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Second in a series

A WAD -- more properly a PWAD, or Patch WAD -- is a collection of resources. The majority of PWADs that you'll find online patch only the MAP resources for one or more levels. Some WADs alter graphics and sounds and sometimes even sprites (e.g., monsters).

On some occasions you must warp to the level that is changed; other times it starts with the logical Map 01 (or E1/M1, in Ultimate Doom). Check the inevitable READ ME file, when in doubt -- or if it looks like nothing has changed from regular Doom.

You have to poke around to find the good WADs. Some of the best WADs patch only the maps, adding a new place to wander, explore, and frag. Often, things like graphics, sounds, and new monsters are overrated -- the level design is generally what makes or breaks a good WAD.

But cool new sounds and textures and graphics are nice, too. So are new weapons, my personal Doom fetish. I happen to love Snake, a WAD that gives you twin handguns, twin chainguns, a sword, a flame thrower (yeeess!), and an exploding frisbee, er, discus. I happen to think that most of the levels (except Level 2) are pretty boring, even for deathmatch, but that's easily remedied. Just warp to one of the regular Doom II levels that lie beyond the patched ones. (Or, using a WAD editor, remove the offending levels so you're left only with the patched weapons.)

Blasting off

When I load up a new WAD that I've downloaded (using the guidelines described in MDR#3), I always start out on Hurt Me Plenty. In my mind, a good WAD should be tough, but passable at the middle skill level. I should have to save a lot. A good multi-level WAD should leave me with about a megabyte of saved games to throw out when I complete it. If I don't feel the need to save often, that means the game isn't very difficult, and I don't fear that I might get totally creamed around the next corner.

Not to say that there's not something to be said about just rushing in, blasting away and not giving a damn much about whether I make it through

to the other side. Actually, I find it's much more satisfying if I save a lot and then get swept so fast into the action that I forget for a stretch, because I'm too busy watching my butt to stop and hit Command-S. I usually save multiple versions of each level, at varying degrees of progress and health. That way if I get to the end with 1 percent health and the next level is crawling with critters from hell from the start, I can restore to an earlier point when I was doing much better. This happened recently when I played the excellent multi-level WAD called Torment. I entered the penultimate level with next-to-zero health and an army of sergeants and Cacodemons descending on me. I restored to a better position and worked my way through more carefully, preserving my health a bit more carefully. It was great!!

Careful design

The best WADs show more than good aesthetics. They demonstrate good planning. One of the best WAD experiences I've ever had was with Diamonds (reviewed in MDR#3). The thing that made it exciting was the lack of ammo.

Yes, you heard me right. The WAD did not have every weapon known to man lying in the room right outside the entrance. Hey, if I wanted that, I'd just hit 'idfa' and be armed to the teeth. What I liked about Diamonds is that I discovered I could defeat some of the more horrendous monsters with much less weaponry than I ever imagined. In fact, it taught me just how effective the chaingun and shotgun can be in certain situations.

The fact is: If there's more than one BFG 9000 in a WAD, it's probably too much. If you find a plasma gun in the first five minutes, you're probably not going to have as much fun as you would if you have to defeat a Revenant and a Mancubus with a Super Shotgun and a lot of running and dodging. (I love the way the Mancub makes a deep "Bwa-aa" sound each time I hit him with a shotgun. I could do that all day!! But enough about my hobbies.)

Puzzles and secrets are an important part of a good Doom WAD, but they shouldn't dominate the game. There's nothing more frustrating than getting through the better part of a level and then getting stuck, hopelessly, without a clue how to continue. (Short of typing 'idclip' and passing through a few walls like Casper, the friendly mercenary.)

The last word

Playability is the most important factor. Design and new graphics are nice to look at, but they don't mean a damn if you can't find a reason to play 'em. Likewise, you can go too far the other way, and make things too demanding. I like puzzles, rooms packed with surprises, and levels that demand careful

conservation of ammo. But if you can't finish the level without cheating, you're not going to get that deep inner peace and feeling of fulfillment when you're done.

I also like new sounds that enhance the action (like in Torment, where the new door and lift sounds lend an otherworldly feel to the place) and graphics and textures that add to the sense -- not that I'm playing a whole new game -- but that I've entered a whole new world. If the graphics distract too much, they've not served their purpose. They should suck you in to the game.

That's what makes a good WAD file. When you forget that you're playing Doom, and all you can think about is getting off Mars alive or saving the Earth from demons, you've hit just the right chord. It's a killer riff, somewhere between "Stairway to Heaven" and "Smells Like Teen Spirit." You're in the zone, and...

Oh, hell, I forgot to save.

What do you think makes for a good WAD? Let us know at reeltime@voicenet.com, and we'll include your thoughts in a future issue of MDR!