cast (Adrian Carmack, Tom Hall, Kevin Cloud, Sandy Peterson, Jay Wilbur,¹ and a host of others), Kushner clearly sees Carmack and Romero as the Lennon and McCartney of gaming. Maybe comparing them to Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious would be more appropriate, only without a Malcolm McLaren operating behind the scenes. If the story of id can be read as the American dream in action and then a cautionary tale of its implosion, it's also straight out of punk, pure and simple.²

I'm not going to rehash chunks of Kushner's book here. It's a really great book and very readable, and you should probably hop across to it straight after this if your interest in id has been sparked. I'm going to keep us focused here on the frothing petri dish that spawned the monster. What follows is a brief, potted history on who made *DOOM* and why. It's important to note that not everyone agrees with Kushner's emphasis on the two figureheads at id. Todd Hollenshead, now CEO at id, thinks reducing the *DOOM* team to the two most visible members doesn't do justice to the spread of input and

talent across the studio. In particular, he singles out Adrian Carmack's art as being underrepresented when *DOOM* is talked about.

Adrian is a supremely talented natural artist who never got enough public credit back in the day for the work he put in on *DOOM* and *DOOM II*. If I can speak to his contribution, it's his imagination that created basically all of the demons in *DOOM*. He was quoted once as saying, "I have nightmares and then draw them," which is probably not far from what really happened. The story has been told over and over that it was John Carmack and John Romero that created all the old games, with Carmack being the technical genius and Romero being the game designer. That makes a good story, but that's not how I see it. First of all, those games were developed by the whole team, with everyone making substantial contributions. Crediting just two people on the team with the majority of the work is misleading. John Carmack's tech was and remains amazing, but it is gated by the quality of the art. It was the imagination of Adrian Carmack that brought it all to life. (THo)³

The id story begins at SoftDisk, a subscription company that first rolled out its monthly disc for Apple II computers back in 1981. Romero joined the company in 1989, after an abortive start-up venture seduced him away from Origin, his first major professional role. After a period making games to be released on the standard SoftDisk monthlies, Romero, along with Jay Wilbur, convinced the company to create a specialist game disc, *Gamer's Edge*. The *Gamer's Edge* group recruited a programmer named John Carmack, who was already creating waves in the gaming scene, and Adrian Carmack, who was an intern at SoftDisk at that point. The group also roped in Tom Hall, although he didn't officially join the team at first. The core team of id Software came together and, in the face of a relatively unenthusiastic SoftDisk, began to hatch their plans for world domination. The major breakthrough, according to Kushner, came when John Carmack managed to re-create Nintendo's console side-scrolling on the PC, in a prototype aptly titled *Dangerous Dave in Copyright Infringement*. Romero was quick to see the huge potential for this and for PC gaming to break out of the rut of slow-moving, strategy- or adventure-based titles, reclaiming a more arcade-styled territory from the burgeoning console market (although the team did send a PC port of *Super Mario Bros. 3* [1988] to Nintendo, who declined to pick it up). When SoftDisk failed to live up to the ambitions of

the team members, they decided that they were going to go it alone, if with a little “help” from SoftDisk. In real terms, this meant “borrowing” computers from the office outside working hours and hiding their developments from the rest of the company. The game became *Commander Keen* (1990), and was released as a trilogy, the first part of which went out as shareware (the model also used for *Wolfenstein 3D* and *DOOM*). Keen was a hit, starting a relationship with Scott Miller’s Apogee and signaling the end of employment with SoftDisk, which, despite being less than impressed with being the unwitting hosts for id’s embryonic phase, recognized the potential of the team that were calling themselves “Ideas from the Deep” and tried to cut a deal with them. It failed, and “Ideas from the Deep” was shortened to “In Demand” and finally “id.”⁴

id Software was officially formed in 1991 and released *Hovortank 3D* the same year, alongside fulfilling some outstanding contractual requirements for SoftDisk. In *Hovortank 3D*, we can see the development of both technology and design toward the gameplay and aesthetics of *Wolfenstein 3D* and *DOOM*. There are no textures (just block colors), progress through the game is much more sluggish compared to the later titles, and the gameplay is as much about rescuing hostages as blasting bad guys; but the groundwork was being laid.

Perhaps what defines early id more than anything else was a singularity of vision and ambition that still leaves most games companies standing in the dust. Historically, of course, the partnership of Carmack and Romero fractured messily and publicly, although whether this was due to a breakdown in shared vision or the pressures of a sudden catapulting into celebrity is open to some discussion. The first tension, however, centered on Tom Hall, who was primarily responsible for the vision of the *Keen* series and voiced unease about the direction in which the new game in development, *Wolfenstein 3D*, was headed. Quite simply, the breakthroughs in technology being driven by John Carmack were creating potential for Adrian Carmack to explore a darker, bloodier stream of consciousness. At the same time, Hall remained committed to fusing arcade action with more complex stories, something that marginalized him in the face of the highly simplified, cartoon content that other members of the team were pushing toward. Following *Wolfenstein 3D*, Hall was anxious that *DOOM* should have something resembling a story. He contended that there was no reason why the gameplay could not be fused with more complex diegetic content. The *DOOM* Bible, which is discussed in the next chapter, clearly shows this

vision beginning to emerge. However, it did not fall into line with the singular thrust of the rest of id's vision. Despite continuing to work on *DOOM*'s early development, Hall resigned in 1993. The vacuum was filled by Sandy Petersen, the creator of the paper-based RPG *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium 1981), a man for whom gothic, hellish worlds and their denizens were a staple diet. Peterson and Romero took on the core responsibility for the level design on *DOOM* (including working from some of Hall's drafts). Bobby Prince, the audio designer for *Wolfenstein 3D*, returned, bringing to the project a thumping metal soundtrack that, in its own way, has left a legacy to game audio that has been as influential as *DOOM*'s technical or visual legacy.

There's no doubt about the fact that id, particularly Romero and Carmack, became true rock stars of gaming. After *DOOM* became an overnight sensation (again, there's no hyperbole in that), the studio parking lot was packed with high-performance sports cars. Romero, in particular, was not just famous for designing *DOOM*; he became a real figurehead, the Big Daddy of Deathmatch and the public face of the company. While Carmack retreated back into pushing the next wave of technology forward, Romero very publicly lived the celebrity high life, as high profile a gamer as he was a developer. During the buildup to and release of *DOOM II*, Carmack was already working on the *Quake* engine, and tension was beginning to build in the company. American McGee was recruited as a level designer, joining Petersen. *Quake* was beset by delays and technical issues, and Romero was increasingly blamed for a lack of direction in the team. In particular, the uneasy mix of fantasy and sci-fi in *Quake*, which could, not entirely unfairly, be caricatured as more of a tech demo than a game, may have been rooted in the ongoing splintering of vision at the heart of id, manifesting in the disparate and somewhat clumsy mix of levels presented in the game. *Quake*'s story, such as it is, feels like a halfhearted bolt-on, an attempt to cover up the lack of cohesion in the final product.⁵ Technologically, *Quake* is a marvel, but in terms of gameplay and aesthetics, it doesn't really have the fine-toothed balance that made *DOOM* such an outstanding achievement—although I'm perfectly happy to accept that a vast army of fans will probably disagree with me there. Either way, the struggle to make *Quake* left an unbridgeable schism at the heart of id, and Romero, facing an ultimatum from the other owners, resigned on August 6, 1996.

What happened next is outside the scope of this book, but in terms of putting *DOOM* in context, the preceding account should start to paint a

picture of the organizational mentality, the unique hive mind, that spawned *DOOM*. First, a major thing to draw from this account is best summed up by Romero:

I grew up in the arcades, and so naturally I wanted the arcades on the computer. And John did too, so our natural instinct was always to make things as fast as we could make them, to mimic the arcades. (JR)

Although both Carmack and Romero had been programming games for PC for some time, this drive to get back to the arcades permeates the decisions made building up to *DOOM*. The speed of *Wolfenstein 3D* was a radical departure from contemporary PC gaming, and to embed this sense of pace into a game as detailed and dynamic as *DOOM* was a major factor in making the game stand out. Second, id was a small, fast, hugely ambitious company of people who were as uncompromising as they were obsessed with games and game technology and with a vision of where these might be headed. The old adage of not making an omelet without breaking a few eggs is particularly apt to the early years of this company. Third, calling id “punk” (i.e., a rebellious counterculture group) is not just a sound bite but a really quite accurate metaphor of the way the company thought and worked (although the personal musical tastes ran more toward metal). id was put together in a back room of a larger company, fighting against perceived lack of vision and ambition, with little desire to kowtow to received wisdom or commercial pressure. This wasn’t just a snotty refusal but was underpinned by a profoundly perceptive understanding of the new opportunities opened up by bulletin board systems and other networking technologies. Equally, like the best punk bands, id’s games may have sounded simple on the surface, but beneath the high-speed two and a half minutes of noise, there was a very deep and serious understanding of the medium and the technology. In other words, the members of the id team might have been making an unholy noise, but they could *really* play their instruments. They just chose to turn their backs on prog. Fourth (and closely related to the third point), the team was made up of gamers, through and through, and based both design and business decisions on staying true to a culture they still felt very much a part of. Romero’s well-documented love of his own games is not just luck, ego, or a result of living the development dream; it drove the types of games id made. While this is true of all developers to one extent or another, it’s this instinct that arguably led to the multiplayer sections of *DOOM* becoming

as important as they did. What's more fun than arcade games? Competitive arcade games! What makes tabletop RPGs and battle gaming so much fun? In part, it has to be the unpredictability of other people, the fact that they learn, experiment, shift tactics, and try to outsmart you in a way that artificial intelligence at that time just couldn't get close to. And there's the pure, simple fun of fragging a friend. I look forward greatly to the days when the sound of Romeroesque bellows of "Eat death, shitmonkey!" echo around the corridors of retirement homes and when octogenerian deathmatchers show the young whippersnappers a thing or two about rocket jumping. That's quite a legacy. Finally, in an era where extensive market research, playtesting, and publisher pressure are only, largely thanks to the rise of the indie scene, starting to lose their grip on creativity in game design, *DOOM* still feels very much like a gamer's game. It retains the edge of old-school bedroom development, as idiosyncratic and uncompromising as *Llamatron* (Llamasoft 1991) or *Elite*.

A few other things leading to *DOOM* should be mentioned. Hall, from early on in the Keen trilogy, was interested in representing the consequences of the player's actions. The shift in graphical quality made it possible to show the player what shooting might do, in a heavily reduced, stylized way of course. It's interesting that what ended up as brains popping out in a cartoon spray in *DOOM* actually started with the notion of a moral imperative, ironic given *DOOM*'s supposedly demonic influence on teen violence and desensitization. Equally, the fact that id shifted quickly from *Hovertank 3D* to *Catacomb 3D*—from vehicular HUD to avatar HUD—is worth noting. John Carmack ties this in to the rhetoric and expectations of virtual reality that were very much part of the landscape at the time. In fact, he argues that the virtual reality (VR) scene offers an important contextual backdrop for understanding some of the development decisions that went into the process of refining the 3D engines from *Hovertank 3D* to *Catacomb 3D* to *Wolfenstein 3D*.

And all the while we were doing *DOOM*, there was all the talk about VR as a high concept. . . . I mean, there were already flight simulators out there, and people were talking about virtual reality, touchy-feely, Jaron Lanier, that sort of stuff. . . . But it isn't exactly clear that people would have taken 3D out of the simulationy slow-based world and turned it into this action stuff in the near-term that we wound up doing that in. That probably was the key contribution of the whole *Wolfenstein 3D*, *DOOM*,

Quake legacy, is making it work on a very fast-paced, adrenaline-fueled action game, when 3D was restricted to these much more sedate simulation, almost academic interest things. Of course, that's all games are: you're going in there, you're interacting with a simulation at some level, but it's not necessarily a simulation of reality. . . .

But the thing that hooked people, that got them in there, was that it was really the first time in gaming you had the ability to project yourself into this world. You know, when somebody got surprised by something in a traditional arcade game, they could be sweating and intense about it, but you'd be like "Dammit, you lost!" But in a first-person game, when you turn around a corner and there's something you didn't expect, especially in the early days before people became somewhat inured to it, we had people literally falling out of their seats. You don't get this from any other style of game, and that's when we knew we were pushing on something a little bit different. (JC)⁶