

Knocking off Doom:

The Doom Clones: From Battle Frenzy to ZPC

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Editor's Note: Two authors contributed articles on Doom clones for MDR#9. The first piece is a comprehensive review of current and upcoming offerings by Danny Stuyck. It's followed by a preview by Tarl Roger Kudrick of a ZPC beta that was mistakenly released on the 'Net.

Unless you've LITERALLY been living in hell lately, you've probably been to a computer store and seen a game that has a behind-the-gun perspective: a Doom clone, more or less. But, you see, Doom actually isn't the thing everyone is cloning... it's Wolfenstein 3-D! As everyone surely knows, Wolf 3-D is that pretty cool game (also by id Software, before the split with Apogee) where you run around with high-powered weaponry killing Nazis.

But, you may ask yourself: Why do so many people want to CLONE Doom (or Wolf 3-D)? Well, as id CEO Jay Wilbur said to FLUX magazine, "When we're first, they give us a t-shirt with a big bullseye on it."

Now, you may think all of these cheap, 8- or 16-bit ripoffs of the best game ever made all suck. Some do. What I've done is compiled a big ole' list of the take-offs (and ripoffs) of Doom so you can: 1) see how many clones there are, and 2) see if you should invest any money on a Doom clone if you've already whipped Doom.

In alphabetical order:

Battle Frenzy: Kinda sucky. You run through a compound killing things, then you blow up the core and run out before the place goes up with you in it. The exit is the entrance where you start. You have a good deal of weapons, but the Genesis was dead when this came out. (Genesis)

Blake Stone (both games): After Apogee broke up from id, they wanted to release a game BEFORE id did. Well, they hired Jam Productions and used the Wolf 3-D engine to make a Sci-Fi game with aliens (ooh, scary). Well, seven days after Blake Stone was released, the demo of Doom appeared, and it completely crushed Blake Stone. Nowadays you can find both Blake Stone games in the Bargain Bin (and they've probably been there for about four years without being touched). (PC)

CyberMage: Darklight Awakening: A good game based on the D.W. Bradley (Wizardy creator) comic book. You get to use Doomish weapons and magic, one in each hand! There are a multitude of weapons and spells for you to mess with, plus a lot of enemies to try them on. Also, you can get into tanks and hovercars that are placed in the city and other areas where you fight. All logical placement. Plus, there are adventure game aspects, like having to earn enough cash to fight in an arena to win a prize that will let you get out of this level. A lot of killing and other cool things make this a pretty good package. Very big system requirements. (PC)

Dark Forces: The Star Wars variant of Doom. You are Kyle Katarn, freelance mercenary, who has been hired by the Rebels to destroy the Dark Troopers, who pose a threat to the Rebels. This game has a cool story, a good deal of cut scenes, and missions that are pretty logical. Let's see: In three of the missions you blow things up by placing detonators, in two you have to hitch a ride on the transport, in two more you have to find someone, and in the rest you'll have unique objectives like stealing the Death Star plans or turning back on the power in a city that got bombarded by the Dark Troopers. This game was the first to institute jumping and ducking, to my knowledge, plus it featured the first variants of popular 'Net play weapons. Though Dark Forces has no network features, it does have some weapons which you can tell were original in its day and were copied by some games today. The Mines, for instance, which can either go off in two seconds or go into motion detector mode and will blow once some gets too close. A very good game. (Mac, PC)

Descent: This game is probably the most original Doom clone I've seen yet! It was developed by Parallax Software, which is a (secret) joint production by Apogee, Interplay, and id, under a different name. Interplay seems to have snagged the rights to Descent and thus, they published it (without giving credit to Apogee or id). In Descent, you must blow up mine shafts to stop the aliens that have taken over the robots from leaking out to the world. Quite an interesting story. Anyway, you use four laser powers, a ton of missiles, and other cool goodies to blast through the 20-plus levels. It's in full 3D (360 degrees!), which makes this game unique. It is a combination of flight sim and Doom. It's definitely worth the download if you like the idea of total freedom and you want to get dizzy. (Power Mac, PC, PlayStation)

Descent II: Ah! The return of Descent. As stated above, Apogee, id, and Interplay are Parallax. Well, for this sequel, some of the people who got hired in created this, with id and Apogee working on projects. Descent II uses the same engine as Descent, but also offers up several new items. You get floodlights, six levels of lasers, the Earthshaker missile, more than 30 new types of robots, new levels, the Guide-Bot (which guides you through the levels), and the Thief-Bot (guess). Also, the scenes in which your Pyro is

flying out of the mines are now done in 3-D rendered animation, a step forward from the original, blocky game graphics used in the first. A good sequel, but it could have been better. (Power Mac, PC)

Duke Nukem 3D: Super-bloody and ultra-violent, this game comes close to the Doom experience -- and it is truly amazing. In it, you are Duke Nukem. Equipped with a jet-propelled motorcycle, you set out to seek revenge only to discover that the world has been taken over by aliens. You begin your battle against evil in the cesspools of Los Angeles, then advance through a variety of locations, including strip bars (don't forget to tip), sewage systems, moon bases, rocket test sights, on the moon's surface, and then back through a huge metropolis filled with alien scum. As if this weren't enough, Duke 3D builds on the point-and-shoot mentality of basic Doom. Sure, you can still dust anything that moves, but now you can do it with the RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade), the Freeze Gun, The Pulverizers (fires hundreds of mini-stingers from both hands), Pipe Bombs, and Trip Wires. Other cool tools include your new HoloDuke (think Total Recall), jetpack, night vision and scuba gear. Sloping surfaces, coupled with the ability to jump, duck and blow up corpses after you've killed them with a non-exploding weapon makes this a must-see. Download it! (PC, Mac version planned)

Escape from Monster Manor: Pretty lame. It has some spooky monster effects but with only one gun and just the average walk around the corner and shoot the spooky undeads gameplay, this one's a stinker. (3D0)

Giza: Compared to the other games, this game really is bad. But, it has a story to be told. You see, this is pretty-much the ONLY "home-brewed" 3D engine ever! Yep, some guy made this engine and didn't go commercial or sell it. It doesn't institute features that are common as A-B-C, such as look up or look down, but still it's a fresh break from all the other kill-them-all games. In Giza, you need to find out the secret of the pyramids before they are demolished in 48 hours. To do this, you need to use your powerful laser, which runs on crystals, to maneuver your way around the pyramids, picking up pieces of an ancient puzzle. Some pieces are fakes, others aren't, so there's a puzzle going the entire time you play it. By touching other crystals you get other colors of lasers, which destroy certain pieces of the wall, allowing you to move through the pyramids. There are also traps and enemies to deal with. You have no guns, so you'll have to outmaneuver all of the above. It may not be a technical achievement, but it shows what a shareware programmer can do. (Mac)

Heretic: This, in my mind, is probably the third-best of all the Doom clones. (My first choice is Duke 3D, followed by Marathon 2: Durandel.) Heretic is an extremely creepy game set in a medieval atmosphere. But then, where else can you wander through a dark labyrinth, only to be cornered (and most likely, killed) by some damn gargoyle or the omnipresent and ever pesky

undead? Heretic's strength is its atmosphere. It also was one of the first to offer players the option to look up and down (Marathon was first). Heretic also instituted an element that has been parodied a lot recently -- the ability to fly and deal "death from above." Heretic offers a total of seven weapons, but each one can be ramped up to super-weapon level for 30 seconds by using the Tomb of Power. (I guess you technically have 14 weapons, when you add in the super ones.) What does this mean to the player? Well, the Magic Gloves can become fire-spewing ultra killers for 30 seconds (that's always fun). Personally, I love 'Net games because of the unlimited opportunities to transform opponents into chickens and torture them. This is a damn good game and you should download it if you have access to a PC or Windows simulation program (e.g., SoftWindows). (PC)

Hexen: Sequel to Heretic. Covered in MDR#7-8. (Mac, PC)

Ice & Fire: A game by the creators of Tetris, you have to unthaw all the frozen scientists and battle evil probes that haunt the labs. A good game but, really, it isn't anything new, except for the use of mirrors. (Mac, PC)

In Pursuit of Greed: A cooler version of Doom, slicker in the sense that it has SVGA graphics, bloodier because there's adjustable gore, "phater" in the sense that you have the Ass-Cam™, badder in the way that you can play as one of five different characters, and fresher in the way every character has different weapons. The only problem was this: It was just too unknown. With no publicity, it has only found its way onto a couple of demo discs (bundled with magazines) and never really went retail. It's pretty damn fun and if you look up In Pursuit of Greed on Yahoo!, Infoseek, or search.com you'll find a cult following of Web pages. I really like this game a lot, so, for people with SoftWindows you should DEFINITELY download the demo. (PC)

Kileak: The DNA Imperative, Iron Angel of the Apocalypse 1 & 2, Kileak 2: All bad robot shooter games. Very bad. (Saturn, Playstation)

Killing Time: Now you're talking! Killing Time is one of the coolest games I've played. And if you have a 3D0 (which not too many people do), you'll want to buy this game! It's weird how it mixes The 7th Guest and Doom together. To describe it best, Killing Time is The 7th Guest and Doom meet The Godfather. As you wander a desolate island boasting a spooky mansion, you'll see ghosts doing what happened on that night, performing what they did. You'll also have a patch of screw-ups that'll come at you, including Mutant Clowns (IT! IT! IT!) and Psycho Butchers with lots of knives. The music is nice and changes when you enter a different area. The cool thing is, Killing Time is non-linear, so you have freedom to move around. You also get cool weapons and a Tommy Gun! (3D0)

Marathon: The original cult hit smash. You are a security officer on the colony

ship of Marathon to stop the aliens inside from taking control and attacking the Tau Ceti colony planetside. It's the first game to use look up and look down controls, plus it was the second Mac shooter ever was released. A good download, but the game is a little dated with cartoony graphics. (Mac, PC)

Marathon 2: Durandel: In this sequel to the cult hit Marathon, your mission is to help Durandel, the rogue AI from the original game, find the eleventh tribe of S'pht. Sure, some missions are a little challenging (ready to take on an ENTIRE fighting battallion?!), but there are some easy tasks to be had as well (e.g., basic exploring tasks). All the weapons found in the original can be found here, plus a pair of new double-barrel, hyper-fast reload shotguns (very nice). The gun offers two triggers, each equipped with a different type of shot. Players also can control double weapons (fists, pistols, and shotguns). Marathon fans will be happy to know the sequel offers up plenty of swimming and water, plus some vocal, interactive comrades who will help you out. Watch out, though -- if you get trigger happy and shoot one of these guys by mistake, there is a chance one of his comrades will seek retribution. Of course, these guys are stupid, and might end up in the line of fire anyway -- and that doesn't help you much, now does it? Also be on the lookout for fake "BOBs" -- they will blow up in your face. Overall, a good game. (Mac, PC/Win 95)

Pathways Into Darkness: The first Mac shooter (which I personally hated). It has very cartoony graphics, sloppy play control, and your gun is so damn weak that you can't live for very long at all! I'd move, strafe, turn, wait, ambush, and do everything to kill this enemies, but it was too time consuming and you died too fast. Still, it's a cult favorite that didn't sell nearly as many copies as Marathon. (Mac)

PO'ed: Doom with a sense of humor. This game started on the 3D0 and is now coming to PC and Playstation. You're a cook, a lá Under Siege, armed only with a frying pan. Now, you've gotta blast through FARTING aliens and more to get a jetpack, the Meat-Seeker, and other weapons to kill the aliens fast so you don't ruin your pies! (PC, 3D0, PlayStation)

Quarantine: A first-person car game where you have to manage your funds by picking up clients in your cab, and also have to recharge at energy poles. It's really bloody, too. You'll need to look out of all your windows to blast punks who are trying to kill you in the screwed up town of Kemo. Get the demo. (PC)

Rise of the Triad: Quite possibly bloodier than Doom, believe it or not. Rise of the Triad, better known as ROTT (now that is a gruesome name!), offers the player five character options. Pick one and prepare to start your mission, which is stopping the Triad. To achieve this, you have to blast your way through the Triad compound. (The game notes that you considered running

away, but those naughty Triad members took the liberty of blowing up your boat.) There are approximately 13 different weapons in ROTT. Some include dual pistols, drunken bomb launchers (beer bombs that you light up), and rocket launchers. You deal death from one of 10 different blood settings (from the child level to ULTRA BLOOD, which has to have a password you set for it -- kinda dumb, really), plus enough other good stuff to make you forget this engine is a rip off of Wolf 3-D's engine! But, they push the engine TO THE EDGE! You can mark the walls with your weapons, use the bounce pads to jump up more than 800 feet to get to secret ledges, kill while looking up and down, run, spin, strafe, and even play a 16 person 'Net game! It's a good bet that if you play this using SoftWindows, you'll have a field day. (PC)

Road Warrior (sequel to Quarantine): No longer do you need the advanced strategy, now you take pre-set missions. They are kinda stupid though. One of them says: Blow up the car taking (insert name here) because he has banned wet t-shirt contests (with women, hopefully, NOT MEN!). But, you always can kill that huge mechanical mouse... (PC)

System Shock: The game by Origin which has you, the busted hacker, waking up in the SHOGAN space station to find SHOGAN has gone nuts. It's more of an adventure game than an action game. It has many amazing things you can do that other games HAVEN'T done yet, including leaning and ducking. Also, you'll find plenty of items plus the ability (the first time ever done in a game!) to walk with the keys and control where in your view you are shooting with the mouse (like in the upper left hand corner). It needs a good system to run, but it's still a good adventure game. (Power Mac, PC)

TekWar: A sci-fi game based on William Shatner's series. Uses the Build engine. This just plain sucked. (PC)

Terminator: Future Shock: Pretty dull, steep learning curve, but you can drive cars and planes. (PC)

Terminator: Rampage: Good game, came out around the time of Wolf 3-D. (PC)

Terra Nova: It's kinda Doomish, but it's more like MechWarrior. Great game though, buy it TODAY! (PC)

Witchcraven: A cool fantasy game using the Build engine, but it's too glamour-esque and not enough good gameplay. (PC)

Witchcraven II: Coming soon. (PC)

Wolfenstein 3-D: It may not be glamorous, but it's the game that made Doom what it is! It's pretty cool and the best-known level editor for Mac (WolfEdit)

combined with FKey will let you plug in new levels to the full version of Wolf 3-D. Though this doesn't feature any multiplayer support (hey, this game is seven years old!), it still has enough Nazi, Mutant, and Hitler killing action to feed your blood thirst. (Mac/PC)

Wolfenstein 3-D 2: Spear of Destiny: More or less, it's more levels, new sounds, new textures, some new enemies, some new objects, etc. It's simply a (much-needed) face-lift for Wolf 3-D. If you have the right computer, and you lovvvvveeeee Wolf 3-D, this would be a good purchase. (PC)

Zero Tolerance: Pretty sucky. It has sucky graphics and is just a bore. (Genesis)

So many clones, too many clones! Well, now you probably have an appreciation on how good Doom is, with all the clones that fail, and the occasional gem that takes gameplay to a new level.

ZPC: A Sneak Peek

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ZPC, which stands for Zero Population Count, is a game developed by Zombie and GT Interactive that's built around the Marathon 2 engine. Certain elements, like map view and the preferences screens, are hardly modified at all. Other modifications are a bit more prominent.

Surely, the biggest question in a developer's mind, when working on a game like this, has to be: How can we use an existing game engine without just making a different-looking version? How can we make our game DIFFERENT? There are several big differences between ZPC and M2. Some are good, some are not so good.

Ideas of strict realism, as far as environment and such, seemed to go out the window on day one. A promo I read for ZPC called it something like "a comic book you play." The colors are strong and garish. Lines are thick, as if inked with a brush. It's a little surreal and, in my opinion, very effective. The key word here is STYLE.

This game's visual imagery is very, very stylish, and you'll either like it or find it horribly distracting and ugly. I happen to like it.

There's a lot more ambient sound in ZPC than in M2. This is both good and bad. It's good because, in a lot of places, the ambient sounds work as music. And it's eerie and militaristic music, and I think it works. Unfortunately it also seems to bog the processor down and requires a significant amount of RAM. Using the same settings as M2, I consistently get about 3 fps fewer in ZPC than in M2, and I noticed that even when the frame rate counter (they kept M2's counter) *said* I was getting the same rates as M2, the game still FELT slower. Not only that, but the ZPC demo's "preferred" memory setting is 12MB (although its minimum is 4MB, just like M2). M2's "preferred" setting is about 8MB. I think the music has to do with why ZPC wants more RAM. However, there are plenty of ways to lower the RAM requirements (and increase frame rate): Drop from 16-bit to 8-bit color, lose a couple sound channels, go from high-res to low-res graphics, etc.

There are three big differences between ZPC and M2 that have significant effect on game play:

Healing. There are no shield chargers. Instead, every dead bad guy leaves behind a large, silver-colored teardrop which, I guess, is their life essence or something. You run over it and your own health goes up. Your "kpm" rating, which I believe stands for "kills per minute," also goes up. ZPC's version of the weaponless attack is the "chi punch," which sends waves of force at an enemy. With a high "kpm," the chi punch does more damage. (At least that's my impression. Serious experimentation will follow.) By the way-- one Usenet poster has pointed out that you can aim the chi punch at the ground and grenade jump, but without causing yourself any damage. I've got to try that!

Saving the game. ZPC finds an approach that I think is the best I've seen yet. In M2, of course, you can only save games at certain locations in maps. In Doom and some similar games, you can save anywhere, anytime. With ZPC, you have to find objects called "memory orbs". By using a memory orb (each one can only be used once), you can save the game. This way, you can save anywhere you like, but you still can't save every time you kill a monster like in Doom. The save-game strategy in M2, which is "where are the pattern buffers and how can I plan around them", is replaced by "I can only save one more time-- where should I do it and when?"

Game difficulty. ZPC is significantly easier than M2, even on the hardest difficulty setting-- the supposed equivalent to M2's "Total Carnage." For one thing, every dead bad guy helps you heal, so it's easy to remain at or near

full strength. Throwing twice as many bad guys at you really doesn't have the same effect in ZPC as in M2 for this reason. Second, the weapons seem more powerful. One grenade will wipe out a cluster of bad guys even on the hardest setting. Then again, you have far fewer grenades, so maybe that evens things out. But maybe not.

I'll say this. On my first try, once I figured out that you should only use the machine pistol at close range (you'll see), I got through the whole demo without dying. And, believe it or not, without saving the game! (I hadn't figured out how to at first.) This was on the fourth difficulty level, equivalent to "Major Damage" in M2. I died more than once on Level 1 of M2 the first time I played it at that difficulty, and I had to save quite a few times.

Summary: ZPC uses the M2 engine, but it is NOT an M2 ripoff. It has striking, dramatic artwork and ominous, moody sound. It has very different ways of healing and saving the game, which has a real impact on strategy. It seems sluggish compared to M2, but it's still quite playable. But it's also significantly easier than M2.

Maybe that's because the game I played was a demo. But probably not.