The Demons of DOOM: A Pseudo-Religious Perspective

A discussion on the enemy of the iconic shooter game franchise and how they are seen by people from different religious backgrounds

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Introduction

Ever since its release on December 10, 1993, *DOOM* has captivated gamers around the world. In fact, even prior to its release, the id Software-developed first person shooter was on the minds of many - it was unlike anything anyone had seen before.

The game's engine contributed greatly to this. Programmed solely by John Carmack, one of id's co-founders and the company's lead programmer[1], the *Doom* engine, later known as id Tech 1[2], was revolutionary in more ways than one. For one, Carmack designed the engine so that the game's assets could be freely modifiable by its users - in this way, he wanted the game to support modifications after seeing what skillful hackers had done to id's previous FPS title, *Wolfenstein 3D*[3]. Another aspect of the engine that contributed to its revolutionary nature was its rendering engine, which, instead of the rectangular mazes of *Wolfenstein 3D* and other prior attempts at FPS games, would render angles beyond the previous 90-degree limitation, as well as varying floor and ceiling heights. As an added bonus, the renderer, if not introduced, at the very least actively utilized diminished light levels[4].

Technical jibber-jabber aside, eventually *DOOM* also captivated me. I was 12-13 years old when I had my first taste of the 2004 title *DOOM 3* in 2007. I was visiting a friend, having heard prior that he owned a copy of *DOOM 3*. Having secretly lusted after the game for three years or so, I popped it in and played it for a while. But then I found out he also had the original *DOOM*. I insisted on trying it out, and...

The rest, as the famous saying goes, is history.

Since 2013, I have also been an active participant in the *DOOM* community. I visit the community site *Doomworld.com* on a regular basis, lurking around its forums. Many interesting discussions take place there, especially the ones that regard the recurring enemy in the *DOOM* games: *demons*. However, even as interesting (and sometimes downright odd) as those discussions are, none that I have seen have discussed the demons in a religious or even pseudo-religious context. That is where this essay comes in.

For purposes of background research, I conducted a survey which I posted namely around Facebook[5][6] and Twitter[7]. A great part of this essay will consist of the results of that survey, as my research is largely centered on it.

For the sake of fairness, I feel the need to clarify that I myself am non-religious. A former Christian, I resigned from my country's church at the turn of 2013. However, I will not go through my converting from Christianity to atheism in detail at any point, since it would serve no

purpose for the sake of the essay. Neither will I discuss my own experiences or thoughts on *DOOM* beyond this introduction.

I should also mention that this essay will not be academic in the strictest sense. I will not go entirely by the rules of proper academic language, but I will not go entirely against them either. In a sense, I will situate myself into the happy medium - "non-academic academic language", if you will.

With that, allow me to immerse you into *The Demons of DOOM: A Pseudo-Religious Perspective*.

How id Software Decided on the Theme and How It Was Received by a Mormon

The internal motives at id Software for the demon thematic for *DOOM* were presumably less than religious. The guys were great fans of the sci-fi movie *Aliens*, so their initial idea was to base their upcoming shooter title - *DOOM*, that is - on that movie, essentially making a licensed game out of it. Jay Wilbur did some research and found out that the rights were available. Eventually, however, id figured they preferred not to have a multi-million-dollar company breathing down their necks, telling them what could and could not make it into the final product. Furthermore, they thought Carmack's latest technology - what was to power *DOOM* - was "too impressive to compromise".[8]

Conveniently enough, Carmack had been developing the idea of demons in his head. He presented his idea to his colleagues, among them Wilbur, John Romero, Adrian Carmack and Kevin Cloud, who approved of it. Kevin and Adrian especially, being fans of the movie *Evil Dead II*, were enthusiastic about the possibility of incorporating a gruesome, gritty art style into the future blockbuster. The rest of the guys agreed to the idea, hence the seed for *DOOM* was sown: it was to be a mix of *Aliens* and *Evil Dead II* - "horror and hell, blood and science".[9]

The idea was met with general approval not only by the co-founders, but also by a future employee of id. The employee in question, hired for the development of *DOOM* after id's main game designer Tom Hall left, is Sandy Petersen. Petersen had sent his résumé to id and made a note about being Mormon on it. Romero was especially concerned about the matter, stating to Cloud that he did not want someone who would be presumably against the game's demon thematic. However, if reluctantly, he agreed to have Petersen come over when Cloud insisted so. The following is a quote from Petersen when Romero decided to probe him about his Mormonism:

"Look, don't worry. I have no problems with the demons in the game. They're just cartoons. And anyway, *they're* the bad guys."[10]

Other Perspectives

Id's internal perspectives aside, *DOOM*'s demonic theme was not received quite as acceptingly everywhere else. Religious organizations especially criticized the game, if not for the idea of killing demons, at least for its satanic imagery.[11] David Grossman, a former Army Colonel and founder of the Killology Research Group, described *DOOM* as a "mass murder simulator" on the American TV show *60 Minutes*.[11][12]

Within the *DOOM* community, on the other hand, the apparent love for the game's theme has gone as far as to question the criticism the game has received from religious parties.[13] In the thread referenced, the OP (forum jargon for "original poster") presents the following statement:

> "This is something that has irked me since I was little. Religious people (specifically western Christians) seem to criticize *DOOM* or any game and movie depicting demons even though they are the villains. YOU KILL THE DEMONS! That is a good thing."

In the same thread, two other posters replied with the following statements:

> "A lot of Christian parents see violence (like shooting in *Doom*) as a way children become conditioned to violence in the real world. This is why many Christians blamed the Columbine Massacre on *Doom* (Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold played it.) Bunch of shit obviously, but there are fanatics out there for everything."

> "It's the occult and satanic references they'd be objecting to, and *Doom*'s not short of them. Some fundies have probably convinced themselves (and are attempting to convince others) that regardless of a game's objective, exposing players to such unwholesome material results in their minds being warped so they become Satanists, mass murderers, tree-hugging liberals and/or (worst of all) atheists."

This goes to show that if not everywhere else, at least within the *DOOM* community the demons are seen as a positive choice as far as religion is concerned.

The survey I conducted yielded more or less similar results. Over a span of 5 days, it received in all 54 responses. The survey consisted of five questions, the first of which was an open-ended question in which I asked the respondents to describe briefly how they felt about the demons being the enemies in the *DOOM* games. The rest of the questions were simple multiple-choice questions intended for demographic purposes.

The second question covered the *DOOM* titles the respondents had played. I included six major titles of the franchise: *(Ultimate) DOOM*, *DOOM II: Hell on Earth*, *DOOM 64*, *Final*

DOOM, *DOOM 3* and *DOOM 3: Resurrection of Evil*. Of the 54 respondents, the most, 51, had played some version of *DOOM* or *Ultimate DOOM*. The second place was shared between *DOOM II: Hell on Earth* and *DOOM 3*, each scoring 50 respondents who had played them. 44 respondents had played *Final DOOM*, 38 *DOOM 3: Resurrection of Evil* and 28 *DOOM 64*.

The last three questions were simple questions about the respondents' age, sex and religion. The largest age demographic was respondents of 19-25 years of age, with 21 respondents. 14 respondents were 18 or younger, 13 were 26-35 and 6 were 36 or older. As for sex, surprisingly enough, all respondents were male. As far as religion went, most respondents, 31 of them, were non-religious. 8 respondents were Christians, 1 was a Mormon and 9 were from other religions. 4 respondents preferred not to specify their religion.

Among the first responses I received was a relatively short but striking response from a 36+-year-old baptized respondent:

> "They have to be demons, shooting people or animals is just plain wrong. Demons enforces [sic] the fact that *DOOM* is a game, not real life."

Another (much longer and more elaborate) response came from a non-religious 26-35-year-old respondent. He presented the following thoughts:

> "It was some kind of breakthrough in video games for me since for the first time (in my knowledge) you could actually fight "demons" from Hell. Demons were the perfect enemies: in our (occidental) culture, they were the embodiment of pure Evil. I didn't remember to have seen this before. When I first played *Doom* it was my first real contact with Hell and demon's theme, so it had a real impact on me. More than anything else the "gory-satanic-hellish" style was truly new for me, it was my real first violent video game. It was great because at the time it meant for me video game would not just be "toys kids" [sic] but also deal with serious matters.
>
> On a more political/religious topic, *Doom* unveiled the religion hypocrisis [sic]: you are actually fighting demons in this game and the same game is accused to promote Satanism by religious establishments. *Doom*, because of the Demon Theme, wasn't only important in video game industry. It was also important in human society to unveil the paradoxes of the way we think daily. It's when I played *Doom* that I started to feel critical against religion. I didn't care much about it at the time, I was not raised as a religious person. Also France (I'm French) has a strong laic culture. But seeing how Christians and other religious [sic] treated *Doom* made me despise them. Later I was more and more convinced that religions were just bullshit.
>
> *Doom* was the starting point of it. And this is why I think *Doom* is more than just a game: it was the match which put fire to the beautiful curtains hiding the ugly truth about religions.
>
> Hence why I consider this game to be EXTREMELY important on a cultural point of view."

The following response, on the other hand, came from a presumably teenaged Christian respondent:

> "It's a pretty good idea for an action game. It would logically avoid alienating people. No matter who you are there's no moral ambiguity with demons. You can slaughter them without guilt."

The bulk of the responses, however, were less impressive, offering next to no religious or moral insight. Among them were responses such as "Rip and tear their guts! Kill 'em all!" and "Hellishly Awesome". One specific response did stand out, though, from a 26-35-year-old non-religious respondent who said to feel "indifferent" about *DOOM*'s demonic theme.

Drawing Lines between Age, Religion and Views

The responses of the survey were strikingly consensual - I did not receive a single response that took a negative stance towards the demonic theme in *DOOM*. The textual content between responses, however, did differ greatly; some were rather elaborate, even several paragraphs long, while others were short and simple. Another difference occurred in the amount of religious or moral insight that the responses presented.

Taking into account the possibility that (some of) the non-religious respondents were formerly Christians, their views, for the most part, did not differ much from other respondents from a moral perspective. In fact, between responses from all religions that comprised the survey's demographics, I could see no immediate differences. As far as religious and moral insight went, all respondents seemed to more or less agree that demons, as the primary enemy, were the perfect choice in the sense that they do not have (many) moral-challenging qualities. For instance, the latter two of the three responses quoted above present rather morally neutral views on the matter.

As for the connection between the respondents' views and age, this is where I started noticing a difference between the insights offered by the responses. The two younger age groups, 18 or younger and 19-25, comprised a total of 35 respondents, and although most of the responses from these age groups were not religiously or morally insightful but more so mere brief (sarcastic) remarks, a few surprisingly insightful responses did come from these age groups as well. However, most of the more insightful responses came from the other two age groups, 26-35 and 36 or older. Once again, looking at the four-paragraph-long response quoted above, the respondent presents his thoughts not only from *a* perspective but rather *several*: a nostalgic and a religious perspective.

Since the entire pool of respondents consisted of males in terms of sex, no conclusions can be made on differences between responses from male and female respondents here. I did wish

to get at the very least one response from a female respondent, but alas, I had no such luck. Therefore, as it stands, it can only be speculated as to how female respondents would have seen the demon thematic of *DOOM*.

Conclusion

Returning to the conception of *DOOM* - and, specifically, its theme - the lack of a religious motive within id's own circles did not translate as such into religious communities, evidently enough. Criticisms of the satanic themes the game is rife with continue to this day, albeit not necessarily in the public.

However, among the *DOOM* community, even its religious participants, a more or less unshaken consensus seems to dominate that killing demons is not (or should not be seen as) a bad thing by any means. If the player assumed the role of a demon and ran around slaughtering humans in the game (which was made possible by the infamous *DOOM* mod *DOOM: Rampage Edition*[14]), it is safely established that things would have been different, if not worse. As things currently stand, however, the demonic theme of *DOOM* is criticized with next to no just reason in the eyes of the community that has grown around it.

References

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