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Wolfenstein 3D: The first game that ever made my pulse race

1. *Wolfenstein 3D* (roughly based on the old *Castle Wolfenstein* games for the Apple II) was released in 1992 as a DOS game by id software. (It was later ported to the Macintosh by MacPlay, a great Mac gaming company which was recently acquired by United Developers.) Its development team was quite a bit smaller than the football-team-sized groups of many games today. It was made by now-legendary programmers John Carmack and John Romero (Jason Blochowiak is credited with "additional programming"); artist Adrian Carmack (no relation, of course); and Creative Director Tom Hall.

2. *Wolfenstein 3D* is a first-person shooter from the perspective of BJ Blazkowickz, a WWII Allied spy who has just jumped his Nazi captor, acquired a gun, and is now trying to escape. How is he going to escape? Why, by shooting every Nazi in his path, of course. This was the first really successful 3D, first-person shooter games, and the idea that a game should be more than just shooting everything in your path and then beating a boss hadn't really come into being. And frankly, puzzles and crafty storylines just weren't necessary. In 1992, the fact that you could navigate a 3D environment and use a gun that it looked like you were carrying to actually shoot people who looked somewhat 3D themselves was so cool that no one really cared if the most complex thing you had to do was find a key to get unlock the last door on the level. In fact, *Wolfenstein 3D* could

be seen as a reaction to the cerebral puzzle games that the primitive graphic systems of early PCs forced designers to come up with. Just look at the name of its developer: id Software. The id is the part of the psyche that unconsciously seeks to fulfill our most primitive needs. And if you find the idea of negotiating a text-based world full of princes and fairies a bit lame, what's the one thing that you're probably absolutely aching to do? Blow some godless Nazi to a freaking pulp. Don't think, dammit! Shoot! Twitch! Anything in *Wolfenstein* that moves needs to be killed. This is pre-*Goldeneye*—in which if you shoot the scientist you can't get the data and you fail your mission. This isn't even networked *Quake*, where there could be a half-second of indecision before you hit the trigger because that flash of movement could be someone on your team. No. If pixels shift on the screen, you must shoot them—because whatever they are sure as hell wants to kill you. So simple, and that's exactly the point.

3. The phrase "the technology that makes the game" is particularly apt when discussing *Wolfenstein 3D*, because the technology really does *make* the game. Side-scrolling had been done for years; first-person 3D is what made *Wolfenstein* so cool. As a side-scrolling game, this would just be *Contra* inside and with Nazis. Sure, first-person 3D had been done in games like *Battlezone*, but *Wolfenstein* was so much more complex than those early wireframe games. And, of course, you're a person rather than a tank, which also intensifies the experience.

When I downloaded the demo in order to write this paper, I was a little disappointed in the graphics. I remembered them being smoother so many years ago. I figured this was just nostalgia, but in poking around on the Internet, I realized what it

was. When I first played this game, I played it on a Mac; I have since joined the Dark Side. Before PCs started to come with such ridiculously accelerated, chock-full-of-RAM graphics cards, the Mac had a dramatic graphics advantage—which was why it so frustrating that PCs became the dominant gaming platform. Although my PC has one of those fancy graphics cards, *Wolfenstein* hasn't been updated to take advantage of it. Hence, it still looks chunky, and at some resolutions, there's distortion. If you make the screen too small, instead of the graphics getting sharper, the game just gets harder and harder to play because the graphics stay pretty much equally pixilated, but get smaller. Fortunately my computer is fast enough to do just about anything *Wolfenstein* demands of it, but I imagine it might have been more frustrating with a 20Mhz 386. id does claim that it will run on a 286; I'm not sure I'd want to try.

The enemies in the game are not the exquisitely rendered, finely detailed graphics that made id one of the premiere computer gaming companies—they're basically primitively animated rectangular prisms. They have a front, two sides and a rear. The animation isn't generally exactly in sync with the movement of the sprite as a whole, so sometimes they seem to just kind of float on over to you. When I was first attacked by a dog, it took me a minute to realize he was attacking me and not just gnawing on thin air.

When I first played the game way back when, I only used the arrow keys to control the player, because that was what made sense to me, given the types of games I was used to playing. As I loaded up the game again, I was happy to notice that id not only let you use a mouse, but a joystick or the Gravis GamePad (which resembled a Super Nintendo controller in layout and cost, as I recall, about $50.) Initially I tried to re-create my initial experience with the game by just using the arrow keys, but that quickly

became frustrating after so many years of mousing, so I switched over. The mouse control feels quite different from the kind that *Quake* and *Unreal* had accustomed me to—it's more of a sluggish one-to-one feel than the more modern control models which incorporate mouse speed and acceleration. I was surprised that moving the mouse forward and backward didn't cause the view to move down and up but rather caused the character to step forward and back, until it occurred to me that there was, of course, no reason to look up or down—all the action occurs on one plane.

The AI isn't terribly complex. Once they see you, they shoot at you. It's difficult to tell if they respond to sound—they don't seem to. They will pursue you out of a room, but they won't open the door once it closes. (The physics are fairly consistent, though. I killed a guard in a doorway once, and came back later to find that the door had not closed—like all doors do after about 10 seconds—because his body was blocking it.)

4. Not to harp on this concept, but, well, you shoot things. The enemies are distinguished by how many shots it takes to kill them and how much they shoot back. (Adolf Hitler, the last boss, wears, as many historians believe he did in his final days in the bunker, a metal suit with four chain guns built into it.) Strategy? Shoot things, avoid getting shot, and find the occasional key. One element of strategy would be light use of the chain gun, since it eats ammo like Roseanne eats éclairs. Ammo is much more limited in *Wolfenstein* than in many of its successors. It feels like you die more easily than in many other first-person shooters. That's probably because the most deadly weapon in *Wolfenstein* is a chain gun[1], whereas later games have such crazy weapons that a pistol

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[1] In the PC version, at least; the Mac version has a flame thrower and a rocket launcher.

needs to do a relatively small amount of damage so that the other guns/rocket launchers/soul stealers can do an appropriate amount of damage.

Actually, some of the coarseness of the game design makes the game more challenging—I already mentioned the pixelated graphics, but the small graphics library means that many rooms look very similar to one another. It's very easy to get lost simply because you can't remember if you've been this way before. As graphic engines got more complex, game designers were able to create more distinct environments, making it easier to navigate.

Some replayability is inherent just because it's so cool. They added a bit more by including statistics on finding secret areas, Nazi treasure, and giving a par time for each level. Also, there are four levels of difficulty, ranging from "Can I play, Daddy?" to "I am death incarnate," so, assuming that you don't start on the hardest level, there is the challenge of beating it on a harder one.

5. *Wolfenstein* placed itself perfectly in history. It placed great demands on processing power just as home computers were becoming powerful enough to provide it. It was a shareware game at a time when the increasing numbers of online services, BBSes and the fledgling Internet could contribute greatly to its distribution. And it launched a wildly successful genre of games, with id at the forefront of the industry. id released the wildly successful *Doom* and *Quake* series, of course (as well as *Heretic* and *Hexen*), but think of all the games that have been released using either the Doom or Quake engine, or one similar: *Redneck Rampage*, *Duke Nukem*, *Unreal*, and *Halflife*, to name just a few. And of course there's *Turok*, *Goldeneye* and *Perfect Dark* on the Nintendo 64.

Wolfenstein wasn't the first first-person shooter. I remember two first-person 3D shooters from my younger days. One was a fairly jerky Super Nintendo game called *FaceBall* that featured smiley faces negotiating a *PacMan*-like maze and shooting each other. It was for one or two players, and the bot AI was actually fairly impressive for the time; as I recall, there were different colored faces for different personalities (aggressive, cowardly, vengeful, etc.) The fact that my friends and I could compete against each from a first-person perspective was so absorbing that, despite the slightly choppy gameplay, the game would occupy us late into the night on sleepovers. The other was a *Battlezone*-like tank game for the Mac called *Spectre*. It was only a one player game, but the graphics were so smooth (though angular) and the gameplay so much more fluid than anything else I had played that it absorbed me for hours. Then one of my friends gave me a disk with *Wolfenstein* on it. Man, forget about it. That was the coolest thing ever. It wasn't some clunky tank, or some lame face, it was me! With a gun! Shooting Nazis! And it looked and felt rich. You could open doors, push back paintings to reveal secrets, kill a guard and come back to find him still there—hell, you could just walk around all day if you wanted. And it had Nazis, something which scares me more than monsters— since they're such a concrete evil—and which can be mowed down practically guilt-free.

  Wolfenstein is fascinating as a historical relic, because in breaking ground in 3D gaming it provided a template for the pinnacles of the genre while to this day remaining eminently playable. After the first few minutes of playing it now, in the year 2001, I couldn't believe that a game with such primitive controls and clunky graphics had entertained me for so long. But after a few minutes, I found myself mimicking the motions in the game with my body, and cursing under my breath every time a Nazi

soldier got a shot off on me. I was getting into it again. Since first playing *Wolfenstein*

in a darkened den back when I was 13, I've had all kinds of more advanced gaming

experiences—from virtual reality systems to the PlayStation IIs that my friends got for

Christmas. But, especially when you look at it from a historical perspective, *Wolfenstein*

still measures up pretty damn well.