

# DIABLO

A Game Review

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In the early 90s the PC game market was dominated by action games. Wolfenstein 3D (1992), Doom (1993), Hexen (1995), Duke Nukem 3D (1996), and Quake (1996) were all very popular. While still prevalent, computer role playing games (RPGs) seemed to stray from the spotlight. During this time network gaming was becoming more popular, but it was still complicated and difficult to set up. Finding and configuring DOS network and modem drivers took up hours of valuable playing time and left the gamer frustrated and unhappy. In 1996 a game was released that helped solve both of these problems. Computer Gaming World's 1996 game of the year, Diablo, was a driving force behind the continued popularity of RPGs and the ease of today's internet multiplayer games.

### Game Info

Title:	Diablo
Developer:	Blizzard North
Publisher:	Blizzard Entertainment ( <a href="http://www.blizzard.com">http://www.blizzard.com</a> ).
Senior Designers:	Erich Schaefer, David Brevik
Additional Design:	Max Schaefer, Eric Sexton, and Kenneth Williams
Lead Programmer:	David Brevik
Senior Programming:	Richard Seis, Doron Gartner Mike O'Brien, and Pat Wyatt
Programming:	Peter Brevik, Robin van der Wel, Jon Morin, Colin Murray, Frank Pearce
Release Date:	12/27/1996

### **The Story**

Diablo is set in a small medieval village called Tristram, and in the catacombs and caves that riddle the ground beneath. The game starts when the player's character returns from some long travels in and unknown land to find Tristram almost deserted. The player must interact with the few remaining townsfolk in order to determine the history, story, and goal of the game. From these townsfolk, the player finds out that while he/she was away, prince Albrecht has been abducted and possessed by the Lord of Terror (Diablo). King Leoric went into the catacombs to find the missing Albrecht, and was driven mad by the evil presence of Diablo. When he returned to Tristram, the king tried to slaughter many of the townsfolk in his madness, and was eventually killed by a local warrior. The treacherous archbishop Lazarus then convinced the townsfolk to venture into the catacombs to rid them of the evil that drove king Leoric mad. Most of the townsfolk were slaughtered or possessed by lesser demons, and the few who returned had strange and disturbing tales about the catacombs.

Along with the history of Tristram, the player learns the main objective of the game from the remaining townsfolk. The player is given four or five small quests to fulfill before being asked to rid Tristram of Diablo. The smaller quests allow the player to develop his/her character's skills, and to collect weapons, armor, and spells before facing the final challenge.

Because of the character development required to complete the game, Diablo is considered to be a RPG. It has many elements of more in-depth RPGs like class of character, character level, and character inventory. There are three classes of character, the warrior, the rouge, and the wizard. Each class has unique strengths and weaknesses that allow the character to use special items. The player earns experience by battling monsters and fulfilling quests, which allows the character to advance levels. When the character advances a level, the player has the opportunity to develop four areas of the characters personality. These areas, strength, magic, dexterity, and vitality, are a subset of the character traits common in more complex RPGs. Finally, the character has an inventory of weapons, armor, magic items, power-ups, and gold.

This is where the similarity to a RPG ends. The player controls his/her character in real time, fighting adversaries, and collecting items. The action is as fast paced and exciting as any good action game. While the action allows the character to advance levels, character development can only take place when there is a break in the action, and it feels like a separate part of the game. This may be the reason that some people feel that Diablo should not be classified as a true RPG.

## **The Tech**

The technology of the game is so good that it does not seem to be out dated 5 years later. Diablo has a user interface that is simple and straightforward. The character is viewed from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective above and off to one side. The mouse is used to control character movement as well as to attack adversaries and use items. The second mouse button is used to activate special items like magic scrolls and healing potions. Along the bottom of the screen there is a heads up display (HUD) that contains character info like health and magic, a description of any selected items, and some quick access spots. There are four popup menus on the HUD that describe your character, current quest, spellbook, and inventory. The HUD is functional, but rather large for the smaller monitors that were still popular at the time. Unlike many current games, the HUD is not adjustable. One of the best user interface features is the auto-map. A transparent map can be activated that overlays the entire screen in order to help the player keep track of the character's location in the maze like catacombs.

Unlike the user interface, the artificial intelligence is pretty poor by today's standards. The game's main tactic seems to be throwing hoard after hoard of monsters at the player. While this makes the action exciting, it leads to uninteresting strategic options. These options are exhausted with a handful of good moves like trying to lure one monster through a doorway at a time, and shooting a bow through a gate at a room full of monsters. When attacking, the monsters don't seem to use much strategy so the player doesn't have to use very complex strategy to defeat them. On the other hand, because the game is action intensive, the poor strategy aspect isn't that important.

What the monsters and demons lack in intelligence, they make up for in looks. The game's graphics are very good. The catacombs and caves are dark and menacing, and are filled with plenty of detailed monsters. The monsters are rendered well, and look very believable. Sometimes the screen seems too dark, but the player is given the option to fix this by using a magic item that increases the light around the character.

Diablo makes up for the fact that it is a weak RPG with its multiplayer capabilities. Blizzard entertainment provides a free on-line community (Battle.Net) where players can meet for multiplayer games. Finding and connecting to other games over the internet is done in the game with a menu that is straightforward and easy to use. This menu contains chat rooms where the player can find other players interested in starting a game, and the game room where the player can view and join games in progress. In order to join an online game, the player only has to select the game and press "join". This easy to use Battle.Net interface influenced the multiplayer section of many later games. The only weakness in Diablo's multiplayer capability is that it limits the game to four players.

## **The Game**

As stated earlier, Diablo is an RPG with a large emphasis on action. The story is necessarily short and simple and does not develop much thought the game. The history, while interesting, is not necessary to gameplay, and the game's objectives are also kept simple. This does not mean that Diablo is boring, or shallow. The player is kept engaged by the varied army of monsters that block him from his goal.

The intense action that keeps the player from his/her goal keeps the game interesting. As with any good action game, the further into the game, the more intense the action. The player must develop the character in order to win the more intense engagements in the lower levels of the catacombs.

The three different character's attributes are well balanced. The warrior's strength and his skill at close combat, the rogue's use of bow and arrows and her ability to find traps, and the sorcerer's spells and his ability to recharge magic items make each class of character fun and challenging to play. This balance also enhances the multiplayer game experience when a group has two or more classes in it.

The weaponry is based very heavily on the weaponry in classic RPGs, but Blizzard did a good job of balancing this area as well. The player has many weapons to choose from, and certain weapons work much better in certain situations. Very powerful short-range weapons that require both hands so the character must give up some defense are effective against large, powerful enemies. The less powerful short range weapons that allow the character to hold a shield for defense in their other hand are effective against most of the monsters encountered, and the assortment of long range weapons like bows and darts are effective against any adversary without risking close contact.

There are a number of features in Diablo that encourage the gamer to play it over and over. A typical game consists of four or five quests even though Blizzard has designed over 40 different quests into the game. The four or five quests in any give game are chosen at random, so when the player starts a new game there will be new quests. There are also many smaller quests that don't count against the four or five in the game, but that can be assigned to the player at any time.

To further increase the playability of Diablo, Blizzard designed it to generate the levels while the game is running. Each time a player starts a new game, he/she sees all different layouts for each level. This helps make subsequent games interesting, but has the downside that the levels feel "machine made".

### **The Success**

In 1996 Diablo won Computer Gaming World's Game of the Year award. Achieving this award in the same year that Quake was released by id software shows just how influential Diablo was. It helped to revitalize the shrinking RPG genre, paving the way for games like Boulder's Gate (1998) and Ultima Online (1998). Diablo also set a new standard for multiplayer gaming over the internet. Battle.Net quickly became the largest online game community of its time. While other Blizzard games like Starcraft also account for the popularity of Battle.Net, Diablo was the first. When looking at most modern games, Diablo's influence on the online multiplayer interface is obvious.

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