DOOM

Dan Pinchbeck

Published by University of Michigan Press

➡ For additional information about this book
   https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24184

CHAPTER 7

All Hell Breaks Loose

Launch, Sales, and Critical Reception

We're nearly ready to take a stroll through Hell and hit the game in detail, but before we do that, we need to look at what happened on December 10, 1993, the day that (to hijack W. B. Yeats) a "rough beast, its hour come round at last," slouched onto the University of Wisconsin's FTP system to be born. I've already spent a little time setting the context for *DOOM*'s launch, but it's worth reiterating some of that, for reasons that will become clear.

In 1993, we've got a few home consoles on the market, and they are doing fairly well. Sony is twelve months away from launching the first PlayStation in Japan and twenty-one months from a European and North American release. There is little crossover between console and PC gaming. As Romero noted, PC games are largely more complex, sluggish affairs. Home computer games have, of course, been around since the early 1980s, but graphics as we know them now are still in their comparative infancy. Equally, this is prior to game retail chains and any kind of formal online distribution like Steam. Internet access happens for most users through modems (56.6 kilobytes per second is a reasonable speed), and there's no World Wide Web yet. E-mail is around, of course, as well as text-based things like Gopher, Telnet, bulletin board systems, and the occasional MUD. But there's a hardcore community (or network of communities) online who are already trading information and, more important, files, an embryonic online distribution network. Frans Mäyrä sees this as a time of rapid expansion, arguing that *DOOM*'s success is closely tied to the explosion of the Internet around this time.

There was an increasing demand for content designed for PCs, and these computers were rapidly becoming interconnected into a global communications network. The release of the free *DOOM* shareware version through the Internet and BBS systems benefited from both trends of development. (Mäyrä 2008, 103)

Technically, *DOOM* wasn't shareware, which might sound like splitting hairs, but the technicality is actually pretty important and pays tribute to Scott Miller at Apogee Software, who, in many ways, built the launch ramp *DOOM* took full advantage of. Jim Knopf and Andrew Fluegelman take credit for inventing the shareware scene of the late 1980s and '90s, each independently coming up with the idea to ask users for voluntary donations in return for free distribution and use of their programs. They were swiftly introduced to one another following the public release of their work, coordinated application names (PC-File and PC-Talk), and set a standard suggested donation of twenty-five dollars. The model took off, according to Knopf (1995–96), at a staggering rate. He argues that several factors were responsible: not landing the user with "clumsy copy protection schemes"; lower pricing than commercial retail applications; an extended trial period by the very nature of the system; and independence from retail, giving the model a sense of novelty. At this stage, the term being used for the model was either *freeware* (copyrighted by Fluegelman, so not in general use) or *user-supported software.* In 1984, a competition was launched by Nelson Ford to find an alternative, and *shareware,* reappropriated by Bob Wallace from earlier, pre-IBM usage, came up tops (Ford 2000). Ford was also responsible for the creation of the Association of Shareware Professionals (ASP), formed in 1987, to protect both creators and consumers from less reputable shareware practices. The concept of shareware was simple: you got it for free and then donated to the creator if you liked it. Ironically, although shareware gaming died out in the late '90s, it's seen something of a revival in the last couple of years in the independent game sector, with indie developers asking for donations for their work and occasionally living quite comfortably off the results. The Humble Indie Bundle is a recent case in point.[1]

Right on top of the formation of ASP, shareware was picked up, pioneered, and then adapted into a more robust business model, by Scott Miller and his company Apogee. Miller cut his teeth as a game programmer, with a couple of text-based adventures under his belt, and in 1987, he

tried out the new version of sharewaring for the ASCII-graphic top-down action-adventure title *Kingdom of Kroz.* Rather than giving players access to the full game and then retrospectively asking for a donation, Miller released the first episode of the game for free and then charged players to get the rest of it. We can get an idea of how this worked from the text on the registration screen of its sequel, *Caverns of Kroz:*

> This is not a shareware game, but it is user-supported. If you enjoy this game you are asked by the author to please send a registration check in the amount of $7.50 to Apogee Software. This registration fee will qualify you to order any of the other Kroz volumes available. . . . [A list of Kroz games follows.]
>
>   . . . Each game is priced $7.50 each, any three for $20 or all six for only $35. You'll also get a secret code that makes this game easier to complete, plus a "Hints, Tricks and Scoring Secrets" guide and "The Domain of Kroz" map.

As an aside, it's remarkable that pretty much the same principle of added downloadable content and secret codes unlocking unique objects is at play now, as the idea of extending a game beyond a disk (or download) to a more dynamic, active relationship with the consumer becomes the norm. This is reason alone for Miller to be recognized as playing an enormous role in the development of business models for the games industry. It's also interesting that this Apogee model (as it is generally known) actually contributed to the design and structuring of *Wolfenstein 3D* and, subsequently, *DOOM*. It relied heavily on online distribution, which, given the constraints previously noted, meant that games had to be screwed down incredibly tight in terms of overall size. This also pushed them toward episodic structures, with the action broken into self-contained but linked units that offered an initially free but complete package while leading on to further purchases. As Kushner notes, shareware games were distributed via modem, which meant they had to be relatively small in size; they also needed to be split into discrete episodes of action, to allow players to sample free versions before committing to buy. In other words, shareware more or less inevitably pushed any developer interested in the model toward not only arcade-style gaming but also some kind of rolling story or Intellectual Property (IP) that would naturally extend beyond the free segment into the monetized one(s). Large interwoven role-playing games just weren't going to work; the sense

of completeness of the free section of the game was critical. As Hall points out, "People were kinda iffy on demos, but getting a whole game, then two more if you register was a great incentive" (THa). Ford made a similar argument, noting that what really made the Apogee model work is that the free games were "complete and playable," as opposed to "some programmers' attempts to cripple their software to force payment, leaving users frustrated and angry" (Ford 2000).

id had adopted the Apogee model (or been adopted by Apogee, depending on how you look at it) from *Keen* to *Wolfenstein 3D,* and there was a fair bit of anticipation for *DOOM*, built by leaked alphas and the occasional hyperbolic press statement. When *DOOM* hit, everything was set to send it stratospheric, assuming, of course, that the product was right. Although Mäyrä is right that *DOOM* was slotting into pop culture in a particularly well-timed way, I'm not sure he gives the game enough credit when he argues it should not be seen "as an isolated incident in the history of digital games" (2008, 103). The shareware model, the rise of the Internet, pop-culture links to films like *The Evil Dead* and *Aliens,* and the heavy metal scene certainly added fuel to the fire. Cloud attributes a measure of *DOOM*'s success to being in the right place at the right time, at least as far as shareware's capacity to bypass publishers and get more idiosyncratic visions directly into the hands of the target market, a process we have seen repeated in the recent indie explosion.

> And of course, we were in a very lucky spot with this whole shareware craziness. Creativity has a chance to grow through the concrete, and you get small teams of guys out there kicking ass and doing some very cool things. And that's where shareware gave an opportunity to a handful of guys who wouldn't have been able to put together a proposal for a publisher for the life of us. . . . We could get together, put something out, and if people like it, they sent us a check. Worked out. In a different time, that would have been a challenge to do. (KC)

But it's doubtful whether a weaker game would have achieved the extraordinary impact of *DOOM*. Romero, while reinforcing how important shareware was, argues that the technology (manifesting most vividly through the visuals) and the sheer speed of *DOOM* went a long way toward wowing the crowd. When he says that "the greatest game that anyone had played . . . was FREE—that was huge, huge, huge," the fact that *DOOM* arguably *was*

the greatest game anyone had played was the deciding factor. Carmack concurs with this estimation, arguing that *DOOM* was one of the first games to break out of the ghetto and achieve a visibility outside the closed world of gamers and geeks. For him, this ties back to the discussions of virtual reality that had a degree of visibility in the public domain: *DOOM* actually seemed to be delivering what had previously only been theorized about, promised, or represented in a movie. He describes it as a "critical threshold of presentation" (JC). There was also the brilliant notion of allowing anyone to sell the shareware version of *DOOM* retail, rather than just relying on online distribution. Romero elaborates,

> When we were marketing *DOOM*, the reason why the title screen on *DOOM* says suggested retail price $9.99 was because we told everybody that could put the shareware version of *DOOM* in a box in any store that they could keep all the money. We didn't want any money, we just wanted the game in a box in a store. So when you went to the store back then, in the United States at least, you could see ten boxes of *DOOM* on the same shelf, and they'd all be from different manufacturers in different boxes, but they all had the same thing in them. (JR)

DOOM exploded. For obvious reasons, it's impossible to track the actual distribution of the shareware version. We've already seen claims of more than ten million installations, and VGChartz estimates 2.85 million units for the PC version, although this may include the 1995 retail release of *Ultimate Doom.* Tellingly, even id has no idea exactly how many units were eventually sold.

Critically, DOOM was an instant hit, racking up an impressive array of awards. In 1994, it won Game of the Year from *Computer Gaming World,* both Game of the Year and Game Innovation at the European Computer Trade Show, Technical Excellence awards from *PC Magazine,* Best Action Adventure from the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences, and Best Sound and Music from *MegaGames.* It was a reader's choice finalist for *Multimedia World*'s Best Action Arcade award in 1995 and was the runner-up for Action Game of the Year from *Strategy Plus* in 1994 (beaten at the post by a relative unknown called *DOOM II*). It also picked up the Best Overall Product Franchise award from *Videogame Advisor* in 1996.

Members of the press were ecstatic. "Four letters, one syllable and a major international phenomenon. Never before has a computer game gathered

such a cult following" was Jeffrey Adam Young's take on things in the December 1994 issue of *Video Games* magazine. "Never a dull moment . . . we want more," gushed *PC Format,* giving the game a rating of 92 percent and a *PCF* Gold Award. *Computer Gaming World* was left in no doubt either. Bryan Walker's 1994 review is the breathless rave of a true believer.

> *DOOM* is a virtuoso performance. Stunning graphics, pulse-pounding sound, intense gameplay, and multiplayer mayhem combine to form what is probably the best action game to date.

Walker puts in the kind of reviewer's complaint that developers can only dream about.

> The resulting adrenaline surge, mixed with the tremendous suspense of the hunt, actually caused me to break my cherished Thrustmaster joystick! That's how intense multiplayer *DOOM* can get!

He then notes reports of deathmatch getting banned at various corporations—at which point an editor's note suggests it's on the verge of being banned at *CGW.* Elsewhere, Denny Atkins of *Compute!* was being seduced by the game despite himself.

> No computer game you've ever seen has graphics and sound like this. Three-dimensional texture-mapped buildings, the smoothest scrolling you've ever seen, and tension-building sound effects draw you into *DOOM*'s reality. The game is ultraviolent, with monster guts splattered throughout the levels as you play. I hesitantly admit feeling a perverse sense of pleasure when I figured out how to make a monster's guts actually bespatter the walls. This isn't the game to let your children play when you're trying to teach them the evils of violence, as *DOOM* definitely glorifies it. (Atkins 1994)

It's customary to talk at this point about the controversy that surrounded the game, although it's not something I particularly want to dwell on, partly because this book is about the game itself, rather than how it got co-opted into political battles, and partly because doing so means trotting out material that's already been covered at some length. The short version is that *DOOM* launched at about the same time that political momentum was already

building to do something about violence in the media and particularly in games. Seventeen years later, this appears to be something of a cyclical pattern, despite the interim period producing no convincing evidence of any short- or long-term harmful effects of playing games. *Wolfenstein 3D* had already raised a few hackles with its Nazi blasting antics, so as new graphics upped the ante in terms of what the *DOOM* Bible called "beefy chunklets" or orbs of innard, it was no surprise *DOOM* would be swept along in the hysteria. It's important to note, as Kushner (2003, 153–58) points out, that antigaming rhetoric had been kicking around since the early 1980s, but the timing of *DOOM*'s release was spectacular, arriving roughly twenty-four hours after Senator Joseph Leiberman issued a demand to the games industry to start rating games or face government intervention, on the grounds of violence and addiction ruining the world (again). As Denny Atkins put it,

> If Congress is concerned now about the level of violence in electronic entertainment, let's hope nobody mails a copy of *DOOM: Knee-Deep in the Dead* to Capitol Hill. This latest blastfest from id Software (creator of *Wolfenstein 3-D*) is a graphic extravaganza that's completely free of the kinds of redeeming societal values found in SimHealth—unless you can find social value in cutting up mutant undead soldiers with a chain saw. (Atkins 1994)

DOOM's creators were and remain more or less nonplussed about controversy over the violent content of the game. Jay Wilbur shrugged off the question in *Video Games* magazine.

> That only comes up when the press asks about it. The public don't care. I haven't been in contact with politicians other than to know that people on The Hill [Capitol Hill, where Congress sits] are playing it. I don't believe in censorship, but I wouldn't oppose something that states *DOOM* is violent. (Young 1994)

Carmack was happier to engage with the debate but remembers being assigned minders to "kick him" if he started to discuss the subject with journalists. He says his position has always been that he is "happy to offend the easily offended." Both he and Cloud maintain that an important point not usually dwelt on is that the *DOOM* player is the hero; there are none of the moral ambiguities of *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design 2001), *Fallout 3,* or even *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios 2010).

In our games you always were the hero. You know, you're supposed to be defending humanity against the forces of evil. You're not going to go and pull a Gandhi against the forces of Hell; you want your heavy armaments. (JC)

In any case, the debate over games and violence is one for another time and place, short of noting that *DOOM*'s brand of cartoon gore and Satanism-lite ensured that it entered pop culture as a controversial entity even for those who had never played it or had any intention of playing it. For those who did play, the spread of the shareware version was extraordinary, with the networked multiplay aspect of the game threatening to make true id's claim to be the "number one cause of decreased productivity in businesses around the world." Kushner reports that Intel and Carnegie Mellon, among other organizations, banned the game due to system load problems.

I've made the case that id, if not actually unique, was comprised of a pretty uncompromisingly focused development team in a very special place and with a very special mind-set. We've seen how *DOOM* grew naturally from the world of *Wolfenstein 3D* and beyond, back through a long and important tradition of first-person gaming. I've discussed how it mutated and changed through its development, and I've shown how this was supported by technology that was genuinely groundbreaking. All of this sets the scene. Now it's time to actually get our hands covered with gunpowder and entrails and to examine, in a bit more detail, "the greatest game ever made."