

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Doom
Platform: PC/PS4/Xbox One/Switch
Genre: First-Person Shooter
Release Date: May 13, 2016
Developer: id Software
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Creative Director: Hugo Martin

Overview

A man wakes up, chained to a stone sarcophagus. Explosions are heard, and sparks fall from the ceiling of a recently abandoned futuristic laboratory. Zombie-like demons roam the room and approach the man. Without hesitation, the man breaks free of his chains, by sheer strength alone, and crushes the demon's head on the edge of his stone tomb. After grabbing the nearest weapon, he goes from room to room, killing every demon he finds. The Doom Marine has awakened.

Characters

- **Doom Marine (DM1-5 or Doom Slayer)** – The player character and an ancient enemy of Hell's demons. He once slaughtered legions of demons until being trapped and entombed within a cursed sarcophagus. He was guarded by demons until UAC (Union Aerospace Corporation) found and extracted his tomb, relocating it to their Mars Base prior to the events of the game.
- **Demons** – The threat that the player combats throughout the game. They are monsters from Hell that invaded Mars after humans began connecting to and taking energy from Hell.
- **Samuel Hayden** – He is the Chairman of the UAC and the one responsible for siphoning Argent energy from Hell as a power source for humanity. Before dying, he developed an artificial body to preserve his mind and continue working. He starts the game as a contentious ally but eventually develops into an antagonist by the end of the game.
- **Olivia Pierce** – She is the Head of Biochemical research at the Argent Facility and leader of the mysterious Lazarus Project. She serves as an antagonist, trying to open up a portal to Hell and escalate the demon crisis.

- **VEGA** – The central mainframe computer and autonomous artificial intelligence of the Argent Facility. VEGA is the only other entity, besides Samuel Hayden, that helps the Doom Marine fight the demon threat.

Breakdown

The *Doom* franchise has always had a tenuous relationship with narratives since its original inception. The lead designer for *Doom* (1993), Tom Hall, wrote the *Doom Bible* prior to development, describing a game with greater narrative focus and backstory than the final product [5]. However, this design was thrown out and John Carmack, lead programmer of *Doom* (1993), famously said, “story in a game is like story in a porn movie; it’s expected to be there, but it’s not that important” [5]. On the flip side, *Doom 3* had a more conventional gaming narrative, complete with cut scenes, characters, and dialog attempting to seriously tell the story of demons from Hell invading a Mars base.

During the development of *Doom* (2016), the reboot of the franchise, the team struggled to find a narrative balance befitting of the *Doom* name [2]. They wanted to include a story, but they feared that dry exposition and a traditional serious tone would look ridiculous and only detract from the combat-focused experience [2]. However, this tumultuous narrative development led to a story perfectly suited to *Doom*’s gameplay.

In order to make any narrative work, the game needed to establish a tone appropriate for the world and gameplay systems developed. If the game was too serious, the concepts of a demon invasion, Hell energy, and an ancient Doom Slayer warrior will appear ludicrous and the player won’t accept them. If the game is too silly and becomes a parody, players will not take the threats of the world or the horrors of Hell seriously.

To address this concern, the game creates a perfect balance of the two, being both self-serious and self-aware. Major characters like Samuel Hayden and Olivia Pierce take the world seriously as they consider the fate of humanity and dangers of a demonic threat, but the Doom Marine and much of the presentation push the absurdity of the premise to the extreme. Hugo Martin, creative director for *Doom* (2016), refers to movies like *The Last Boy Scout* (1991) as an example of using self-aware humor to acknowledge cliché or ridiculous situations and make them acceptable and more entertaining to audiences [2]. Moments like the Doom Marine going through an animation of placing his weapon inside the final boss’ mouth, for no reason beyond showing one last gruesome kill, or the UAC hologram using corporate language to normalize topics like weaponizing demons reveal that the game is completely mindful of its ridiculous nature and wants to have fun with it.

However, the pivotal element that allows the entire narrative to work is the design of the player character, the Doom Marine. In a game where the developers anticipated series fans would be annoyed by the presence of cumbersome dialog and story sections that stop the player from getting back into the action, the Doom Marine is a character that echoes this sentiment. He is a silent character whose only emotion is a primal hatred of demons. It would be easy to dismiss him as merely a vessel for the player, but he is a character that makes value judgements throughout the game. He doesn’t care about humanity’s Argent Energy and seems to actively hate Samuel’s use of Hell’s energy for

technological development. He simply wants to find every demon or anything from Hell and destroy it.

Because of this attitude, he obviously comes into direct opposition to Samuel Hayden's wishes. In one instance, Samuel tries to reason with the Doom Marine to carefully disable the Argent filters, which produce usable Argent energy, and the Doom Marine simply smashes it with his foot. Even on the final filter, Samuel warns that destroying it will stop all Argent energy production for the entire solar system. In response, the Doom Marine decides that the best way to destroy the machine is to tear the filter out with his bare hands. But Samuel Hayden is more than a narrative foil to the Doom Marine; in a very real sense, he is the driver and main conveyor of the game's story. Many decisions of where to go and what to destroy come from Samuel and the majority of instances where the Doom Marine is given a lengthy piece of exposition come from Samuel. Samuel represents the more traditional story that the Doom Marine rejects.

In this way, by opposing Samuel, the Doom Marine opposes the story itself, rejecting any opportunity to engage with the narrative and instead wishing only to continue his demon slaughter. The developers anticipated that many Doom fans would not want to engage with the story, so they created a character that matches this emotion and the game is better for it. This reflects a narrative philosophy seen in the game, creating the narrative around the gameplay of the player.

Many people joke about the unrealistic nature of the original two *Doom* games, from the player character running at ridiculous speeds to the absurd number of weapons the Doom Marine carries. The latter of which is so famous that it ended up as an experiment on *Mythbusters*, testing how many weapons a soldier could carry while still being fast and effective in combat [1]. However, instead of reigning back the unrealistic gameplay, id software made the narrative reflect his absurd abilities. He is no longer a normal space marine of previous games; he is the ancient Doom Slayer and an eternal enemy of Hell's demons. Instead of creating a traditional character with relatable weaknesses and emotions, the Doom Marine is the awesome demon-killing monster that the game encourages the player to be. The narrative recognizes the power of the player as demons fear his presence and characters worry that he could thwart their plans. This more fantastical origin not only gives the player a greater sense of the power-trip that *Doom* (2016) is designed to generate but allows for greater gameplay opportunities. The Doom Marine having unbelievable strength or being able to absorb Argent cells is not a point of confusion, but a natural evolution given his supernatural nature.

This gameplay focused narrative-design could easily be valued as a detriment to the story, like the game doesn't care about its story, but I think it gives the game its cohesion. Sometimes players complain about a dissonance between play and story, like the two were developed in isolation. *Doom* (2016) doesn't have that effect, the narrative is critical to the experience. It gives the game its spirit. Listening to Samuel Hayden say his work is for the betterment of mankind while the Doom Marine glances down at the dead scientist on the floor is a perfect example of the game's tongue-in-cheek black

humor. The combat, the music, the art direction, and the narrative all come together in a complete vision of *Doom* (2016).

Strongest Element

The strongest element is the Doom Marine himself. He simultaneously serves as perfect vessel for the player projecting themselves into the world and the power-fantasy of gameplay, while still retaining unique character and a sense of identity. Actions like breaking the control panel that Samuel tries to speak through or finding the most creative way to kill a cyberdemon are synonymous with Doom Marine's aggressive and irreverent behavior. Despite being a significant change to the protagonist of a classic franchise, the fanbase has embraced this new Doom Marine for moving him closer to what *Doom* means.

Unsuccessful Element

The most unsuccessful element is easily the game's ending. It is strong from a gameplay side, giving the player a good boss fight and quickly wrapping up Olivia Pierce's story; however, it lacks a real resolution for Samuel Hayden and the Doom Marine. After killing the Spider Mastermind, Samuel pulls the player back from Hell to take the crucible, a large demonic sword used to close the portal between Hell and the UAC's Mars base. Samuel tells the Doom Marine that he's won, and the game is over but that he will continue harnessing Argent energy for the benefit of mankind. He states that he and the Doom Marine will never agree on how to handle the demons and ends the speech by sending the Doom Marine to an unknown location. The game cuts to the title before the Doom Marine even finishes teleporting. It's a very clear lead-in to a sequel and just feels incredibly anticlimactic and unsatisfying. Players that grew invested in the story of the Doom Marine and Samuel are left in the cold with only the hope that their stories will be continued at a later date. It leaves a bad taste in the player's mouth right before rolling the credits.

Highlight

The highlight is easily the beginning of the game. I, like many, worried about a reboot of *Doom* (1993), thinking that its gameplay could not be translated to a modern setting and anticipating the beginning of the game to be reminiscent of *Doom 3*'s slow atmospheric opening. I was pleasantly surprised by picking up a gun within seconds of the game's start and immediately jumping into combat. The real shock occurred after a monitor gives you a quick rundown of the situation and your current objective. The screen changes to an audio call with Samuel Hayden, suggesting he and the Doom Marine should work together in a way that "benefits [them] both." In response, the Doom Marine aggressively shoves the monitor out of the way and continues his demon hunting spree. It encapsulates everything wonderful about *Doom* (2016) from the ridiculous "demonic invasion in progress" warning on the monitor to the Doom Marine's disregard of story engagement mirroring the player's current emotions while sending a clear message about his character.

Critical Reception

Brad Shoemaker reviewed *Doom* (2016) for Giant Bomb and awarded the game five out of five stars. He praised the writing and dark humor as “somehow gloriously stupid and extremely smart at the same time.” He especially loved how the game alludes to the new Doom Marine being the same “doomguy” from the original two games and the delicious absurdity of viewing him as a divine avenger from in-game Biblical myth. [6]

Arthur Gies reviewed the game and gave it an 8.5/10 on Polygon. He wasn't impressed by the story component of the game, confused by the narrative trying to do more storytelling while being trimmed down as much as possible. He suggests that the game lacks the sophistication that its tone between being “in on the joke” and being “dead goddamned serious” implies. Ultimately, he summarizes the story as an occasionally intrusive justification for fighting monsters and getting guns that functions as a distraction to the main shooting gameplay. [4]

Lessons

- **Find the Right Tone:** Games often feature ridiculous mechanics on insane worlds, but that often means conventional tones may not be the best fit. A serious emotional love story may not belong in the gameplay of a grindhouse shooter. Every game has a perfect tone buried beneath; through experimenting and searching, it can be found. It took viewing an unlikely buddy-cop movie for id software to find *Doom*'s tonal voice.
- **Narrative Should Reflect Gameplay:** While games are capable of incredibly stories, players engage with the world through gameplay. Instead of fabricating a narrative to play alongside your game, look at the mechanics and details that set your game apart and develop the narrative from those elements. Those narratives will become more impactful when they derive from the act of playing the game.
- **Focus on Gameplay Doesn't Mean a Bad Narrative:** It is no secret that *Doom* (2016) is more focused on combat than storytelling; however, recognizing this improved the story. By making the player character reflect that gameplay-first attitude in the story, the player is like-minded with the Doom Marine and can more easily relate and connect to the story.

Summation

Doom (2016) accomplished a monumental undertaking. It not only rebooted a classic franchise whose gameplay didn't seem compatible with modern design sensibilities but created a compelling narrative to a series that originally considered narrative expendable. Despite being a voiceless protagonist, the Doom Marine feels like a defined character in sync with the actions of the player. The self-aware humor allows the ridiculous demonic imagery to be used without falling into the traps of being overly-serious or a self-parody. A story for a *Doom* game sounds oxymoronic, like its presence should taint the purity of id's shooter gameplay. But the story of *Doom* (2016) seamlessly fits with its gameplay and world, almost as if this narrative has always been a part of *Doom*.

Work Cited

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