ROOTS

THE
EVOLUTION
OF DOOM
LEVEL
DESIGN

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ROOTS

The Roots of Doom Mapping:

An Evolution of Level Design

Through the Most Influential WADs Ever Made

By Not Jabba

Introduction

Fan-made Doom maps have a ton of history—26 years of it now. Legions of mappers have come and gone, each with their own ideas about what makes Doom great and what new things they can do with it. Style tropes have soared to popularity and faded into obscurity. People have inspired each other, making waves with each great project, and their ideas are copied and respun by new people with their own distinct voices. If you're new to this scene, you probably can't keep track of all the namedrops, much less make sense of the timeline. This author is influential, that author is influential, here are the 10 greatest WADs according to one person and a completely different 10 according to the next. Hell, I started writing about Doom and hanging out with veteran mappers, modders, and reviewers after 13 years of playing every great release I could get my hands on, and there was still a ton of knowledge that had slipped past my radar. The people who've been active since the 1990s have seen the rise and fall of modding empires; the amount of communal memory is insane.
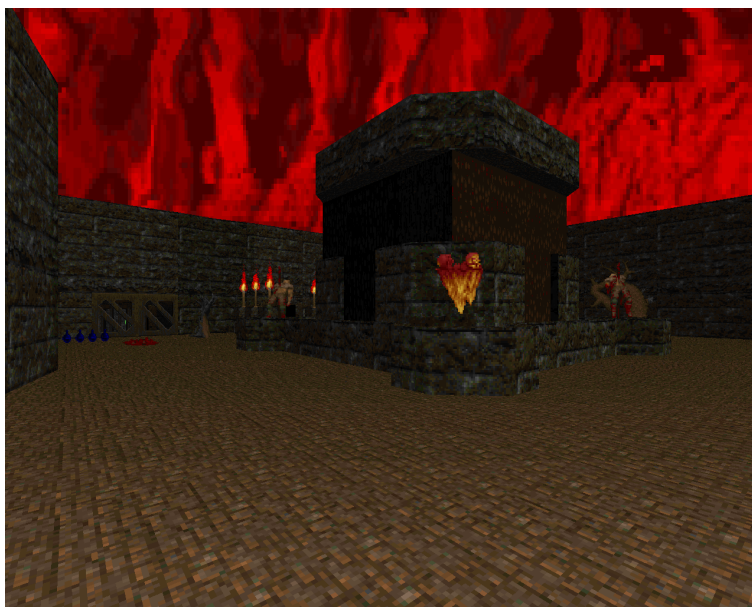

Requiem (1997)

The thing is, nobody's ever written it all down. Most of it exists in scraps of conversation somewhere or other, whether it's on forums or chat servers or

in award write-ups and readme files, but nobody's tried to pin down the overall narrative.

As we worked on 25 Years of Doom, we tossed around all kinds of ideas for historical articles: a history of gameplay modding, histories of specific mapping styles, histories of memes. There was even some half-joking discussion about a history of Doom maps featuring helipads with a giant letter H on them. You could probably write that article if you wanted to. There's been plenty of material. But a history of all Doom mapping… well, that'd be an entire book's worth of content.

Lay out the most influential releases in chronological order, and the narrative appears – schisms, rebellions, counteractions, reconciliations, and fusions

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Then last spring, somebody on Discord started up a random discussion to brainstorm the 10 most influential WADs of all time—which, frankly, is probably not worth writing about in and of itself. It's too simplistic a view of Doom history, and it tells you very little without more context. But suddenly the historical perspective made sense. The mappers whose ideas took off like wildfire are a lens on what was important to people, and why. Lay out the most influential releases in chronological order, and suddenly the narrative appears, just like that. Take the zoomed-out view, and you see schisms, rebellions, counteractions, reconciliations, and fusions, all in such a natural order that you'd think somebody planned it out. I guess that's what history always looks like, probably.
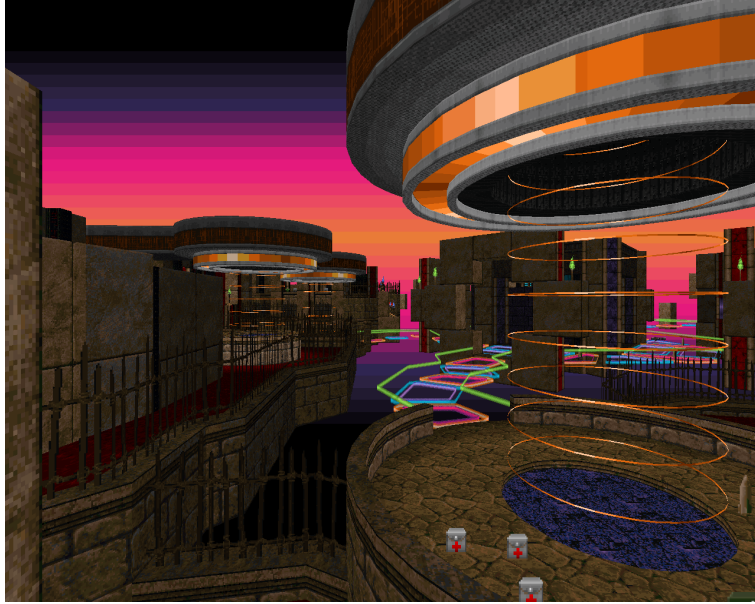
Ancient Aliens (2016)

This article is far from a comprehensive look at everything that's ever happened. I like to think it's more than just the tip of the iceberg, though—it's long enough that it could probably be bound in hardcover, though it would certainly be no War and Peace. It's a start, a way to make sense of how we've evolved as a community. And hopefully it will help keep some of our communal memory alive in the years to come.

Chapter 1:

The Masters of Doom

When the original Doom games came out, they were a revelation. There had been plenty of video games before Doom that were fun to play, and a decent handful that had made use of advancing technology to present gameplay mechanics in a polished way. It wasn't even the first game to feel truly immersive—by my reckoning, that was Ultima Underworld. But nothing before Doom had felt so vivid and visceral at the same time. Nothing before it had felt almost like it could be real—or perhaps more to the point, nothing before Doom had made it seem like feeling real was something video games could do. It's easy for newer gamers to miss that point, given how cartoony it is compared to the full-3D games that followed it. But if you were 8 years old in 1993, staring up in awe at Doom playing on demo loop on a row of a dozen store computers, you'd have known right away that nothing was ever going to be the same. Trust me. 8-year-old me was there. That's the real reason that first-person shooter games were referred to as "Doom clones" for years afterward—the real reason that, even as late as 1996, games like Quake and Duke Nukem 3D were being marketed as the games that would finally kill Doom.

There's a reason that first-person shooter games were referred to as "Doom clones" for years

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Games before Doom were usually pretty cheesy, because that was the easiest direction to go with the technology that was available. Video games were too simplistic to be taken very seriously; you had a cartoony art style because that was the best thing your engine could handle, and on top of that, you probably had a tiny development team where the programmers and level designers were also the visual artists. You couldn't even have very many words on a screen at a time due to the low resolutions. Besides, '90s

culture demanded that you be laid back, especially if you were young and male, which meant you were by far the primary target demographic for video games at the time. As a result, games tended to be really goofy, with over-the-top attitudes, stories that made little sense, and silly powerups and enemies.

Even in Doom, you can still see some of that. The story is gritty but mostly lighthearted, monsters like the Pinky and Cacodemon have exaggerated physical characteristics, and the powerups seem to have little reason to exist in the game world except that they're fun. But the screwball tone of earlier games is largely gone, and the goofy elements feel pretty slight in comparison to the heavy, sinister mood that permeates Doom. Doom's world feels far more palpable than those of its predecessors in the action game genres; the emotions it evokes come from deeper inside you. And although it doesn't have the complexity or depth of story that contemporary role-playing games like Ultima Underworld had, its visceral environments have a lot to say in their own way.

Doom's world feels far more palpable than those of its predecessors in the action game genres; the emotions it evokes come from deeper inside you

Needless to say, Doom mappers have taken a great deal of inspiration from the things that make Doom unique—both the design tropes of the original games and the odd hybrid nature of its engine. Doom was created at the cusp of a new era, which it ushered in. And so it's dark and silly at the same time, realistic yet also arcadey, offering complex ways of creating spaces in 3D and yet in many ways limited to abstraction. This fascinating and utterly unique sphere is where the Doom mapping community dwells, as though we're an alternate branch of history where Doom was so great that nobody even bothered to develop subsequent games and we've reimagined the whole evolution of game design via our wonderfully creaky old tech.

Of course, it helps that the level designers at Id Software knew what they were doing, and that their design gave us a lot of depth to mimic right

from the start. The first two Doom games each have their own distinct tone, and each of them has influenced the mapping community in different ways.

Doom - id Software (1993)

The Only Way Out Is Through

One of the most important things about Doom as a trailblazer (both for the gaming industry and for fan-made content) is the way that it combined action and horror. Horror already existed as a video game genre through Alone in the Dark and perhaps a few other games, but conveying the emotion of fear was practically an impossibility before the Doom engine. Part of this is simply that it's both in real-time and first-person perspective, which means that you can't see everything happening around you and the things you don't see can actively harm you. In addition, its sound design was sufficiently good and its texturing and spriting were sufficiently realistic in their level of detail to carry the mood.

But perhaps most importantly, Doom was the first game that really allowed the level designers to take lighting seriously. Wolfenstein 3D had no lighting at all; Ultima Underworld had global light levels that you could affect by equipping torches and such. But Doom allows for a wide range of light levels within the same area, meaning that you can simulate cast light

and shadow. Creepy, isolated interior areas can descend into darkness while outdoor areas remain bright; glowing tech-lights can cut swaths of bright light through darkness, and pillars can interrupt those swaths, cutting dark shadows through them. The engine also allowed for a handful of specialized lighting effects, which are used sparingly in the original game but can't be underemphasized. Staring into the dark maw of the wooden maze in "Halls of the Damned" (E2M6), most of it almost pitch black but with patches of light blinking at multiple speeds so that they felt disturbingly desynced, and knowing that you had to go in there to get that last key to exit the map—that was a real thing in 1993. It was terrifying.

Doom was the first game that really allowed the level designers to take lighting seriously

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Due to engine limitations, Doom doesn't mess around with complex gradient lighting. That's because you have to add linedefs to add lighting, and having too many linedefs in one spot will overload the game. So for the same reason that the architecture uses simple, clean lines, the lighting does as well. As a response to the limitations they were working with, Id's level designers focused on high-contrast lighting, very bright next to very dark, which creates an appealing stylized look. Although many modern Doom mappers go wild with gradient lighting, often to excellent effect, this high-contrast style has remained very popular as well, particularly among retro mappers.

The gameplay itself contributes a fair amount to the horror tone as well, particularly in the way threats are presented. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the famous blue key trap in "Toxin Refinery" (E1M3), where everything suddenly goes dark when you pick up the key and Imps appear out of a previously unseen ambush closet. Another similar case occurs in "Command Control" (E1M4), where you open up one door of a small room at the center of a hub area and all its doors open at once, flooding enemies out into the hub. Ambushes (whether via monster closets or teleporters) and other combat surprises fit perfectly with the tone of the game, serving as alarming interruptions to the standard pacing and sudden

adrenaline-pumping challenges, and they have been part and parcel of fan-made Doom mapping for as long as it has existed.

Romero's E1 is usually a key point of discussion when people talk about Doom. Early Romero emphasized the flow of combat above all else, reserving the scariest elements of the game for a handful of specific moments. His E1 maps are mostly very open and nonlinear, gated only by occasional keycard use, allowing you to play the game as a sort of running exploration with branching paths and optional side areas. These maps are constructed to allow a great deal of freedom of movement, which feeds into the fast pace of the combat. This fast pacing is also well served by the E1 monsters, which all have low health and are easy to bring down quickly with the basic weapons that you have on hand throughout the episode.

Since Romero's maps are the first thing most people remember about Doom, it's easy to spin it in the modern era as a straight action game. And this is where it's worth reiterating that a lot of Doom's horror-like atmosphere comes from the engine itself and the impact that it had at the time. Things like lighting and monster jump scares are relatively minor "horror elements," at least in comparison to the mechanics that modern horror games employ, but the gestalt of the Doom engine's various features and graphical detail was so intensely atmospheric that the game was able to induce every emotion you could possibly associate with the horror genre—dread, repulsion, eerie unease, and of course full-on terror.

The two later episodes, which were mostly created by Sandy Petersen, lean into the horror elements a lot more. In these maps, where you have more intimidating monsters lurking around and hunting for you in the dark, and seemingly anything can happen—ceilings suddenly sweeping down to crush you, pillars of flesh moving up and down with no apparent purpose, mazes of teleporters with no clear logic behind them—it's a lot easier to feel overwhelmed and backed into a corner. The lighting gets darker in many of these maps, becoming an even more important part of the atmosphere. Petersen's Doom maps place more emphasis on survival rather than being a badass, and they tend to take on a dungeon crawl aspect. As open as many of Romero's maps are, it was also Petersen who introduced true exploration-focused sandbox gameplay through maps like "Containment Area" (E2M2) and "Mt. Erebus" (E3M6).

The combination and division of horror vs. action elements was a huge part of what made Doom successful, and it has been the mapping community's main takeaway from the first game. I say "combination and division"

because it's just that: you can focus on the horror, you can focus on the action, or you can blend the two to varying degrees. Action-oriented mappers tend to take more inspiration from Romero's gameplay flow, while atmosphere-oriented mappers tend to follow Petersen's tropes more. Doom itself did well to combine the two, of course. The horror elements frighten and intimidate, but you have no choice except to grab a gun and push through; the creepy mood and surprises form a huge part of the new player's initial experience, but a veteran player who already knows what's going to happen can play more aggressively and appreciate the fast pace of the game.

Naturally, modern Doom players rarely find the game scary, but its horror-atmospheric elements are still treated as critical for establishing mood in fan-made maps, no matter what the mapper's gameplay focus is. Ambush tactics tend to also be important from a combat and pacing perspective: you can enter a room that's empty and then find it suddenly populated, blocking your escape route, as opposed to entering, seeing opposition, and quickly backing out to deal with combat through the safety of a doorway. No matter how jaded Doomers may get with the lurking terrors of the game, however, there are still occasional releases like Maskim Xul and Dark Universe that will scare the crap out of you, just like Doom did in the old days.

Doom 2 - id Software (1994)

Their Own Reality

Doom 2, on the other hand, is barely about instilling fear at all. It's something a lot more…experimental than that. If the first game provided the mapping community with a set of baseline gameplay archetypes and genre savvy, then the second one gave us our yearning to create the inexplicable and strange in all its myriad forms—which I believe is a big part of why we're still here 25 years later.

Though it's sometimes criticized, the Id team's decision to stick with the exact same engine for the sequel allowed them to refine their formula quite a bit, rather than getting distracted by a lot of new features. On the most basic level, the many changes and additions from the first Doom are about making Doom 2 a more combat-oriented game. The first game was seen by many as a little too simple and too grindy, so the sequel adds an anti-grind weapon (the Super Shotgun) and a large number of monsters with more challenging attacks and higher damage outputs, in addition to making the first game's boss monsters a more standard part of the lineup. As a result, both monsters and players become more threatening to each other, and the game's various maps become dynamic playgrounds where movement and strategy are more important. Needless to say, this added strategic depth has given mappers a lot to work with. It allows for a much greater variety of gameplay than would be possible with the first Doom's monster set, and mappers have taken advantage of this to develop numerous combat styles over the decades.

Sandy Petersen designed half of the levels for Doom 2, with the rest being mostly split between Romero and American McGee, and Petersen's style is perhaps the one that people most associate with the game, whether they consider that to be for better or for worse. Petersen's maps in the first Doom had begun to develop the idea that Hell was a place where reality unraveled; in Doom 2, he went all out with it. The unraveling of reality

becomes a central focus of both the aesthetics and the gameplay throughout the entire game.

Doom 2 gave us our yearning to create the inexplicable and strange—which I believe is a big part of why we're still here 25 years later

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Petersen's maps deal in abstraction. "The Factory" (map 12) and "Downtown" (map 13) are in roughly the shape of a factory complex or a downtown area with city blocks and tall buildings, but once you look past that outer shell, nothing makes sense. The interiors of buildings appear twisted beyond recognition, reconfigured with a character that may or may not be explicable in terms of gameplay logic but is absolutely never explicable from a real-world perspective. Compare the cities in Doom 2 to the ones in a game like Duke Nukem 3D, where the whole point is to replicate a realistic environment. Petersen was having none of that. What's the point of a demonic apocalypse if things still make sense, if real-world logic still exists as a safety net to fall back on? And so you have maps like "Tricks and Traps" (map 08), where every room in an ostensibly human-made techbase is entirely designed around conveying some sort of strange combat puzzle or unusual style of ambush, and "The Pit" (map 09), which is constructed around odd movement puzzles that no military-industrial megacorp would have put there for its employees to traverse during their daily tasks. The whole concept behind these maps ties into a line from one of the intermission texts: "But something is wrong. The demons have brought their own reality with them."
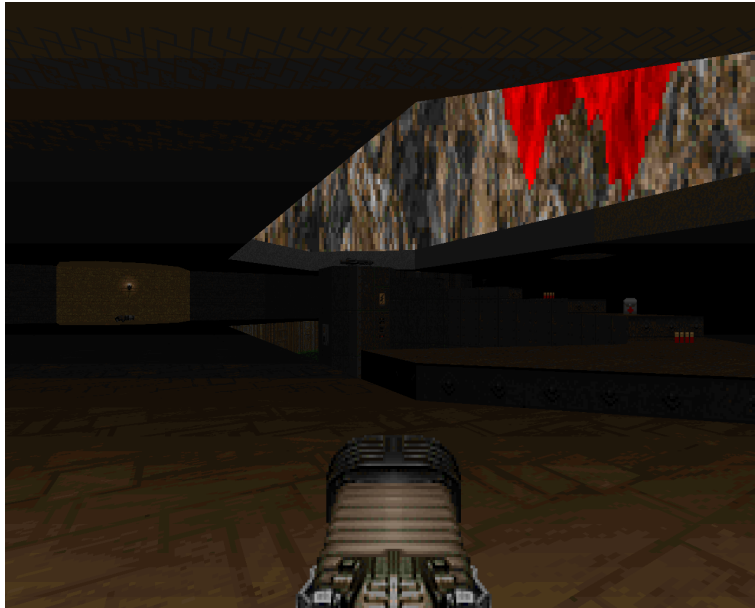
And perhaps the most interesting and unique thing about Doom 2 as a concept is that this disturbance in the fabric of reality goes both ways, and nowhere is it more apparent than in the Hell maps. The first Doom's vision of Hell was awesome, but pretty traditional: rocky wastelands full of fire and brimstone, with the added twist of the organic elements, entire landscapes made out of flesh and guts. Doom 2's Hell looks a whole lot like a twisted version of Earth, which is the entire point. Even as Earth's reality bends to take on the eerie, hostile tone of Hell, Hell's reality has begun to twist around earthly shapes and materials. "Barrels o' Fun" (map 23) sees a hellish landscape wrought in abstract stucco and metal constructs and filled with barrels of human toxic waste; "Monster Condo" (map 27) is a haunted mansion filled with libraries and walled in the same brick and wood that make up the city maps. Clearly this wasn't just Petersen; Romero and McGee both made Hell maps, and they both treated them the same way. The whole team was on board. It's even present in the bestiary, as though the bosses from the first game were prototypes for the creation of new species of cybernetic monsters that blend human tech with demonic flesh, perhaps in demonic factories or perhaps by some supernatural shift, simply because Hell's biological reality has gotten…confused. Personally, I think all evidence points to the latter.

The fundamental unbalancing and reconverging of reality, the disturbed surrealism that permeates most of the maps, is what makes Doom 2 the game it is

At the risk of repeating myself, almost the whole game is built on that same ideology. McGee's "The Crusher" (map 06) structures a boss battle around the game's first Spider Mastermind being little more than a fly trapped in a web, poised to be destroyed by conveniently placed technology; Romero's "The Tenements" (map 17) seems normal at its heart but begins to unravel around the edges; Petersen's "The Chasm" (map 24) splinters the safely traversable space into a web of tightrope walks over vast, deadly pits. It's particularly interesting to see how Romero, the king of tight, logical flow in Knee-Deep in the Dead, changed as a mapper in Doom 2 after he had been working with Petersen for a while. His maps are still combat-focused, with large and freeform spaces that are designed around high-concept combat elements—the sniper zombies in "Industrial Zone" (map 15) or the steady rain of fire from distant Mancubi in "The Living End" (map 29), for instance—but his maps in Doom 2 tend to use Petersenesque abstraction as a canvas for those fights, both in the aesthetics and the overall layouts. McGee, by contrast, tends to be regarded as the least influential of the three because his maps are the most conventional—but that said, his early-game maps have served as the inspiration for the opening runs of most large fan-made mapsets, the simple, logical prelude that helps to emphasize the later descent into madness.

No matter how you slice it, Doom 2 is a weird game. Even if you look past the "unraveling of reality" aspect, it represents a totally open-ended design ethos; it isn't at all concerned with what a "real place" should look like, which allowed the designers to build structures around what they wanted from their gameplay. But the fundamental unbalancing and reconverging of reality, the disturbed surrealism that permeates most of the maps, is really what makes it the game it is, and it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that almost every fan-made Doom 2 map ever made draws on that at least a little bit, and often extensively. Just look at your favorite megawad to see worlds coming apart at the seams—or better yet, check out the creations of the Russian Doom community, such as A.L.T. and Sacrament, for the idea that you don't even need Hell's influence in order for reality to make no sense anymore. There's something about the whole concept that taps deep into human psychology—who hasn't felt that the world was coming apart around them at some point or other? The weirdness of Doom 2 has had far less impact on the mainstream game industry than the first Doom's more logical establishment of genre tropes—but it's had every bit as much influence on the Doom community, and it's hard to imagine that the Doom engine could have held such a grip on our collective psyche for so long with nothing but flowy techbases and fiery hellscapes.

Doom provided the mood; Doom 2 provided the creative template. The official id games invented the genre and established the original rules that the community would play by.
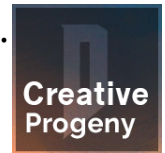
- Literally every Doom map ever made

No End in Sight (2016)

Chapter 2:

The Fine Art of Sadomasochism

Although they were created within the context of a masculine game design culture by guys who notoriously liked to posture and show off, the original Doom games aren't very difficult. Let's face it: gamers just weren't that skilled back in the early 1990s, the first-person shooter genre had barely begun to exist before the Doom engine came along, and not every computer even had a mouse. If they'd made Doom much more challenging, it wouldn't have enjoyed the immense popularity that it did, because few people would have been equipped to play it yet. Although some games (both classic and modern) are designed to be difficult, the sorts of niche skillsets that are required to achieve true mastery are generally not the stuff of commercial games anyway. Instead, they tend to be the domain of—you guessed it—modding communities.

In any game community with any staying power at all, challenge creep is inevitable and begins immediately. As soon as the base game has been conquered, people will start to look for more difficult ways to challenge themselves with it, a need that gives birth to speedrunning scenes and similar subcommunities—bonus points if you have to detonate a rocket in your own face to cross the finish line in record time. For Doom, which was one of the first games that was editable using easily accessible tools, creating new maps became another available outlet for players to find the challenge they were looking for. Highly skilled players become mappers, creating maps that scratch their particular itch or push their skills even further. The best of these creations become recognized as the go-to for challenge-seekers. The new releases become milestones, new mountains that every challenge-seeking player wants to climb. Meanwhile, the best players keep getting better, and the ceiling rises. This isn't just a side effect of the existence of modding communities; it's a part of why modding communities exist.

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Ultimate Doom's more limited set of monsters, weapons, and items results in simpler core gameplay with a somewhat lower skill ceiling than Doom 2 has, which is why the challenge community tends to revolve around Doom 2. That doesn't mean that nobody seeks to make challenging maps for the first game; Id Software's own Thy Flesh Consumed is one of the great early examples. But Doom 2 added a ton of combat components, most notably several mid-tier enemies with attacks that require more specialized skills to evade, and these components have become the basic building blocks of most challenge-oriented mapping. It didn't take long after the release of Doom 2 before the biggest and most influential of the early challenge mapsets saw the light of day.

The Plutonia Experiment - Dario and Milo Casali (1996)

Skip the Small Talk

Plutonia is one of those megawads that tells you what you're in for right off the bat. The original Doom introduces monsters slowly and deliberately; Doom 2 is a little freer in its usage, but still maintains a strong sense of increasing challenge and threat hierarchy. Many Doom mappers savor the gradual introductions of monster species, even decades later. Plutonia, on the other hand, doesn't waste any time throwing you into the midst of deadly combat. The first monsters you encounter in "Congo" (map 01) are either shotgunners or chaingunners, rather than basic Former Humans or Imps. Dive a little way into the map, and you'll quickly discover that a significant number of its 46 monsters on Ultra-Violence are Mancubi and Revenants—and not individual ones framed as easy introductory miniboss fights, but small groups of them placed to be threatening. There's

a Pain Elemental playing a support role as well, but the most striking appearances are the two Arch-Viles. Even though both are optional—and indeed, the whole map offers opportunities for evading rather than engaging—placing them in map 01 is an extremely clear message as to the megawad's philosophy: if you're not seriously prepared for a fight, then you'd best get your kicks elsewhere. It cuts to the chase because Milo wasn't interested in fiddling with gameplay that he didn't think was fun, but it's also a good communication tactic that's been used in many challenge mapsets since, perhaps most recognizably with the Cyberdemon that lords over map 01 of Ancient Aliens.
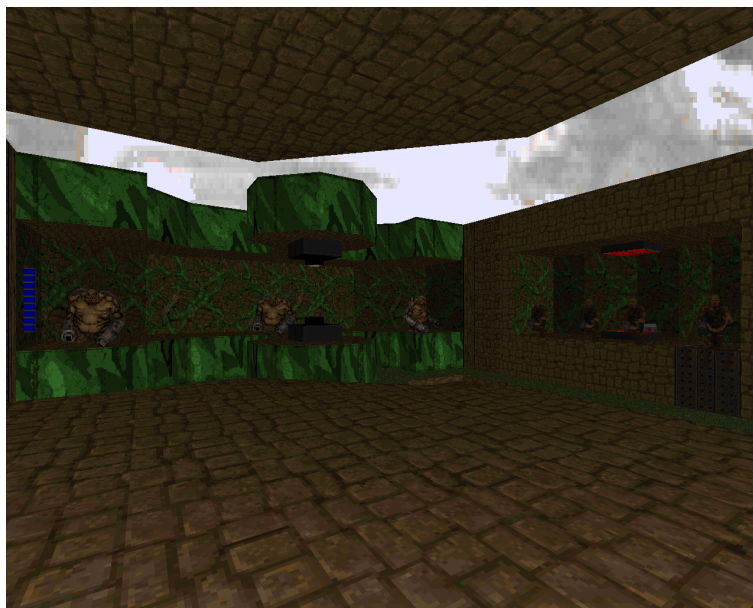
Monster placement is the key to all of Plutonia's level design. The megawad focuses almost entirely on the threatening placement of small numbers of monsters, heavily emphasizing the more powerful monster types, though it goes fairly light on the boss monsters. Chaingunners, Revenants, and Arch-Viles are the holy trinity of Plutonia combat, as they are the most immediately threatening monsters in the bestiary and the ones that have the greatest effect on the player's movement decisions. Mancubi, Arachnotrons, Pain Elementals, and harasser Cacodemons typically fill in the supporting roles, with groups of shotgunners providing periodic bursts of glass cannon uncertainty to keep you on your toes. Imps mainly exist to give you the occasional quick pop of satisfaction; Hell Knights, Barons, and Pinkies are used sparingly and are there to intimidate and hog space,

demanding that you slot them into your list of priorities in order to gain more freedom of movement. At the risk of stating the obvious, most small-scale challenge mapping over the years has followed a very similar mold for overall monster placement, simply because it works extremely well and is very hard to improve upon.

The first map makes Plutonia's philosophy clear: if you're not seriously prepared for a fight, then you'd best get your kicks elsewhere

Hierarchical monster presentation is hardly the only design element that Plutonia eschews for the sake of focusing on the combat. The architecture is plain and utilitarian, with aesthetic beauty and detail so utterly deemphasized that many of the map themes are simply ripped directly from Doom 2 and given new shapes as appropriate for the fights at hand. Though most '90s mapping is pretty austere out of necessity, one can easily compare Plutonia to TNT: Evilution, its sister megawad in the commercial release of Final Doom. Whereas Evilution places a fair bit of importance on environmental design in order to make the maps feel more like real places, Plutonia heavily emphasizes abstraction, tailoring the shapes of architecture to fit the flow of combat.

The map layouts and progression are designed to be compact, semi-open, and relatively flowy, as opposed to being a bunch of discrete areas strung together. Having different sections of a map connect fluidly helps many of the monsters to be threatening, as you are typically pressured from multiple angles, but it also allows the mappers to focus on pacing. The result is that each map is both fast-moving and very bloody, like a perpetually moving brawl. The player is put in the position of struggling to overcome the number of challenges in play at once and is frequently forced to move around—either retreating back into territory that's still dangerous or advancing into areas with new threats—due to either being placed at a sudden disadvantage (e.g., with an ambush) or having space denied to them (by groups of threatening monsters or by damaging floors). Even the very beginning of a map is sometimes hostile, with "hot starts" that force you to react to oncoming monsters as soon as you spawn in the map instead of giving you space to breathe and collect yourself before plunging in.

The Casali brothers laid so much groundwork that all combat-oriented mapping has been a series of footnotes to Plutonia

Although the brawl-like core design is fairly consistent across the megawad, Plutonia is more experimental with its combat at times and brought in some very distinct innovations that, like the core combat, have been echoed in many other challenge mapsets over the years. The perpetually resurrecting chaingunners in "The Twilight" (map 15) were perhaps the first major example of monsters being treated as pure mechanics, with no pretense of being living beings in an ecosystem, as odd as it may sound—and perhaps the first case of combat design that was deliberately belligerent, specifically designed to be alarming, frustrating, and "unfair" while at the same time being a well-reasoned, intentional choice that serves the goals of the level design. Similarly, the iconic "Hunted" (map 11), which teases you with a mob of Arch-Viles and then disperses them all over what is effectively a large hedge maze and expects

you to find your way through, is perhaps the first combat-oriented concept map.


And then there's "Go 2 It" (map 32), which stands out as the most brutal map in the set, a first foray into extremely heavy, monster-dense combat with lethal floods of monsters at every turn and more Cyberdemons than appear in the entire rest of the megawad combined. With its massive threat levels and complete lack of any space that appears remotely safe, this BFG- and rocket-heavy map is designed to confuse and intimidate a less experienced player (i.e., almost everyone playing Doom in 1996) into thinking that it's simply impossible—but in the end, it plays out as something of a puzzle, where you have to find the best way to gain a foothold and approach the rest of the challenges from there. This type of gameplay paved the way for monster-dense challenge mapsets like Hell Revealed and, eventually, the modern hardcore scene, and it has come to be known most commonly by the evocative but somewhat vague term "slaughter." "Go 2 It" is also very sensibly placed as an optional super-secret map, and the idea that secret maps are the ideal slots for the most intense and monster-heavy maps in a megawad has become fairly common in later years.

Plutonia was the first major release that focused entirely on combat, and that hyper-focused dedication is what makes it so successful. The two mappers kept playing and refining until they had worked out all the fundamentals, exploring a full range of combat styles and concepts and examining the uses of each monster in the bestiary as mechanical components, ignoring most other aspects of design in their quest to create the ideal form. Although the Casalis' work leaves plenty of room for improvement, it's fair to say that they laid so much groundwork that there wasn't a whole lot left to lay, and that all combat-oriented mapping has been a series of footnotes to Plutonia.

Hell Revealed - Yonatan Donner and Haggay Niv (1997)
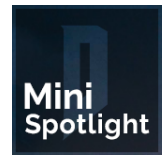
Siege Engines

Following just a year after Plutonia was released as part of Final Doom, Hell Revealed asks the next obvious question with regard to challenge mapping: What if there were lots more monsters? Like, *lots* more? Perhaps using "Go 2 It" as a springboard, Donner and Niv created an entire megawad's worth of maps defined by monster density, which was highly novel at the time and was essentially built-in advertising for the idea that Hell Revealed was the most challenging set of maps ever made (which it most likely was).
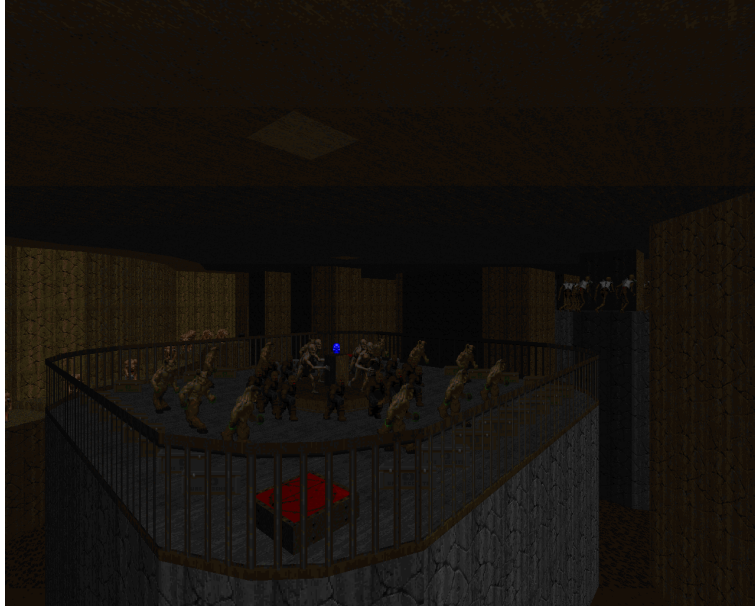
It drew competitive players like flies, particularly since it was one of the first mapsets designed with the express purpose of being speedrun—and it still has more speed demos than any other PWAD to this day. This immense popularity among speedrunners was itself a major source of influence, and challenge mapping, demo compatibility, and speedrun-friendly design have gone hand in hand for decades as a result. It's one of the major reasons that challenge maps have almost exclusively been created for vanilla and Boom map formats until very recently (as in, literally this year), as ZDoom-based ports have too many engine quirks to support competitive demo compatibility.

Hell Revealed asks the next obvious question with regard to challenge mapping: What if there were lots more monsters?

Donner and Niv were new to mapping when they began the project, and the first half of the megawad has had relatively little stylistic influence—though it still has its share of demos. Most of the iconic maps are in the latter half, and it's these maps that established the signature gameplay style that Hell Revealed and its followers in subsequent years are remembered for. Somewhat similar in style to "Go 2 It," these maps are designed as

rudimentary combat puzzles where developing a strategy and gaining a foothold are the key to succeeding. The gameplay style is based around dense blocks of entrenched enemies alongside individual boss-tier monsters; the former exert large amounts of pressure by limiting player movement and flooding the playable space with projectile attacks, while the latter exert zones of control that force them to become key components of the player's strategy, both as threats to be outmaneuvered/dispatched and as tools for infighting. With the whole playable space overshadowed by these threats, players are compelled to consider the enemy force as a whole rather than as individual monsters, essentially becoming one-person siege engines. The goal of each large battle is to find a crack in the defenses, some way to carve out a position and then dismantle the whole works from within.

These types of setups allow for a dual approach. If you find the right strategy, you can work quickly to eliminate the enemies, which means that solid routing and planning will give you advantages in a speedrun; on the other hand, the entrenched nature of the enemy force means that you can work more slowly and methodically if you need to. This flexibility, combined with full support for all difficulty settings, made it a good go-to mapset for players trying to develop their skills—but its Ultra-Violence was still seen as the ultimate challenge at the time, a yardstick by which other mapsets were measured. Though Hell Revealed's siege warfare is less dynamic than the combat styles you'll find in modern challenge maps, and

has largely fallen out of favor, it served as a cornerstone of big fight design for many years to come—particularly in megawads like Alien Vendetta and Kama Sutra that sought to combine big, impressive visuals with the spectacle of large-scale combat.


Players are compelled to consider the enemy force as a whole rather than as individual monsters, essentially becoming one-person siege engines

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Chord G and **Chord 3 -** Malcolm Sailor (1999/2000)
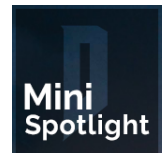
The Puzzle Box

The five-map Chord series takes the idea of "combat puzzles" to the next level, particularly in its last two entries, Chord G and Chord 3. Essentially ignoring the large-scale siege concept of Hell Revealed, Malcolm Sailor's hardcore maps take ideas more directly from Plutonia but spin them into true nightmares that take a great deal of thought and skill just to survive, let alone conquer.
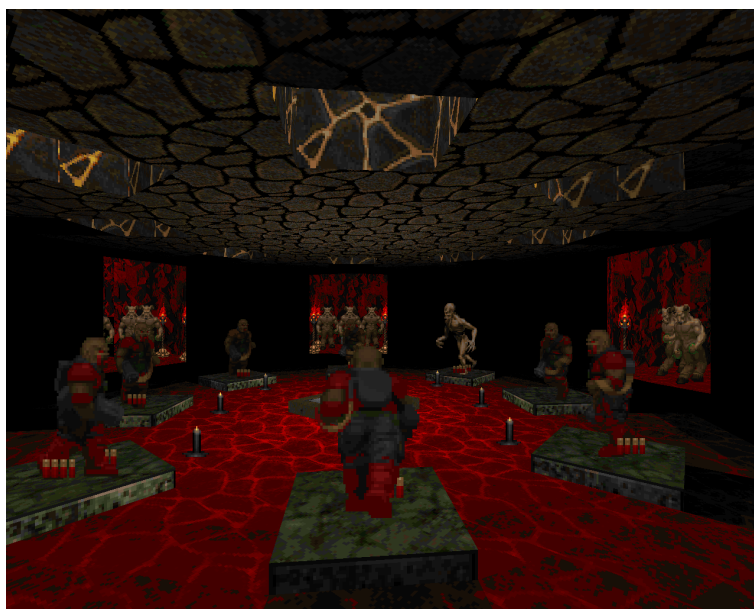
The Chord maps deploy a combination of tight spaces, heavy-duty monsters, and resource scarcity, which together turn seemingly simple map layouts with around 100 monsters total into a grueling, relentless fight to stay one step ahead of your enemies. Ammo and other items are allotted in such a way that you have barely enough to keep going, forcing you to leave enemies at your flank and push on to find the next breadcrumb cache as the map fills up with threats around you, while saving your hard-won shells and rockets to take out the top-priority threats or the ones that you absolutely have to remove in order to clear a path. High-threat enemies like Revenants and Arch-Viles demand a high level of attention in close quarters, while Barons and Hell Knights serve as space dominators, requiring too much time and ammo to dispatch immediately but taking up so much room that outmaneuvering them becomes critical.

The Chord series take a combination of tight spaces, heavy-duty monsters, and resource scarcity to turn seemingly simple map layouts into a grueling, relentless fight

With such tight, intense design, every decision can make or break your run through the map, and the level of strategy required is highly appealing to methodical puzzle-solvers and speedrunners alike. In Chord 3 in particular, getting to the exit alive is only half the challenge; the only way to clear all the enemies is with a smart mix of infighting and Berserk-enabled melee combat to conserve ammo. If there was any one development that foreshadowed the highly advanced, macro-strategic combat of the modern hardcore scene, it wasn't Hell Revealed with its intimidating swarms—it was Chord with its vicious pressure-cooker gameplay and riddles to disassemble one piece at a time.

Plutonia provided the template for all "challenge" mapping to follow, showing how the Doom / Doom 2 gameplay vocabularies could be expanded upon to counter the skyrocketing skillsets within the Doom community.
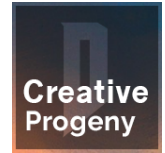
- DemoniZed

- Hell's Eventide

- Hell Revealed 2

- Disturbia and No Chance

- Plutonia Revisited Community Project

- Skepland

- Plutonium Winds

- Swift Death

- Moonblood and Exomoon

- Darkest Room
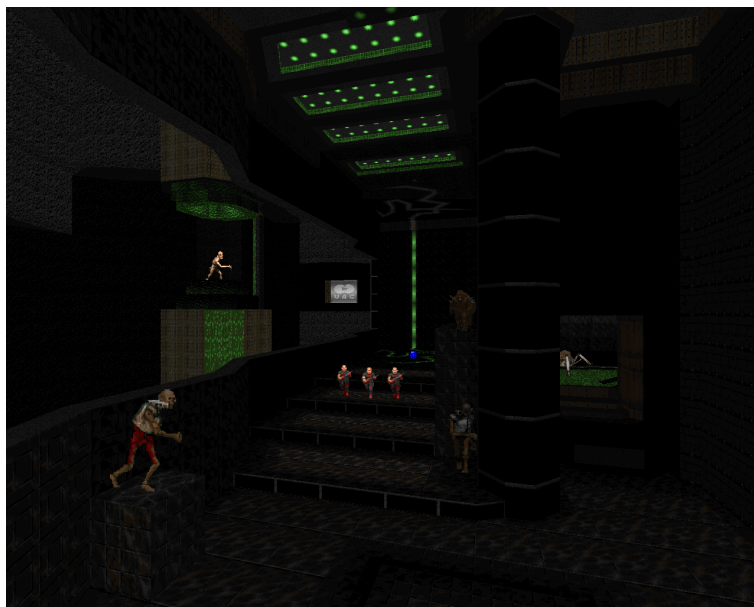
Darkest Room (2019)

Chapter 3:

Lost in the Adventure

Of course, there are plenty of other reasons to play video games besides challenge: relaxation, ambience, atmospheric immersion, role-playing, intellectual stimulation, sense of adventure, a good story, beautiful things to see. For mappers, their Doom creations can be an outlet for artistic expression, and conversely, for players it can be a way of appreciating what other people have to say. Doom is an art scene.

Level design that revolves around establishing *mise en scene* or the feeling of going on a grand adventure, with combat that primarily exists to keep the map moving rather than occupy much of the player's attention, is seemingly the polar opposite of the Plutonia ideal, where the architecture exists solely to serve the flow of combat and anything that lowers the adrenaline or slows the map down is a detriment. Likewise, puzzle elements add to the sense of delving deeply into the game world, but would grind any Plutonia-style map to a screeching halt. For this reason, discussions about Doom mapping are very often framed as a dichotomy where combat stands opposed by literally every other aspect of design. A challenge mapper might say that letting any other element come first detracts from the quality of the combat, while an adventure mapper might point out that combat that is too fast or challenging detracts from the player's ability to appreciate everything else that goes into the level design.

For mappers, their Doom creations can be an outlet
for artistic expression, and for players, they can be a
way of appreciating what other people have to say

Both halves of this debate are largely a product of the 2000s and 2010s, and I don't mean to suggest that adventure mappers in the 1990s were reacting against challenge maps or vice versa; I've personally seen no evidence for

this. But you can see the beginnings of the split quite early on as the different schools of design began to form—it's a natural divide that occurs among players (and mappers) in many gaming communities.

Some of the earliest hints of adventure mapping can be found in Invasion 2: The Upper Decks and Galaxia, which use a realistic approach to architectural layouts to establish a sense of place and environmental details to tell a story as you progress through the map. TeamTNT's first two megawads, Evilution and Icarus, also frequently use a more environmental approach to level design in order to immerse the player. But it was another TNT megawad that really set the first gold standard for adventure mapping.

Eternal Doom - Team Eternal / TeamTNT (1997)

WAD Spotlight

The Odyssey

Eternal Doom is the epitome of everything Plutonia isn't. The megawad places an enormous emphasis on what was possible to achieve with Doom-engine aesthetics at the time, but it's not just about making a given area look attractive; much more than that, Eternal Doom is about creating a sense of place, a feeling that the world you're infiltrating is intricate, fully detailed, and alive. The combat, rather than being the primary focus, fills in around these details and serves as a supplement. The idea is that killing monsters is fun in its own right and doesn't need to be a focused activity; instead, it should take a back seat and allow you to partake in the adventure.
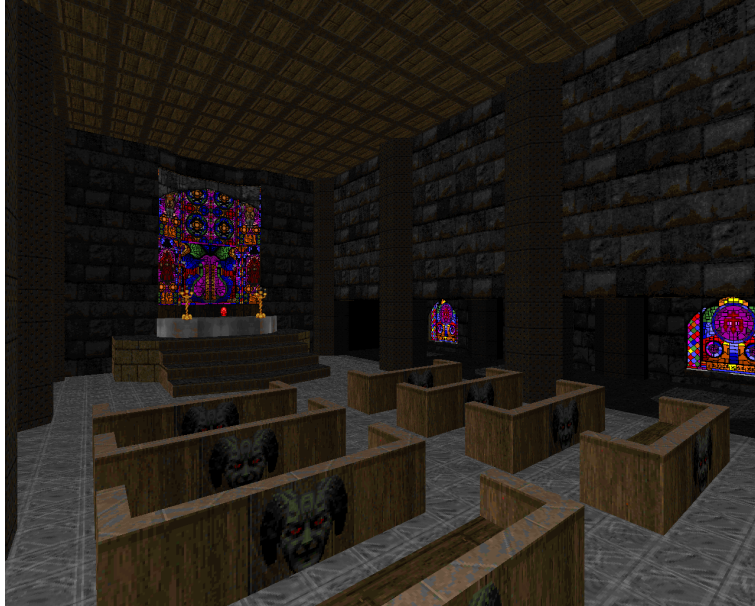
As a result, Eternal Doom doesn't deal in abstraction the way Plutonia and even the original Doom games do—abstraction would be antithetical to conveying the sense of place. Instead, most maps in the megawad (and certainly all of the really memorable and beloved ones) take great care to infuse each scene with details that establish the location and increase the level of immersion in the setting. Techbase settings such as "Genesis" (map 01) feature looming computer consoles that control nearby objects, plausible reactor-like structures, cryosleep chambers, and other mechanical structures that imply a concrete purpose. The warehouse grounds of "Nucleus" (map 04) contain huge crate mazes that recall E2M2 of Doom (which itself could likely be called the first adventure map), along with a sewer system and a perimeter waste tunnel for toxic runoff. In the fantasy "otherworld" maps, fortress architecture is designed to feel functional and lived-in as well as designed for aesthetic beauty. Towers feature crenellations not because it makes the gameplay smooth (perhaps the opposite, in fact), but because fortified towers should realistically have crenellations, and it wouldn't feel like a castle if they didn't; Chaingunners perch at the top of these towers and snipe at you not because it fits into free-flowing combat design, but because it's an advantageous position and real enemies would be foolish not to take advantage of it. Cathedrals are designed with arrays of pews, and banquet halls with tables and benches, not because they serve as deliberate routing obstacles for combat but

because they are realistic details that flesh out the intended purpose of each room. The way settings are built conveys the idea that the world would exist with or without your presence—that you have merely found yourself as an unwilling intruder, far from home and out of your league—rather than being designed around your survival needs or convenience.

Eternal Doom's world would exist with or without you – you are an unwilling intruder, far from home and out of your league

Similarly, decorations are used as scenery, with an eye for where things should realistically be placed. Standing torches exist where they are realistically useful, and trees are placed in a way that makes them appear to be growing naturally, with no particular order. If these obstacles get in your way, then too bad; real trees would do the same thing, if you were fighting your way through a real castle courtyard, and you should probably have paid more attention to where you were going if you didn't want to get hit by that fireball. Again, this flies in the face of the way that objects are used in combat-oriented mapsets, which place great importance on pure freedom of movement.
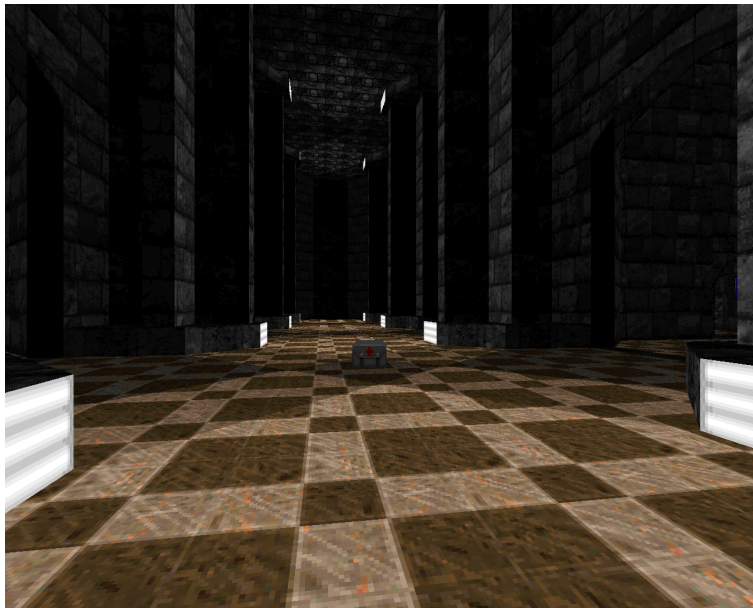
Eternal Doom contains a great deal of custom texture work to help establish its settings, and it was perhaps the first mapset to use midtextures extensively as an aid for storytelling and scene-setting. Vines and spiderwebs (the latter inspired by and ripped from Heretic) drape forgotten corners, creating an overgrown, derelict look. Doorways use midtexture overhangs to create the appearance of curved arches. Fuzz-effect forcefields block openings, and sheets of glass, intact or shattered, create passable or impassable windows. Among the most distinct and ubiquitous midtexture details in Eternal Doom are the flames, both smaller ones licking up from around the edges of lava pits and larger walls of blazing fire, which are used to create memorable details like the huge torches at the beginning of "Darkdome" (map 12) and the enormous tower of flame in "Fire and Stone" (map 21).

Eternal Doom's progression is divisive, with practically every step hard-won through hunting and puzzle-solving - most players will need to set aside hours

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Eternal Doom was also one of the first mapsets to use lighting with greater complexity and atmospheric depth than is present in the stylized high-contrast style of Doom and Doom 2. Though the megawad was still bound by vanilla limits and uses relatively few gradients, its maps tend to have a strong focus on realistic light and shadow casting, using blocking structures to build complex shapes out of shadows, and windows or ceiling openings to cast complex shapes of light from outside of the playable space. Sverre Kvernmo's maps—such as "Time Gate" (map 05) and "Darkdome," which are widely considered to be among the best in the megawad—frequently give the most attention to lighting and feature intricate "structures" of light that dramatically increase the sense of detail and atmosphere in a room. Entirely dim and dark spaces are often used for fantasy interiors to create the appearance of structures that have been lost to time, and enclosed passages fade slowly into darkness or light with the use of torches; techbases, on the other hand, rely much more frequently on the bright-dark

lighting style of the original Doom. This duality helps to create the sense of moving back and forth between two different worlds.
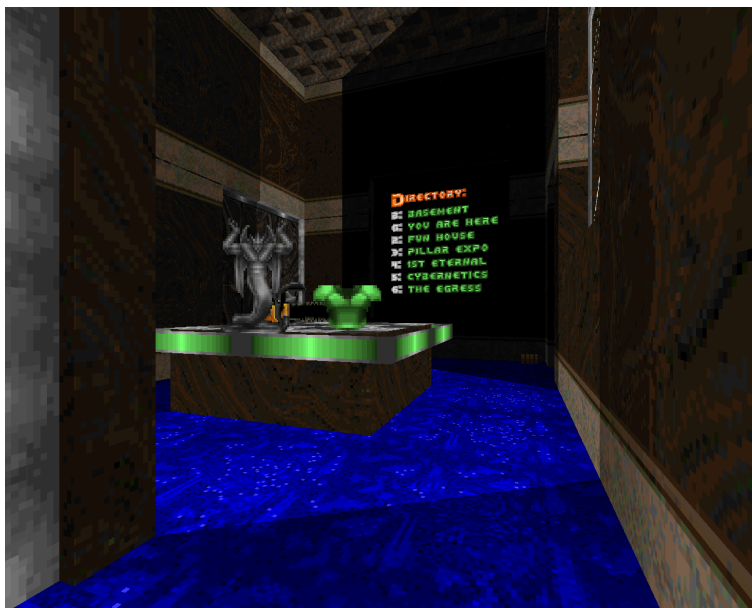
It probably goes without saying at this point that many combat-focused players cry foul on many aspects of Eternal Doom's level design, but the thing that's really divisive about the megawad is its puzzles, which usually take the form of obscured progressions. This style of play has its roots in the "adventure" genre of point-and-click games like King's Quest, where careful exploration is the primary focus of gameplay and solutions frequently require players to think deeply about what they're looking at rather than simply reacting to the expectations created by game mechanics. In Eternal Doom, mandatory progression is frequently gated behind the types of observational details that would normally be reserved for secrets— cleverly hidden switches, texture changes, and other visual elements that require the player to identify that something is slightly off. As a result, hunting around and observing your surroundings carefully becomes a key part of the gameplay, which is one reason that combat is deemphasized. One of the most famous examples of the megawad's puzzle progression is in "Silures" (map 20), where you have to identify and "use" the lone dead tree in a grove of living ones in order to open a passage. "Excalibur" (map 30) is the epitome of everything that's divisive about the progressions, an enormous map where practically every step is hard-won through hunting

and puzzle-solving and most players will need to set aside hours to beat it without the Doom Wiki's walkthrough.

Eternal Doom is about the journey, rather than the destination

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There's a lot going on in Eternal Doom, and if it seems hard to pin down what an adventure map really is, that's because a true sense of adventure can only be created by combining a great many seemingly disparate elements. Eternal Doom's slower pace of gameplay helps to build the sense of adventure by giving it a cautious, deliberate feel and playing up all of the visual elements that are important to the player's sense of exploring and uncovering forgotten lore. The puzzles build a sense of adventure by making you feel like Indiana Jones, unraveling the secrets of forbidden realms in order to find the rewards that they hide. Even the huge size of most of the maps builds a sense of adventure by making the worlds themselves seem vast, and by making you feel like you have to work hard and commit a huge amount of mental energy in order to win. An adventure map can't be a one-trick pony; you have to feel like you're really there, and that means you have to be fully immersed in the complexity of the setting, the progression, and the varied mechanics of play. All of these elements come together to create the overarching sense of the mapset as "an experience" rather than simply a fun diversion. Eternal Doom is about the journey, rather than the destination, and that's why it demands that you take your time getting there and pay attention to everything along the way.

Grove - B.P.R.D. (2004)

Once More, With More Puzzles
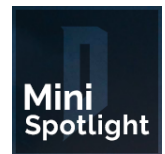
It's one thing to create a project like Eternal Doom, which is essentially a Doom game with elements of other genres thrown in. But to cut a completely un-Doomlike experience from whole cloth, or distill it down to pure puzzle/adventure elements by boiling out all of Doom's

standard gameplay…that's another matter entirely. Grove plays something like a Myst game with more freedom of movement, a little indie vignette that revolves entirely around exploration and observation, in which you're given no instruction and no obvious core Doom mechanics to extrapolate from and simply have to figure out what your goal is by grabbing a primitive scrawled map and determining where your path can take you from there.
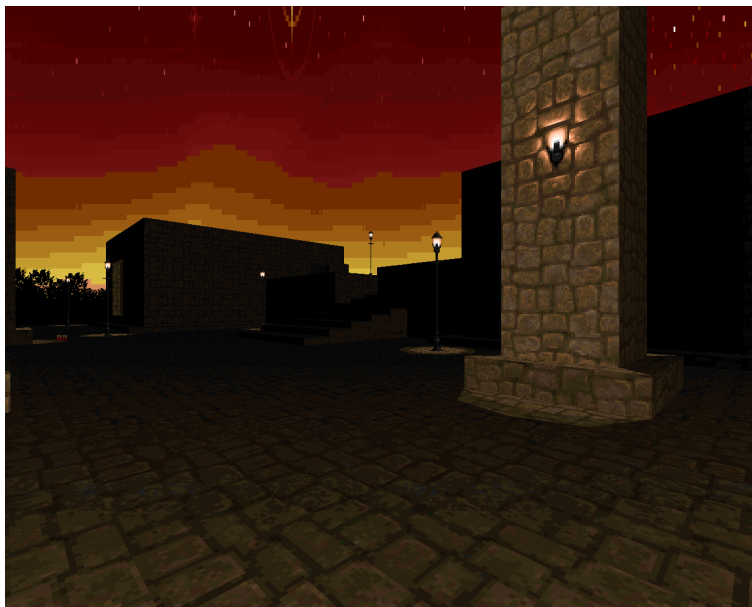

Grove is a fairy tale, a beautiful and otherworldly dream that could just as easily take place in the far future or the far past, and its mysterious setting and wealth of hidden lore hint at a far bigger picture that remains unknowable while still giving you plenty to tease your brain and keep you immersed. Grove really wants you to slow down and take in its atmosphere and surreal beauty, and there's just no way you could do that by running around like a maniac…so it simply doesn't let you. The map takes place in a dense, night-black forest, requiring you to navigate by the twilit skyline and the aforementioned hand-drawn automap replacement as you try to hunt down items and make sense of the clues available. Later puzzle maps like The Given and Phocas Island 2 have proven that you don't need quite such drastic measures to command the player's full observational awareness —a pure mood piece that's sufficiently intriguing, with sufficiently little combat to get in the way, will keep people's mind on the observational elements.

> *Grove took the idea of Doom as an adventure to a whole new level, proving that the game has enough flexibility to provide an enormous range of artistic expression*

But Grove's eerie setting is brilliant, and easily captivating enough to drive the player's engagement with the map. Like Eternal Doom, it fundamentally plays out as a switch hunt, but each "switch" is so deeply woven into the setting as an interactive object that it feels much more like true puzzle solving, and the world-building is strong enough that it pushes you to think about the potential cause and effect of each action. Every aspect of playing the map is built into the idea of the whole world as one big puzzle; locating the main puzzles is itself a challenge, and finding the resources to defeat the rare but deadly monsters is an equally essential part of the experience. Grove took the idea of Doom as an adventure to a whole new level, proving that the game has enough flexibility to provide an enormous range not only within the core mechanics of play, but also as a means of artistic expression.

Epic 2 - Eternal (2010)

Once More, With Fewer Puzzles
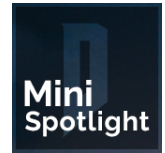
Let's face it: Eternal Doom's obscure progression isn't for everyone, and many people are going to wish they could have the sense of high adventure without the feeling of slogging through all the puzzles. Enter a man who wore his inspirations on his sleeves, the mapper who called himself Eternal. Eternal created a great many noteworthy projects that all reflect the ethos of Eternal Doom to some degree or other, but the one that most obviously plays like a "lite" version of TeamTNT's masterwork is Epic 2.
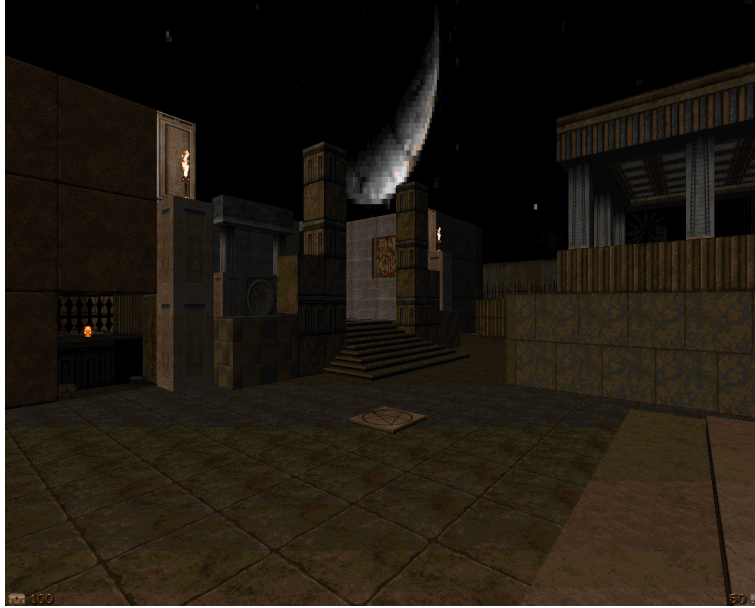
The megawad takes the player on a long, winding adventure through ancient tombs and cities and strange alien spaceships, reveling in the pulp feel of its settings. Everything from Eternal Doom is here—the sense of *mise en scene*, the hanging vines, the deadly traps, the tangible air of ancient mystery, the contrast between tight dungeon crawls and expansive plazas—but the puzzle elements, while sometimes present, are significantly toned down. Sure, Epic 2 has its share of conventional Doom-style switch hunting, some searches a bit more cryptic than others, and the mechanic is still very much in service to the adventure feel of the maps, just as it is in Eternal Doom—but it never really gets in the way of enjoying the tense combat, which is brought back to the forefront of the level design in a way that it never was in its predecessor.

> *Epic 2 revels in the pulp feel of Eternal Doom, but the puzzle elements, while sometimes present, are significantly toned down*

To that end, Epic 2 uses a wide variety of combat styles, primarily switching between Plutonia-esque brawls and Hell Revealed-style light horde combat, but also throwing in some stronger Eternal Doom homages and calmer, more ambient exploration maps. Keeping the adventure feel but

focusing on action allows the megawad to fully embrace the feel of being in an Indiana Jones movie, moving swiftly rather than deliberately and treating the elements of other game genres as a way to vary the pacing rather than as the heart of the game. Small wonder that Epic 2 and Eternal's other work is so popular among players who are fans of adventure mapping but had a tough time making it through Eternal Doom—it distills the essence of what made that megawad so great, particularly the grand sense of journey, but in a way that isn't quite so…eternal.

Sacrament - Clan [B0S] (2011)

Beauty and Loss
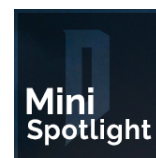
"Russian realism," the term coined by *kmxexii* to describe the work of Clan [B0S] and other Russian mappers of the 2010s, is a fairly distant offshoot of Eternal Doom's school of design. In some ways it is inspired by Eternal's mapping (especially his more artistic work, such as Hell Ground), and in others it's more of a return to the slower, more deeply contemplative style of Eternal Doom, but its tone and settings are truly distinct. Sacrament itself began rather modestly as a Russian community project, but its creative direction was such a powerful gut-punch that it galvanized the Russian community to create a huge number of similar releases throughout the early and mid-2010s, and influenced many mappers in the broader Doom community as well.
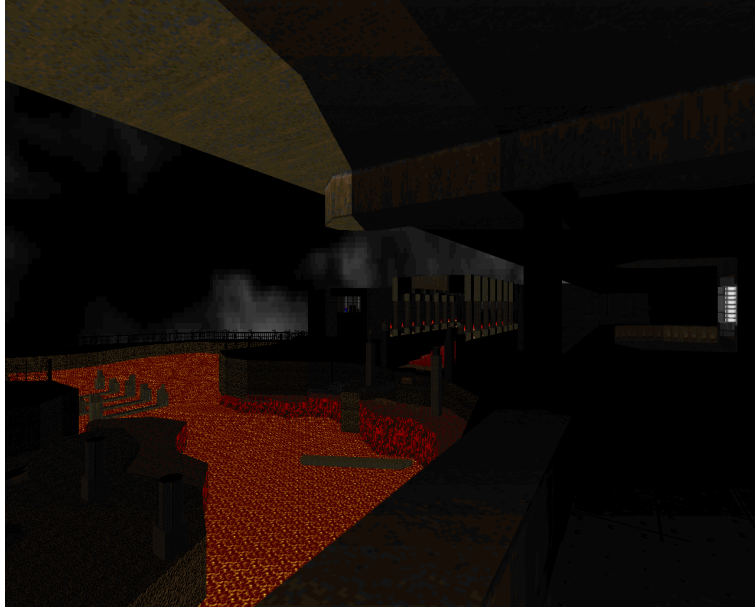
As an early example of its kind (and a community project to boot), Sacrament represents a mixed bag of generally realist or adventure-oriented mapping styles, but its stronger maps contain the seeds (and arguably the entire crop fields) for the particular style that would come to define Russian mapping. Maps like Wraith's "Lavatraz," Azamael's "Seaport," Dragon Hunter's "Industrial Processing," and Beewen's "Controlled System" (maps 05, 11, 12, and 13, respectively) are sprawling, dim, and deeply moody, with an atmosphere so thick you couldn't even stick a fork in it anymore, because it would just bounce off. They're also rather empty on the whole, ignoring the conventional idea that large spaces must be filled with monsters and instead letting the enemies simply serve as inhabitants for a world that feels left behind.

> *The idea of being "left behind" – the incredibly strong sense of post-apocalyptic emptiness – is perhaps the most defining aspect of Russian realism*

That idea of being "left behind"—the incredibly strong sense of post-apocalyptic emptiness—is perhaps the most defining aspect of Russian realism, and it's exactly why the style is so realist. Cities, parks, building interiors, and other real-world settings are rendered with such intimate

detail that you can't help but wonder who lived in them before everything went wrong, and feel the deep sense of loss that's left behind by their absence. Sacrament and many other Russian works also take advantage of PRBoom+'s ability to play .OGG music, which is used to back up the mood created by the maps themselves, so that the best of them feel absolutely drenched with emotive power.
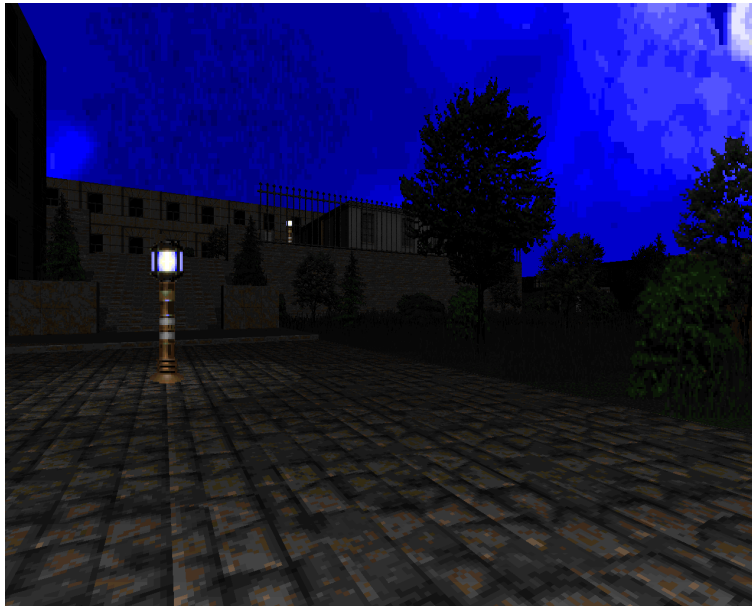
The whole style of mapping was best exemplified by Lainos, who served as a creative director for Sacrament (and other projects) and created its most famous map, "Doxylamine Moon" (map 02). Though his style shares many elements with the other mappers mentioned above, he seems most responsible for the ultra-realist direction of the project, and many of the specific usage tropes that other mappers would pick up in later releases. While other maps in the project emulate similar settings using stock or stock-like Doom textures, "Doxylamine Moon" is a stunningly realistic city layout that's made all the more familiar through the extensive use of gritty, photorealistic textures. This aesthetic style became a major hallmark of Russian mapping in the years that followed and remained a staple of Lainos's own maps, particularly his other two magnum opuses, 5till L1 Complex and Comatose. These two maps, along with "Doxylamine Moon," place an enormous importance on nonlinearity and explorability, and a significant portion of each is completely optional; Lainos lets you complete them as quickly as you want and bow out if you get frustrated, but he

knows that the complex, intriguing setting and the secrets it teases will keep you searching for as long as you're able. And although the Doom community's current fascination with sandbox maps probably can't be traced back to a single source, I believe Lainos was a major factor in their rise to popularity, simply because he's so good at creating places that players want to explore to the fullest.

Eternal Doom, and the WADs that follow in its wake, demonstrate how Doom can be used to take the player on an epic journey, not just on a thrill ride.

Creative Progeny
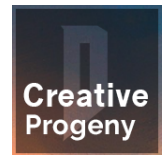
- Mordeth
- STRAIN
- Brotherhood of Ruin
- Equinox
- Doom Raider
- Daedalus: Alien Defense
- Remain
- Eternal Doom IV
- Hell Ground
- Phocas Island 2
- A.L.T.
- 5till L1 Complex
- Hellfire: Dreams
- Bloody Steel
- Sheer Poison

- Comatose
- Legacy of Heroes
- The Given
- Lost Civilization
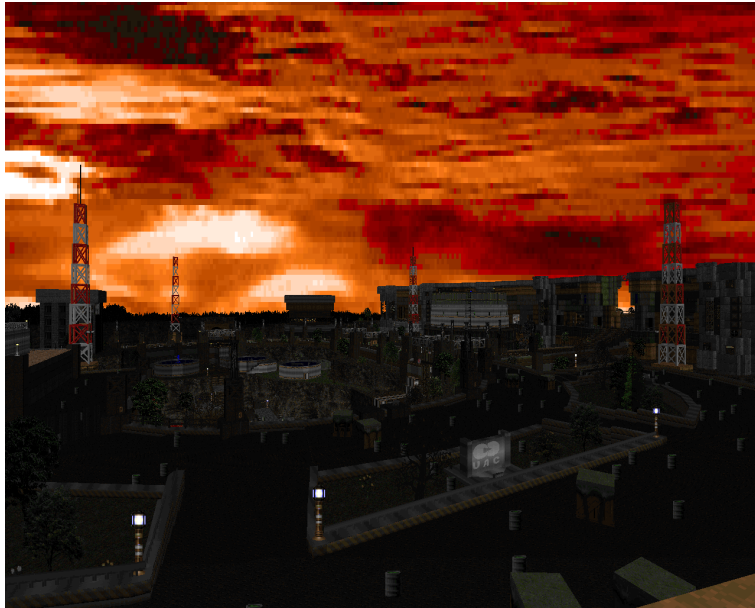
Lost Civilization (2019)

Chapter 4:

The Great Synthesis, Part 1

So there you have it: throughout the 1990s, the formation of clashing mapping ideologies, a community already dividing based on the priorities of different players. Plutonia's gameplay was beloved by more challenge-oriented players, but it wasn't particularly interested in presentation, beauty, or narrative and thus had little to offer anyone else. Hell Revealed was impressive but was viewed as completely inaccessible for many players. Eternal Doom was steeped in atmosphere and adventure, but drove a lot of people crazy with its obscure progressions and switch hunting. Does any of this sound familiar?

But what if you could have your cake and eat it too? The idea that you can simultaneously have smooth, tough gameplay alongside strong aesthetics or mood must seem glaringly obvious from a 2019 perspective, but like all good ideas, somebody actually had to do it before it became obvious that it could be done. Dichotomies always have their logical limitations, but there have to be mistakes, mixed feelings, great works that leave something to be desired, itches that need to be scratched, before someone can come along and offer the best of both worlds. Simply put, you can't have something that offers the excitement of both Hell Revealed and Eternal Doom before Hell Revealed and Eternal Doom exist; the skills needed to create it aren't apparent yet.

The idea that you can have smooth gameplay
alongside strong aesthetics seems obvious today, but
like with all good ideas, somebody actually had to do
it first

By the turn of the millennium, many players and mappers had moved on from Doom to Quake and other more modern games. Some of the greatest

early mappers, including Iikka Keranen, Matthias Worch, and Dario Casali, had graduated to careers in commercial game design. Many of the major post-Requiem mappers—Anders Johnsen, Anthony Soto, Brad Spencer, Lee Szymanski, Kim Andre Malde, and others—had gotten together to create a team megawad out of Johnsen's struggling one-man project, after which most of them would drift away from Doom. The twilight of the game's odd little mapping community had always seemed like it would inevitably arrive sooner or later, and with the coming of the new millennium and the biggest of the "Doom killer" games themselves becoming obsolete, it must have felt more imminent than ever.

In other words, it was about time for somebody to create the most influential PWAD of all time.

Alien Vendetta - Various (2001)

Fiat Lux

That Johnsen-led megawad was Alien Vendetta, and although it was recognized as a great work in its own time, it has gradually come to be cemented as the closest thing Doom mapping has to a holy scripture. In 10 Years of Doom, Cyb referred to it as the "last great classical megawad," a description that's been paraphrased many times in the years since. With all the changes happening in the early to mid-2000s, it probably looked like the last of its kind, and in some ways it may have been. But for my part, I've often thought of it as the first great modern megawad instead. Both labels are equally true; Alien Vendetta was the turning point for Doom mapping, the crossover from the understated philosophies and ambitions of the 1990s to the mapping community as we know it today.
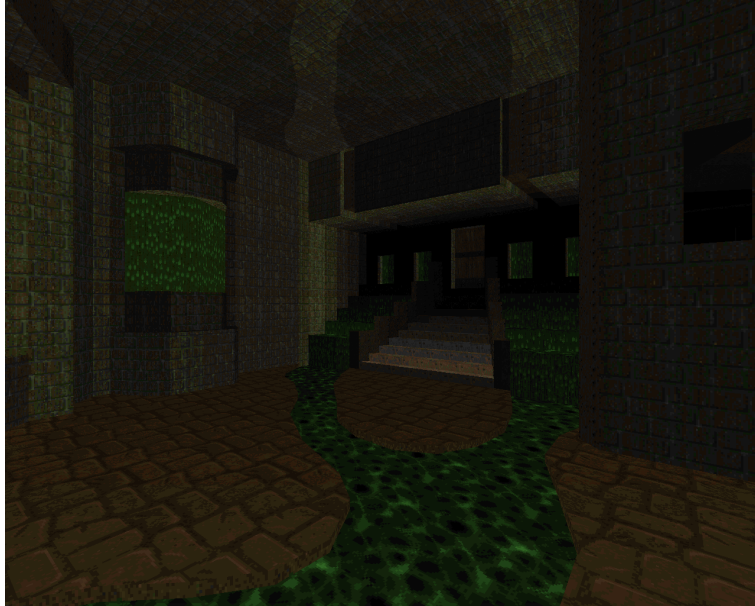
Even now, it's a bit hard to pin down exactly what was important about the megawad, because the things it accomplished were so broad and easy to take for granted. It's not so much that people take specific ideas or techniques from it, as they do with Plutonia and Eternal Doom, but rather that it has given the community its entire conception of what Doom mapping is and should be. It's the canvas upon which most subsequent Doom mapping has been painted, the framework to which later mappers have added drywall, electricity, and plumbing—particularly when it comes to maps made in the more classic vanilla and Boom formats, but not exclusively. As I've already implied, Alien Vendetta represents a synthesis between the aesthetic and artistic ideals of adventure mapping and the satisfying combat of challenge mapping; there's certainly more to it than that, but it's worth looking at how it accomplishes that synthesis before we get into more complex philosophy.
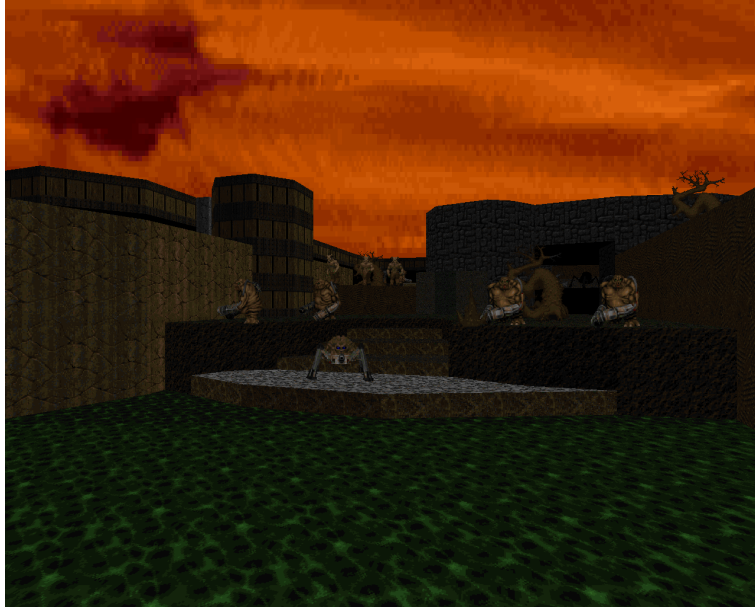
Alien Vendetta primarily styles its combat after Hell Revealed, but with many refinements and a different target audience. Monsters are frequently presented as a flood rushing at the player, but the overall flow of combat is often tempered with more dynamic, Plutonia-like moments, relying on the strategic placement of more dangerous monsters. The toughest maps—typically Johnsen's—use siege combat similar to the later Hell Revealed maps, which offered a good combination of intimidation and accessibility, genuine threat and the feeling of epic intensity. The monster placement in AV also tends to emphasize presentation wherever it's possible to do so without diminishing the combat; rather than simply being clumped into units like in Hell Revealed or treated as completely individual like in Plutonia, monsters tend to be placed more organically—snipers perched on aesthetic arrays of crates, turreted enemies given attractive perches with positions that play to the architecture, and a general eye toward how monsters look as an arrangement in relation to each other. Among the best examples of the megawad's combat presentation is "Hillside Siege" (map 06), which sets up enemies so that you feel like a one-person Normandy invasion force, pushing forward against ranks of enemies with advantageous tactical positions but with enough maneuverability to avoid being bogged down by them.

Alien Vendetta may have looked like the "last great classical megawad," but I've often thought of it as the first great modern megawad

The overall difficulty level is aimed at being enjoyable for strong players, but it's intentionally lower than Hell Revealed in most cases. Even the background information in the textfile makes it clear that the mappers put a great deal of thought into how AV related to Hell Revealed and how its intended player base had shifted thanks to careful moderation. AV is meant to be enjoyed by a wider audience, to find a more moderate middle ground between people who play for intensity and people who play for simpler sorts of fun. At the same time, its toughest maps match or even surpass Hell Revealed, which creates a sense of climactic escalation at various points in the overall progression and makes victory feel more hard-won. The most obvious comparison between the two megawads is Johnsen's "Dark Dome" (map 26), which is a direct homage to the most famous map in Hell Revealed, "Post Mortem" (HR map 24). Each map is the epitome of siege warfare in its respective megawad, but "Dark Dome" is more streamlined, more dense, more challenging, and all around more impressive than its predecessor.
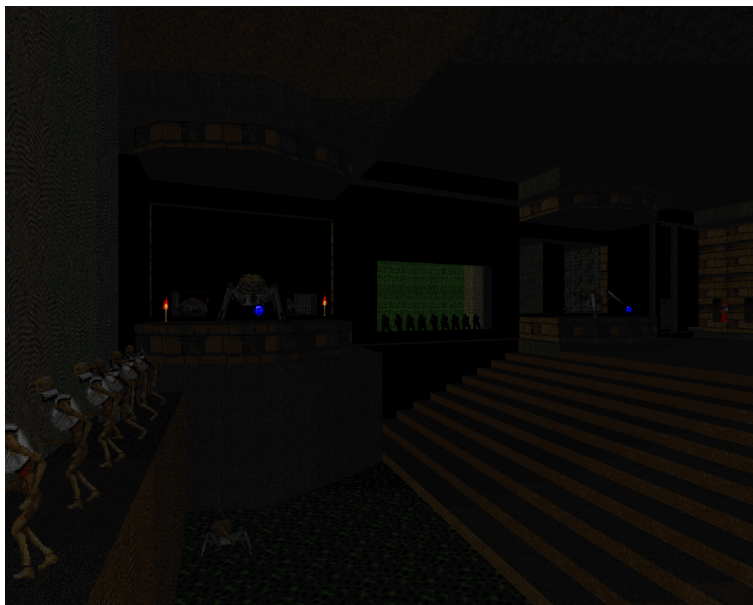
Alongside its tough, engaging combat, Alien Vendetta adds in a number of adventure elements that make the setting more interesting and give players more of a feeling of being part of a story, as in Eternal Doom. A number of maps feature realistic sector-art details, like the ship in the harbor in "Cargo Depot" (map 03) and the train track that runs between that map and "Seclusion" (map 04), giving them a sense of connection to each other. "Beast Island" (map 08) tosses you into a wasteland and tasks you with making the journey from a ruined village to a seaside castle, and "Nemesis" (map 11) takes you on an even grander adventure through a honeycomb of caverns and a series of towering island fortresses high above the water. There are even some cool storytelling tricks like the hanged Imps in "Fire Walk With Me" (map 29). But although they're an important part of the level design, the story and setting details are kept out of the player's way or are limited to areas with few monsters, and many occur outside of the playable space, which keeps them from interfering with combat.

Alien Vendetta was the turning point for Doom mapping, the crossover from the understated philosophies and ambitions of the 1990s to the mapping community as we know it today

The level of architectural detailing in many AV maps is significant; the mappers considered aesthetic beauty to be important, and on the whole, it was among the most detailed releases that had existed up to that point (perhaps only surpassed by the GothicDM series, which was itself pretty infamous for sacrificing gameplay in the name of aesthetics). Rooms and architectural facades are shaped in as complex a way as possible within vanilla limits, frequently relying on regular pillars and ceiling cutouts in the vein of Eternal Doom, but Alien Vendetta also begins to work a lot more with inset trim, such as metal borders around the interiors of windows (and other methods of creating a frame within a frame), as well as corner trim on buildings. Much of its detail comes in stacked tiers—stair-like cutouts forming the tops of arched doorways, windows that appear semi-rounded, and nested cutouts in ceilings and walls. "One Flew Over the Caco's Nest"

(map 21) is one of the best examples of the megawad's emphasis on detailing, as it manages to pack an incredible amount into its tighter spaces, both regularized detailing such as insets and unique details such as cords of flesh dangling from the ceiling. Detailing of roughly similar complexity had been done before in a handful of cases, including the Chord series and The Darkening E2, but Alien Vendetta was the first to apply these sorts of high aesthetic standards across an entire megawad, and it really left an impression. Its combination of specific detail tropes was so effective and easily reusable that it has become the foundation for much of modern detailing, and is still used today in a much more refined form.
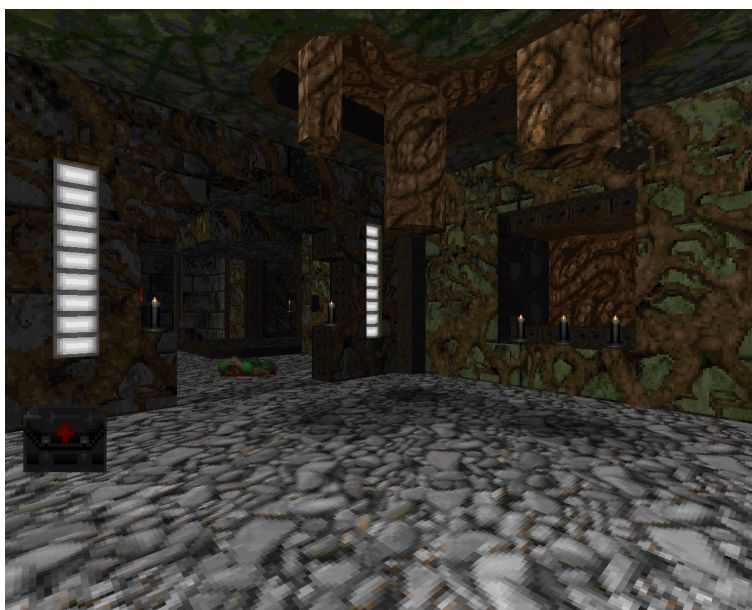
Alien Vendetta also firmly established the Doom community's modern lighting aesthetic, though it borrowed individual elements of it from GothicDM 2, Eternal Doom, the Chord series, and 99 Ways to Die. It turns out that this type of consistently detailed lighting was possible in the vanilla engine all along, and you can see it in AV as early as the opening view of map 01. Alien Vendetta's lighting style, used by most of the mappers who worked on the megawad, is built around gradients; each bright swath of light is ringed by narrower gradients of the same shape, creating a soft transition down to the ambient light level. Gradient lighting had been done before—most notably in the later Chord maps and in a more rudimentary form in Eternal Doom—but its ubiquitous use in Alien Vendetta was what established it as an essential element of most types of mapping, and set the

general usage style that others would follow. And whereas Eternal Doom and the Chord series used their lighting primarily from an atmospheric perspective, Alien Vendetta also places significant emphasis on lighting as a framework or a complement for other forms of detail, using it to draw attention to points of interest or create patterns that attract the eye and make scenes look more complex, which is one of the most fundamental aspects of modern lighting.

Alien Vendetta represents a synthesis between the aesthetic and artistic ideals of adventure mapping and the satisfying combat of challenge mapping

So Alien Vendetta combines aesthetics and combat to an extent that almost no PWAD had before, but more importantly, it does so in a way that's entirely unified, so that the two halves of design enable rather than detract from each other and frequently emphasize each other's strengths. Atmosphere can be a huge part of the feel of combat, and strong details can focus attention in the right places; at the same time, well-placed monsters can contribute to the aesthetic and the sense of adventure, and varied combat intensity can be a part of the way a mapset tells a story. And not only did the megawad establish the importance of combining the two, it also provided the rough template for how each would be used going forward into the modern era. Alien Vendetta's basic aesthetic elements are the primitive form of most modern aesthetics; its combat was built on and revamped through Kama Sutra and the Scythe series, which essentially defined the most common styles of modern combat.
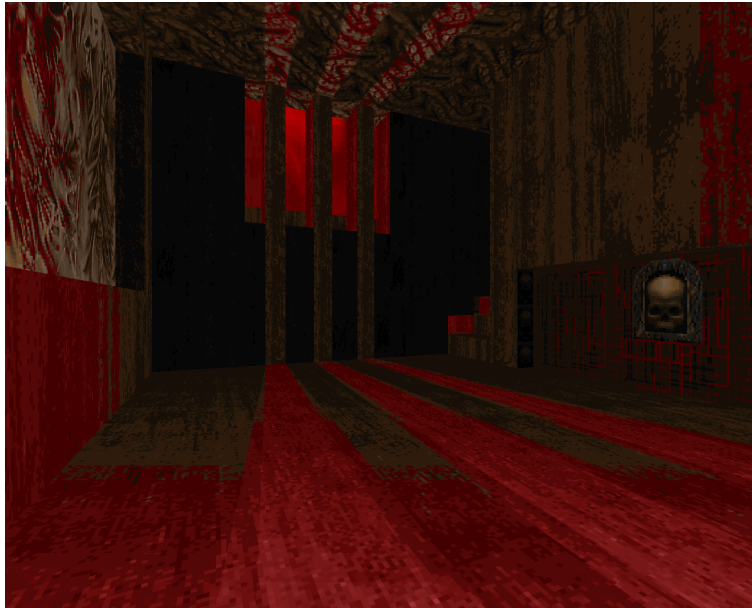
The Alien Vendetta team also gave a marked amount of attention to the "anatomy" of the megawad. While Plutonia forgoes any sense of story or connection between its maps, and Eternal Doom provides a deep feeling of overarching narrative but lacks a sense of order or pacing, Alien Vendetta balances its narrative at both the macro and micro levels—playing the distinct feel of individual maps against the broader sense of progression to make the long journey feel memorable. The map progression goes beyond Doom 2's basic base-city-hell and builds in a stronger sense of how the player is moving from place to place. It begins with very earthy, modern tech-city settings before launching into a four-map segment set in some kind of medieval fantasy world, then throws the player back to Earth in a sequence of gleaming techbases that gradually crumble into a realm that's equal parts Earth and Hell; after the player breaches the main gateway, the last stretch moves through a marbley, fleshy Hell and, finally, deep into a vivid crimson Hell that becomes fiery at the end. Very few maps seem randomly inserted, and the fact that the megawad is broken into a series of distinct chunks, often with logical transitions between them, helps to create the narrative. This quasi-episodic progression is given further definition—a sense of purpose, if you will—through the placement of individual standout maps. "Hillside Siege" serves as a mini-climax at the end of its episode, conveniently placed before the requisite post-map 06 story text; "Nemesis" and "Misri Halek" serve a similar role in the map 11 and 20 slots. "Sunset"

(map 01) is specifically placed to establish the overarching sense of aesthetics for the megawad and stands apart thematically from the maps that follow it. "Toxic Touch" (map 10) provides a deeply atmospheric, eerily enclosed interlude to the sprawling outdoor maps of the medieval episode without departing from the theme; "Clandestine Complex" (map 24), by contrast, is a complete thematic departure, a sudden lurch into an apocalyptic earthly setting between the pure Hell episodes. Among the most thematically unusual maps in the set is "Killer Colours" (map 31), an abstract construct that shifts from one monochrome setting to another, creating mood pieces purely through color and light.

Misri Halek was the first great "That One Map" in a megawad – the one completely unforgettable map that serves as a shorthand for the entire project

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The most important map in the megawad is Kim Andre Malde's "Misri Halek," which is to the development of large individual "megamaps" as Alien Vendetta is to megawads as a whole. "Misri Halek" isn't simply enormous; it offers its own self-contained journey, its own epic narrative arc. The map is like nothing else in the megawad—a mysterious, inexplicable pyramid serving as the façade for an infinite labyrinth, a forgotten enigma teetering on the edge of oblivion, crumbling into a hellish abyss like the universe being consumed by the Nothing in "The Neverending Story." This image is as haunting as it is cinematic, and the combination of unanswered questions and shifting setting allowed Malde to build up the larger sense of adventure as the player progresses through the various sections of the pyramid. "Misri Halek" was the first great "That One Map" in a megawad—the one completely unforgettable map that serves as a shorthand for the entire project, even as the rest of the megawad remains memorable.
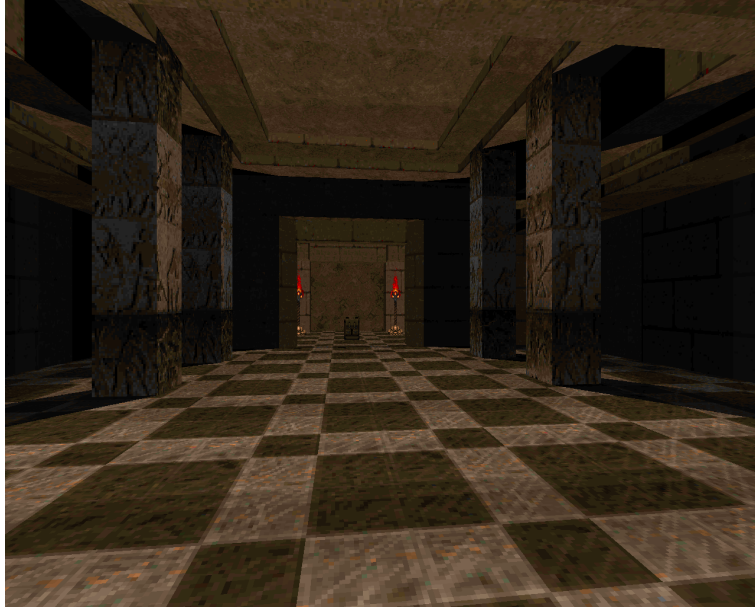
In a sense, Alien Vendetta didn't do anything new and simply owes its existence to a number of WADs that came before it—Hell Revealed and Plutonia for the combat, Eternal Doom for the sense of adventure, GothicDM for the detailing—but any seasoned Doomer knows it can't simply be reduced to its component parts. Alien Vendetta took each great thing that had been done before and did it in a more compelling way than anyone had ever done it—and then rolled it all up into a single incredible package. Doom as we know it in the modern era exists because Alien Vendetta created it. It gave us more than just a gigantic palette of mapping techniques; it gave us our entire conception of how a Doom project should be handled, the idea that Doom mapping is a complex craft for which the only proper goal is total mastery, which requires that the mapper give attention to artistry and polish in equal measure.

In many ways, Alien Vendetta was the end of an era, and I think people knew it at the time. The mappers and players of the 1990s were people for whom Doom had been a contemporary game; they got into it because it was new and exciting, and stuck with it for a little while. It was inevitable that most of those people would move on. In order to stay alive, Doom had to become a full-fledged artistic medium, a creative scene that drew in first-timers and returning nostalgia gamers alike with its endless sea of captivating creative output. I do not wish to suggest that Alien Vendetta singlehandedly enabled the survival of the Doom community—no single

PWAD could have done that. But it was Alien Vendetta that opened the door, the first great release that gave Doom mapping its own distinctive modern-retro direction and elevated it into something far beyond simply a collection of add-ons for an aging game. Johnsen and company's creation was supposed to be the last megawad before people moved on, but instead, it was the tipping point for Doom mapping to become something that lived on through a vibrant community.

Scythe - Erik Alm (2003)

Fast Casual Meets Fast and Furious
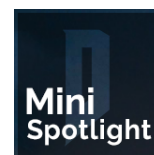
Scythe could perhaps be seen as a "lite" version of Alien Vendetta, but it's primarily known for toning down other design elements and focusing on stylistic gameplay. The combat is super fast and highly steamlined, and nearly every map in the megawad is bite-sized (with a few being slightly bigger bites than others). As a result, the entire set plays like a hot knife through butter—enemies come at you so quickly and fall so quickly that you can hardly slow down even if you try, and the layouts are designed to encourage constant movement and aggressive offense over cautious defense.

Despite the relatively even speed of gameplay, the maps ramp up gradually and consistently in difficulty, with the first ones being so casual you can practically play them in your sleep and the last ones revolving around brutal shock combat that was quite daunting for the time. Because that transition is so smooth over time, it's very intuitive to adjust to the difficulty ramp, though most new players will still hit a wall when it comes to suddenly being plunged into a massive horde battle in "Fear" (map 26) or being forced to speedrun through "Run From It" (map 28). This combination of zoomy pacing, easy-moving layouts, and steady increase in challenge makes for an overall style that could best be described as fluid, and it's easily the most significant factor in the megawad's long-lasting legacy.

Scythe plays like a hot knife through butter – enemies come at you so quickly and fall so quickly that you can hardly slow down even if you try

Scythe, being gameplay-focused, is quite a bit more limited in its aesthetic details than Alien Vendetta and has very few adventure elements. However, AV's gradient lighting style is very prevalent throughout the megawad, probably because lighting is the least physical aspect of detailing and can't possibly get in the player's way. The later maps build up an increasingly heavy atmosphere and frequently put a strong emphasis on setting, most notably the surprising ice theme that suddenly shows up in the last couple of maps. As the first major megawad to appear in Alien Vendetta's wake, it represents just one way to play with priorities—a way to remain firmly planted in that same all-encompassing artistic philosophy while also shifting the level design to revolve around a very specific focus. As influential as the first Scythe has been, it was the sequel that really grabbed hold of Alien Vendetta's core ideals and laser-focused them into such a pure and engaging style that the Doom community became practically obsessed with it—but we'll get to that later.

Deus Vult - Huy Pham (2004)

Holy Shit!
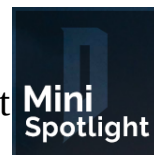
Cram all of Alien Vendetta into a single level, and you might get something a fair bit like Deus Vult, which was by far the most gigantic and ambitious single map ever created at the time of its release. Deus Vult was so vast that the release technically includes five maps—one that's the full intended experience, and then a version that's broken up into four separate maps just in case your computer couldn't handle its magnificence all at once, which was highly likely. The entire incredible journey plays like the action movie sequel to "Journey to the Center of the Earth," taking the player from a gleaming gateway laboratory down into the farthest depths of Hell, with multiple setting changes, mini-climaxes, and a great deal of cinematic ebb and flow along the way.
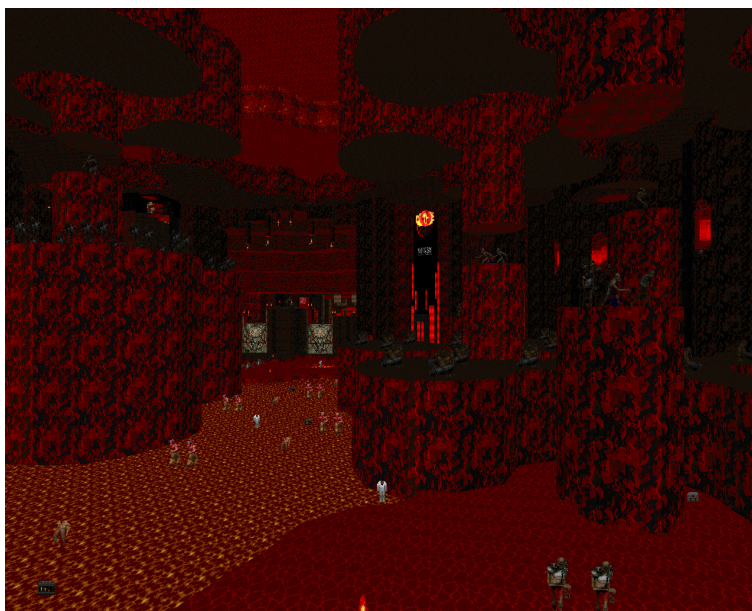
The map builds upon many of the detailing tropes of Alien Vendetta to create settings that are elaborate and strikingly beautiful, but it also aimed to blow players' minds with the scale of individual areas, many of which were incomparable to anything that had been seen before. The titanic red-rock cavern and mammoth cathedral chamber in particular inspired awe on a whole new level, foreshadowing countless vistas and grand-scale combat arenas that have been created in the years since.

> *Deus Vult was by far the most gigantic and ambitious single map ever created at the time of its release*

To keep the player under pressure within these enormous confines, Deus Vult stretches Hell Revealed-style siege combat to its limit, setting up hordes and boss monsters as a seemingly endless legion—and on top of that, it begins to work with abundant mass warp-ins of monsters, allowing arenas to appear empty and draw the player inside before suddenly becoming intensely hostile. Though most modern "slaughter" maps take a very different overall approach to their combat, DV inspired many future mappers with the sheer scale of its battles, which has become commonplace in the hardcore scene as well as in more conventional hardcore-lite maps following in the tradition of Alien Vendetta. There's nothing quite like a map that makes a player's brain melt while trying to take in its complexity and scope; a huge number of modern mappers have aimed to capture this feeling, and it was Deus Vult that first showed us how it could be done.

Alien Vendetta, hailed at the time as the last of the classical Doom megawads, instead set a new standard in its gameplay and aesthetic polish, kickstarting a whole new renaissance on the back of its lessons.

Creative Progeny
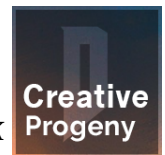
- Vrack 3
- Tremor
- Vile Flesh
- Kama Sutra
- Europe
- Hellcore 2.0

- Vae Victus 1 and 2
- Scythe 2
- Songs of the Damned
- Jade Earth
- Frozen Time
- Counterattack
- Struggle
- Avactor
- Remnant
- Most major projects released after 2002 in one way or another
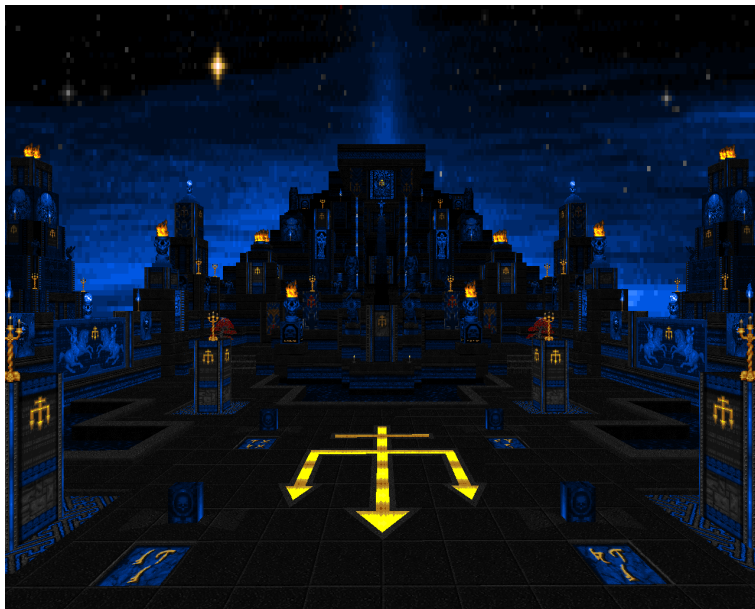
Struggle (2018)

Chapter 5:

When the Walls Fell

When Doom's source code was released in 1997, Doom fans with programming knowledge immediately set out to make the game easier to work with and add new features for mappers to use. The source port explosion was well underway by 1998, which saw the earliest releases of the two most popular port families, Jim Flynn and Lee Killough's Boom and its derivatives (nowadays typically PRBoom+) and Randi Heit's ZDoom (which has since evolved into GZDoom and other, more specialized ports).

Why did these two ports end up winning out? Because their creators worked quickly, for one thing. Boom was the first really complete source port, and it offered a lot of things that people wanted as mappers and players. ZDoom, which was quite a bit more complex, pushed many features out the door quickly due to the demand from players and the competition from other ports. This meant a fair number of snags along the road, including compatibility issues between earlier ZDoom maps and later versions of the port—but it also meant that the demands of mappers were consistently being met. Since Boom was so popular, ZDoom also had a tremendous advantage in being Boom-derived and Boom-compatible. From a practical standpoint, it makes sense for players and mappers to be able to rely on a single mid-level source port and a single advanced source port. From a player's perspective, you either want to be able to play most releases in one port (Boom) and advanced releases in another (ZDoom), or to simply play everything in a single port (ZDoom). From a mapper's perspective, you want your work to be easily accessible and for your chosen port to be continuously updated to make your life easier. Ultimately, once their basic needs had been met, people didn't want to juggle a bunch of different specialty ports, especially ones that were less developed.

If you read through the 10 Years of Doom Top 100 feature, you can see very clearly where the explosion of port-based maps happened,

gathering steam through 1999 and dominating 2000 and the years beyond. It's pretty easy to see why. Source ports were a huge deal for mappers—even the ones that simply removed the static engine limits and allowed mappers to put more on the player's screen at once, but especially the ones that added a host of new features. Boom was designed primarily around its user-friendly mapping format, which is similar to classic Doom but provides a lot more flexibility in what types of actions mappers can use, not to mention some of the more low-level advanced features like transparency and scrolling floors. By contrast, ZDoom went all out with adding features from more modern games, such as particle fountains, slopes, and colored sector lighting. At the time, it must have seemed as though all the rules had been unwritten; Doom level design became an arena where anything was fair game, and ZDoom in particular offered possibilities that were akin to an early game making program. The huge number of port releases in the early years show how excited everyone was about crafting mad science with the boatload of new options available. Early releases like the KZDoom series with its ACS scripting and polyobjects, Assault on Tei Tenga with its hub progression, and Runaway Train and The Adventures of Massmouth with their goofy mission objectives and story-driven gameplay, inspired later mappers and began to establish tropes for the way features were used.

Source ports were a huge deal for mappers – especially the ones that added a host of new features

Boom mapping has always been largely integrated with more classic mapping styles—even early releases like DemoniZed, though they were certainly fed by the excitement over new port features, tended to use those features in a way that supplemented Doom's core gameplay, rather than subverting or reimagining it. ZDoom, on the other hand, became its own subcommunity very early on, with its own ideas about what makes a game interesting that were very different from, and often clashed with, those of more classically minded players and mappers.

When it comes to ZDoom releases, it's a bit tricky to talk about "influences" within the mapping community, because each release for the

port has its own distinct feel and feature set compared to classic Doom releases, and because ZDoom mappers take so much of their inspiration from games outside of Doom. But even if there aren't many lineages of direct stylistic influence, there are certainly schools of thought about how port features are used. One of the earliest and thickest branches on the evolutionary tree of ZDoom mapping deals with the uncanny, using port features to play with sensations of reality and unreality.

Void - Cyb (2003)

The Abyss Gazes Back

Supposing you could approach Void from the perspective of a Doom player in 2003, it would take your preconceptions about Doom, turn them upside down, shake out their pockets, and leave them in a confused heap on the floor, wondering what hit them. It wouldn't waste any time doing it, either. The first hint of the uncanny comes right at the title screen, courtesy of the compressed XM music in place of what would normally be a MIDI track. It's fairly common to use more advanced music formats these days, but at the time, if that simplified MIDI sound was ingrained in your mind, an intrinsic part of playing Doom maps, it would have struck you as… different. Maybe not astonishing, but certainly a little bit unreal.
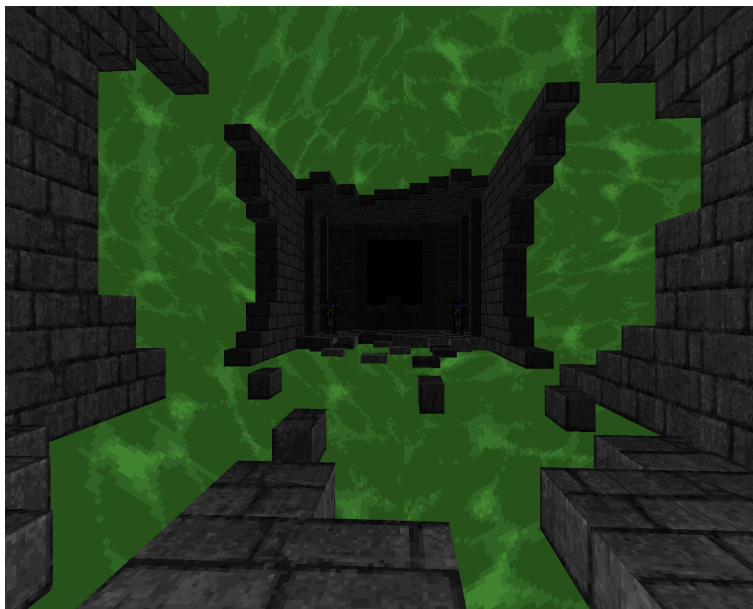
The whole map is like that; it throws one mind-bending thing after another at you, right from the beginning. The sky spins around you at dizzying speeds, rapidly shifting through a rainbow of colors and pulsing light to dark. Platforms and wall details drift up and down with fluid motion, as though they have a life of their own. The tunnel that faces you at the start is smoothly curved, its marble wall textures scrolling unnaturally as they slide the full 360 degrees around the opening. Bricks hang suspended in space, creating precarious paths. Doors hinge open and closed, walls rotate around, bookcases slide across the room and try to kill you. It feels like the laws of physics are being bent, because they are—real-world laws of physics, for one thing, but also Doom's laws of physics. The Doom engine has a very specific set of things it can do, architecture that can move in specific ways; with Void, those constraints have ceased to exist, and nothing behaves the way it's supposed to.

> *The Doom engine has a very specific set of things it can do, architecture that can move in specific ways; with Void, those constraints have ceased to exist*

The monster usage is similar. The black and white Imps that face you as you enter the map are just regular Imps, but there's something creepy about the way they match the checkered wall textures, let alone the fact that they're two different monsters that behave identically. Much of the map pits you against the Afrits and Dark Bishops from Hexen, emphasizing the former's erratic, un-Doomlike movements and the latter's slithery, un-Doomlike attack. All of the sudden, without warning, you'll find yourself fighting spiders, and then a boss spider; all of the sudden, there's an evil space marine clone out of nowhere. Because it's not tied to Doom's standard bestiary, the map is able to give you something unfamiliar at every turn.
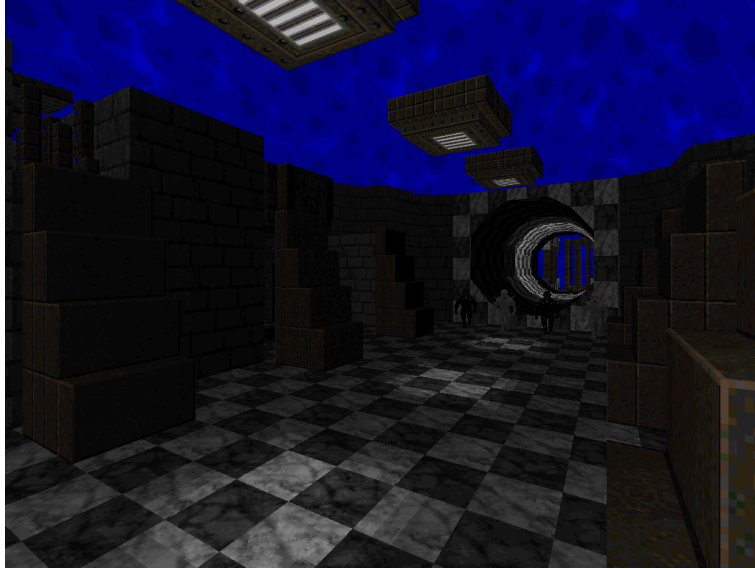
That unfamiliarity is what makes Void tick, and it never lets you get comfortable. Just when you think you've gotten used to the look of the map, you're thrown into a monochrome subworld with a scrolling marble sky and a whole new set of death traps. Later on, you're tasked with completing Hexen-like puzzles. In one of the map's most iconic sequences, you're shrunken down to the size of a rat and have to navigate the tiniest details of the architecture in order to bypass an obstacle. All of these challenges lead up to a boss fight where you have to keep an eye on the shifting architecture as well as your enemies. Most Doom maps in classic formats are designed around the familiar; you're expected to fine-tune skills you already have, or to rely on your gut understanding of the game's mechanics to complete challenges. With Void, the whole point is that you never know what's going to happen. As with any good eldritch event, the world is creepy because it's *wrong*, because you can't count on what you know.

For a player, perhaps, a lot of this uncanniness is happening in the background; the more immediate experience is, "Whoa! This is cool!" But even a modern player would be hard-pressed to go through Void without feeling the unreality of it. The fun of playing a map like this is the way that it messes with your mind, which might be why so many of Void's successors have horror leanings.
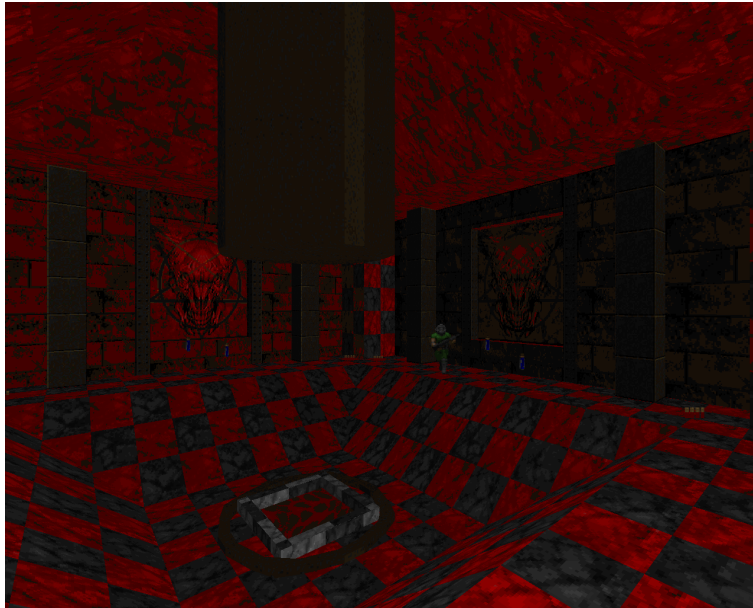
Don't get me wrong—uncanniness isn't something that only exists in ZDoom maps. Void probably took a fair amount of inspiration from the surrealism of earlier PWADs like Equinox and Null Space, though its most obvious muse is American McGee's Alice. Void's influence extends well beyond ZDoom mapping as well—hell, how many classic-styled maps have you seen that created their eerie atmosphere by having their architecture floating mysteriously in some sort of void space? Any Doom map that makes a deep effort to unsettle the player with its strangeness is likely tapping into Void's energy to some degree, directly or indirectly. That said, ZDoom provides a powerful set of tools for conveying these emotions.

More modern GZDoom maps can't simply rely on the port's features feeling new; the fact that you have fog or bobbing platforms in a Doom map isn't especially uncanny anymore, because people have seen it plenty of times. Modern mappers have to keep delving deeper—consider Shadows of the Nightmare Realm with its disturbing music, pervasive darkness, complex portal trickery, and monsters appearing out of thin air, all supplementing many of GZDoom's more basic features to help make the maps feel unsettling. Creating the uncanny is a big picture thing, and it requires all sorts of level design knowledge that isn't port-specific…but being able to bend reality at will certainly helps.

RTC-3057 - Team Future (2004)

No One Can Hear You Scream

RTC-3057 takes a much more realist approach than Void does, but it evokes a lot of similar feelings. Then again, it's a science fiction story in a video game, so "realist" is a pretty relative term. Both WADs use the vividness of their environments as a way to get deeper inside the player's head, calling up a sense of dread, wonder, and mystery. But while Void uses the strikingly un-Doomy details of its world design to make everything feel unreal, RTC-3057 uses them to make everything feel hyper-real, so that every empty hallway feels thicker with tension and every monster seems that much scarier.
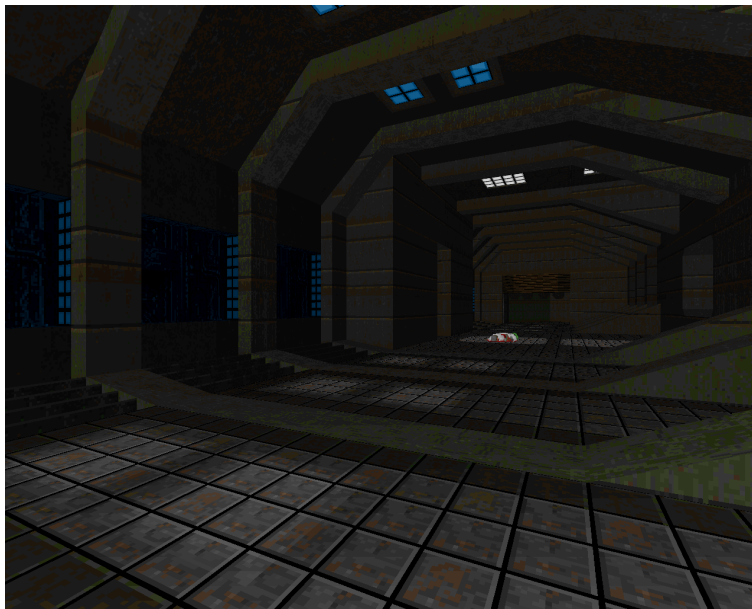
The hub-based episode deploys a large number of advanced features, but in a targeted way. Slopes and 3D floors are used to create realistic ship structures and furniture. Fans whirl ominously, and overhead fixtures cast hazy light through the air underneath them. Translucent windows grant views into other parts of the spaceship, but many of the details are obscured. As with Void, the music is in a higher-quality sound format than MIDI, which helps immerse the player and make the game feel like it's not the familiar territory of Doom.

While Void uses the strikingly un-Doomy details of its world design to make everything feel unreal, RTC-3057 uses them to make everything feel hyper-real

Tastefully scattered fragments of people's digital logbooks advance the story and make you feel even more like you're part of a real world. This immersive realism is one of the things that ZDoom ports are best at, and it really pays dividends when a key moment in the story demands an emotional response—like, say, the vengeful pleasure of dumping a Cyberdemon out of an airlock.

The source port explosion, most especially in ZDoom and its derivatives, gave amateur designers incredible new features and possibilities for expressing themselves and experimenting with new ideas.

Creative Progeny
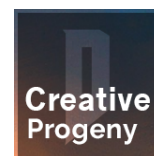
- Impossible: A New Reality
- Foreverhood
- Oniria
- Cold as Hell
- Happy Time Circus 1 and 2
- Valhalla
- Unloved
- Plasmaplant
- dead.wire and dead.air
- Shadows of the Nightmare Realm
- Void and Rainbow

- Dark Universe
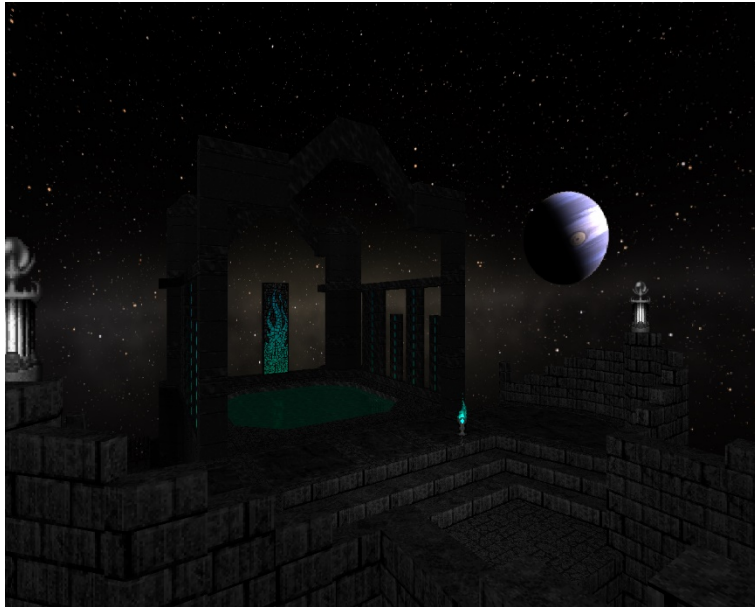
Void and Rainbow (2017)

Chapter 6:

Big Budget Doom

The history of ZDoom mapping is rich and varied, and we're certainly not done with it yet. The port family's features allow mappers to go so far off the beaten path that many releases are simply unclassifiable—how could something like ZanZan, Urban Brawl, Reelism, or Lilith ever be lumped into a school of mapping? Their influences come from entirely outside of the Doom community or *sui generis* from within the author's deranged mind, and they bear no resemblance whatsoever to the experience of playing Doom itself. Mapping for the Z-ports offers enough flexibility to make projects like this possible.

ZDoom and GZDoom have continually grown more advanced for as long as they've been around, offering new features and mapping aids every year. Over time, the community seems to pick and choose the best features, or those that are the most functional for most projects. Slopes, deep water, and fog have remained ever popular, while particle fountains and colored sector lighting have fallen out of favor. Decorate (now ZScript) is a fantastic toolkit with lots of neat properties for monsters and other actors, but Centaur-style shield blocking and stealth monsters are frowned upon. ACS scripting (also recently replaced with ZScript) allows for very flexible mapping, but the mapping community tends to acknowledge that cutscenes rarely have the desired effect and has mostly ceased to use them. Because the whole feature set is so experimental and so easy to get carried away with, ZDoom mapping on the whole has often been sneered at by classically minded mappers who see it as excessive, valuing flash over substance. And while there's often some truth to these criticisms, they sort of miss the point. The more features you have to wrangle, the more skills you have to learn, and the more unique your design goals are, the more difficult it is to work something pure and polished out of them. So the course of ZDoom mapping has been one of gradual refinement, of coming to understand the breadth of what is available and how to use it to bring ideas to fruition—

and in the meantime, classic mappers continue to work with the simple core gameplay that's already been refined by a great many people who came before.

The course of ZDoom mapping has been one of gradual refinement, of coming to understand the breadth of what is available and how to use it to bring ideas to fruition

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But the school of mapping that many people consider synonymous with ZDoom, the one that was most popular in the 2000s and early 2010s, was all about going whole hog with features. These mappers envisioned Doom as a more advanced version of itself—a more modern first-person shooter with amped-up arcade action and the cheesy, over-the-top appeal of the Build engine games. Later mappers would continue to reflect the evolution of FPS games as a whole—Quake, Unreal, Half-Life, it was all fair game. But even though they incorporated ideas from so many other games, they remained a very Doom-oriented subcommunity with their own tropes and distinct voices, drawing from their love of Doom first and foremost.

Action Doom - Scuba Steve et al. (2004)

Mini Spotlight

The Power of Cheese
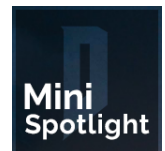
Action Doom was the first release to take ZDoom mapping over the top; it was goofy and ridiculous and packed full of the advanced features that were available at the time, and it was proud of it. Emulating both the gameplay and the tone of side-scrolling console shooters like Contra, it delivers nonstop action and faux-unintended comedy. In short, it never lets you forget that you're playing a video game, and taking yourself seriously is something that you do at your own peril.

To achieve this, the team really had to go in with no holds barred, and that's where ZDoom comes in. The game world is literally bursting at the seams with explosions, flying debris, and other effects that make it feel consistently pumped up. True to the game's console shooter stylings, your health is cut down to almost nothing so that a single hit is lethal, giving an even greater meaning to "run and gun."

There was nothing subtle about any of it, but the absurdity was the whole point

But what really stands out about the production is the unique action sequences in every level. The boss battles are huge and elaborately scripted, complete with boss health bars. Trees fly by you at breakneck speed as you leap from one vehicle to another in a deadly highway chase—assuming you didn't pick the boat chase instead. A building explodes around you as you race to make it onto a helicopter, which is then grabbed by the final boss in its death throes. The Action Doom team got so into it that they launched a marketing campaign with physical merchandise, itself inspired by cheesy '90s advertising. There was nothing subtle about any of it, but the absurdity was the whole point, and in its own way it was as retro as any vanilla

mapset—it appealed to people's nostalgia for what they saw as a golden era of video gaming.

Simplicity - Agent Spork (2005)

The Future Is Shiny

     As the name implies, Simplicity is a bit of a rebellion against some of the complex, highly experimental ZDoom releases that came before it—but only a little bit. The point isn't that it cuts back on the port features—it uses them pretty extensively in many maps. The point is that it uses them subtly, not bombastically like Action Doom and not in an effort to transform Doom into a different game, but woven seamlessly into its very Doom-like gameplay. Transparency, slopes, and 3D structures serve as highlights for conventional architecture; scripted events support the simple flow of the combat, throwing in a bit of variety but never lasting very long; a small selection of custom monsters appear alongside Doom's stock bestiary, but they don't do anything too fancy.
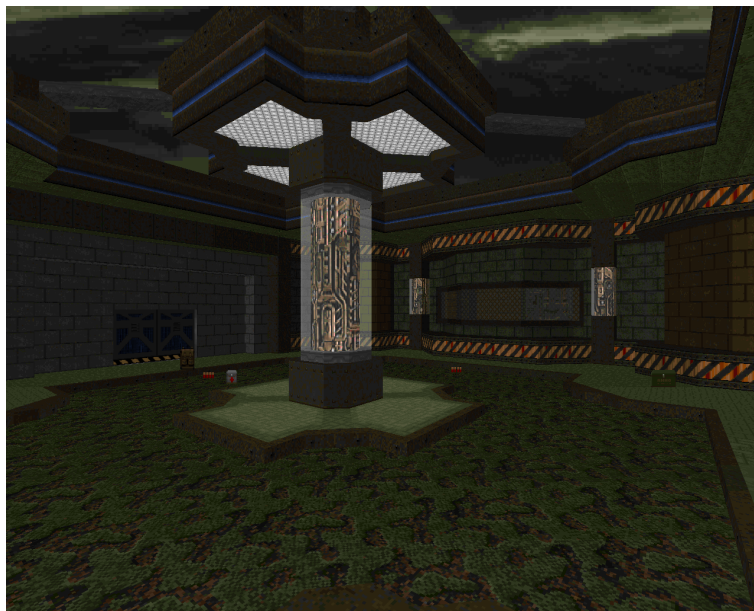
The most ZDoomy thing is probably the boss battles, for which Agent Spork couldn't quite resist adding some more complex move combos and scripts that give them a more SNES-like feel. The result of all this is that Simplicity feels like it's halfway between a classic fast-paced mapset like

Scythe and a "big budget" ZDoom project like Action Doom. If you learn one thing from looking at the history of Doom mapping, it's that people are always reacting against other mapping styles, often revising them to create cool hybrids.

Simplicity focuses on the arcade-like aspect of Doom's gameplay, using its features to supplement the fast-paced action and make it feel even faster

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But like Action Doom, Simplicity really focuses on the arcade-like aspect of Doom's gameplay, using its features to supplement the fast-paced action and make it feel even faster. Simplicity is highly streamlined and linear, at times surprisingly similar to Action Doom's literal straight-line progression, because that's one of the best ways to make a map move very quickly. Both the aesthetics and the combat are clean, ultra-polished, and—well hell, I guess I'm just going to use the word "streamlined" again, because that's exactly what it is. The distinct sleekness of the megawad has inspired a fair number of mappers both inside and outside of ZDoom's subcommunity; Scythe should be properly credited for doing it first, but Simplicity did it in its own way, and was just that little bit classier.

Ultimate Torment & Torture and Knee-Deep in ZDoom - Tormentor667 et al. (2007)

The Kitchen Sink

Take the flashy, over-the-top cheese of Action Doom and combine it with the sleek visuals and arcade-style gameplay of Simplicity, and you have the mapping style created and propagated by Tormentor667, who's perhaps the most well-known, prolific, and controversial ZDoom/GZDoom mapper of all time. The defining characteristic of Tormentor's mapping is the kitchen sink approach, which is to say that the maps are packed with advanced port features, in contrast to Agent Spork's style. Visual features, gameplay features, storytelling features—Tormentor goes the whole nine

yards with every facet of mapping in order to give his projects the production heft and glamorized look of a big Hollywood blockbuster. Although Tormentor already had noteworthy releases under his belt in the preceding years, his major breakout projects were the solo mapset Ultimate Torment & Torture, a revamp and expansion of some of his earlier work, and the team project Knee-Deep in ZDoom, for which he was the creative director and one of the primary mappers.
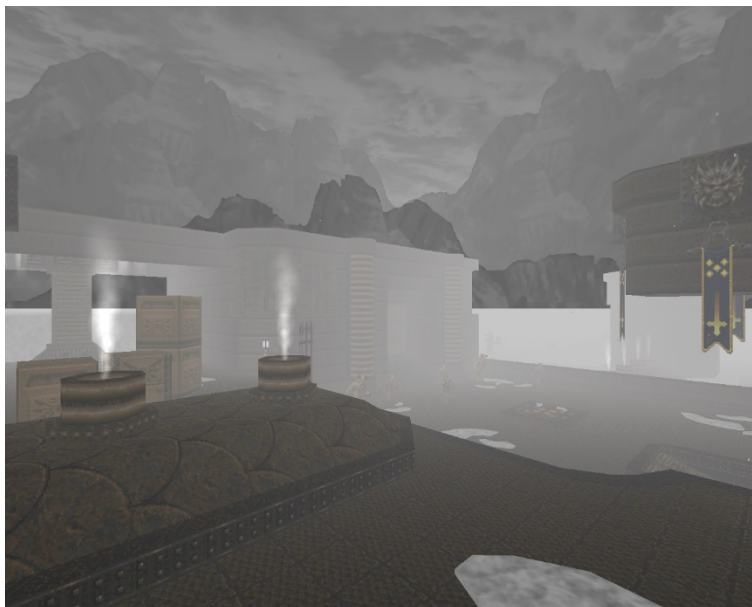

In UTnT and KDiZD, the aesthetics are a major part of the mapping style, a way to make the maps feel grander, more intense, more atmospheric, and of course more modern. Whereas classic Doom maps might use aesthetics as a canvas of sorts, a relatively unobtrusive backdrop for the gameplay, Tormentor is geared toward immersive environmental design. The player's attention is turned toward the environmental details, and enjoying those details is a key part of the experience. Steam erupts from burst pipes, sparks shoot out of damaged computer consoles, and particles drift up from teleporter pads. Weather systems such as rain and fog saturate the outdoor areas with mood and tension. Falling into lava or a deep chasm is instant death, because that's how realistic environments are supposed to work. Lava falls move more slowly than waterfalls, because they're more viscous. But unlike RTC-3057, where the realism is hyper-tuned to create tension and inspire caution, Tormentor's realism is more cartoony and exaggerated;

the focus of the gameplay is action, and the environmental details are designed to feel badass, bringing out the dramatic flair of the action.

The maps are packed with advanced port features— Tormentor goes the whole nine yards to give his projects the production heft and glamorized look of a big Hollywood blockbuster

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Tormentor uses a lot of conventional detailing alongside the port features, which makes his maps feel very visually dense – again, because it's dramatic to look at. This visual density tends to make the environments feel like more extreme versions of themselves, regardless of the setting. In the fiery gothic maps that make of most of UTnT, it makes them that much more sinister and hellish. In KDiZD, it plays up the high-tech feel of the techbases, which reflects the idea that the maps are more modern, aesthetically impressive versions of the original IWAD maps. Both the standard architectural detailing and the ZDoom features tend to build up a sense of homogeneity within a map—Every single light casts a similar downward lighting effect, every outdoor area is permeated with a similar fog, inset details and trim repeat realistically across entire architectural complexes, and so on. Classic Doomers have sometimes criticized this style of detailing as "copy-paste"—which is perhaps a bit ironic, given that modern limit-removing and Boom maps tend to have their own set of homogeneity tropes. Regardless of what port you're mapping for, this type of detailing gives a certain unity to a map, which can be valuable in the right context; in Tormentor's case, it's an aid to the environmental design.
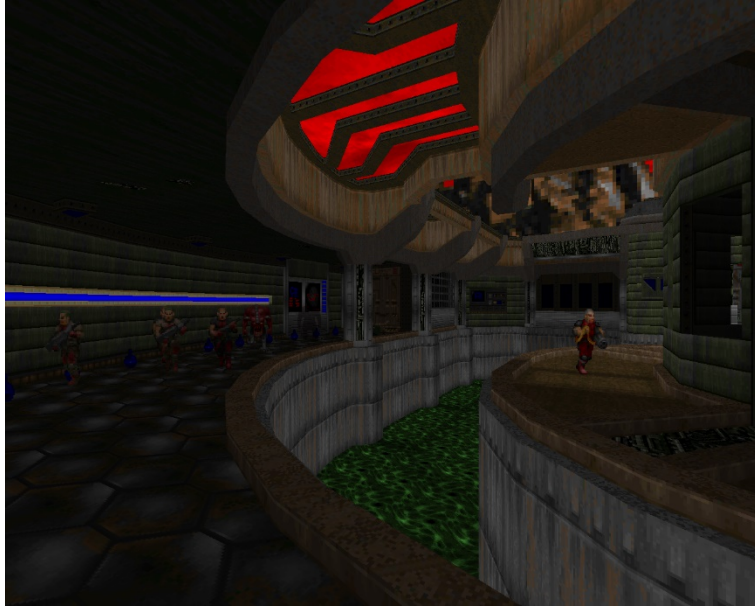
UTnT and KDiZD are just as liberal in their use of custom monsters as they are with visual features. A typical Doom mapper's philosophy would fall in line with the original Doom games, which is to say that each monster should occupy a distinct combat niche so that the player has to respond to each one differently, allowing for intuitive skill-building and dynamic combat scenarios. Tormentor doesn't follow this philosophy at all, because his level design isn't about moderation and his combat isn't about dynamic pressure. A Tormentor map is designed as an arcadey blast-fest where the combat is more about presentation—i.e., the feeling of being an action hero, where nothing can stand against you—than it is about challenge. And so you have Imps alongside Dark Imps, which are a more powerful variant of the same thing, and Soul Harvesters, which are Imps with slightly homing projectiles, and Shadows, which are somewhat faster and sneakier Imps that shoot volleys of a few projectiles. Hell Knights fight alongside leonine counterparts with shields, and various forms of zombies with semi-automatic guns blend in with Doom's stock undead hitscanners. Partly this is for variety, which after all is the spice of life—Tormentor's maps are populated by a diverse array of entities to fight your way through, each of which presents you with an in-the-moment challenge to respond to on the fly, rather than a tastefully limited set of skills to gain deep knowledge of. It also adds to the sense of presentation—for instance, a Dark Imp might be placed in such a way that it appears to serve as a "captain" for a set of

regular Imps, or a broader selection of zombies might add to the realistic feeling of fighting soldiers who died carrying a variety of weaponry. In other words, it adds *flavor*.

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*Meteors rain down and an operatic chorus screams
out the end of days at full volume in the background.
Why? Because it's cool*

Whatever individual design choices and features they may use, Tormentor's releases—including the many group projects he's led over the years—are all defined by a sense of grandeur and drama. There's a sweeping, cinematic feel to every aspect of the map design, from the slow, deliberate buildup of enemy firepower to the special effects. These directorial sensibilities are perhaps the most far-reaching aspect of Tormentor's legacy, as later years have seen many classic-styled maps (Jade Earth or Remnant, for instance) that also tend toward that same cinematic feel, albeit within the limits of vanilla or Boom format.

The high-drama cinematic arc is particularly apparent in UTnT, which is heavily focused on storytelling. Onscreen mission objectives give you a sense of purpose and an explicit set of sub-goals to tick off as you go, while

pre-level intermission messages build up the sense of impending doom and make the hordes of Hell seem far more legion than they actually are in-game. The last episode of UTnT is particularly over-the-top, beginning with a massive battle between ally marines and demons and ending with a spiral assault up the side of a volcano in space with progressively more powerful foes at every turn. The final boss battle is as Tormentor as it gets: a prolonged, multi-stage showdown against a gigantic, godlike pillar of light and its endlessly spawning miniboss guardians, all while meteors rain down and an operatic chorus screams out the end of days at full volume in the background. Why? Because it's cool.

"Because it's cool" is essentially the answer to everything Tormentor does, and that's because no matter how loud and melodramatic his maps get, it's really all about light-hearted fun. Many of the releases that have followed in Tormentor's footsteps, such as Thunderpeak and Winter's Fury, have dialed back the volume a little bit for the sake of refinement, but ultimately the philosophy of these projects is the same: go big or stay home.

Putrefier - Ed Cripps (2012)

Reincarnation

If many mappers see GZDoom as a way to turn Doom into a more modern FPS, and GZDoom keeps getting more advanced, then it stands to reason that the definition of "a more modern FPS" will keep evolving over time. Putrefier was, at the time, the most insanely modern thing that people had ever seen in a Z-port, making the Doom engine look more like it belonged to Quake 2 or Unreal 2. Accordingly, the atmosphere is thick and ominous, but it keeps the focus of an action-oriented shooter rather than leaning into true horror—though there's some fantastically creepy stuff to feast your eyes on.
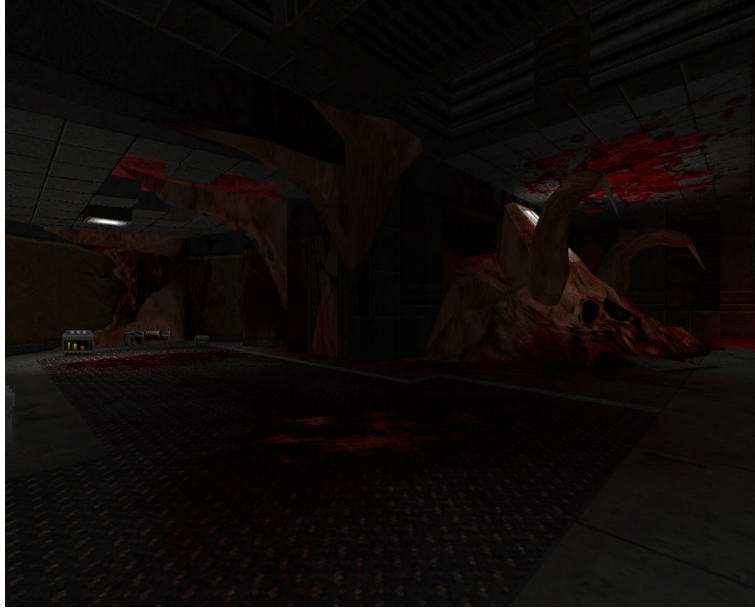
In this and other maps, Ed uses GZDoom's more basic features (e.g., slopes) so thoroughly that they become a major focus of the architecture, rather than a supplement; the environments are complex and stunningly beautiful. Putrefier also has some incredible visual effects so advanced that they had rarely, if ever, been seen before in GZDoom maps at the time of its release. All you have to do is open the map up and look at the water in that first room to see what I mean—but of course the map's most memorable visual feature is the moving flesh creature that juts out of the architecture in the ruins of a control room, a light fixture flickering in what passes for its forehead.

A map like this shows what GZDoom is made for

A map like this shows what GZDoom is made for; it's about the steady march of progress, about taking Doom farther and farther from its origins and creating a more advanced game engine in which anything is possible. Some of the features that help make Putrefier such a masterpiece of environmental design couldn't have been dreamed of when ZDoom was first created, but many GZDoom mappers are still going deeper, using even newer features like 3D models to create games that don't look like Doom at all.

The nearly limitless possibilities afforded by ZDoom and its associated ports gave designers the intoxicating sense of freedom necessary to create rich, feature-stuffed Doom projects that revelled in their own potential.
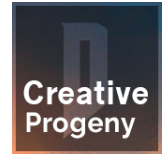
- Super Sonic Doom
- Temple of Chaos 2
- Zen Dynamics
- Thunderpeak
- Cheogsh and Cheogsh 2
- Winter's Fury
- ZDoom Community Map Project 2
- Pinnacle of Darkness
- Plutonium Sandpit
- Warphouse
- The Inquisitor 3
- WolfenDoom: Blade of Agony
- Waterlab GZD
- UAC Invasion: The Supply Depot

WolfenDoom: Blade of Agony (2017)

The Age of the Community Project

In a sense, nearly all of the great classic '90s megawads—Memento Mori, Icarus, Requiem, STRAIN, Eternal Doom—were community projects; it's just that the online Doom community at the time was a very small and tight-knit band of hobbyists, with the handful of dedicated mappers forming loose confederations as needed to get the next set of maps done. Doom mappers were an odd diaspora scattered across chat systems like Compuserve, AOL, and IRC networks, as well as bulletin boards and newsgroups, communicating only as quickly and efficiently as the primordial networking technology allowed. Although there was innovation during this period, level designers had relatively simple models to follow for what made a good map, and there wasn't such a wide gap between experienced and inexperienced mappers.

As forums increasingly became centers of activity for Doomers, the online presence grew, with more and more people engaging with the game as a social activity. This is part of how people playing Doom first began to form a group identity—having a communal space is critical for the formation of communities. With community comes a sense of shared enthusiasm, a desire to welcome and fold in new people. Thanks to forums, it also became easier for people to comment on each other's work, and to chime in with support and excitement for new projects even without being involved in them directly. At the same time, the removal of map limits, availability of new port features and user-friendly editing tools, and broader ideas about what a Doom map could look like led to an explosion of creativity, with everyone wanting to try out new ideas.

As forums increasingly became centers of activity for Doomers, the online presence grew, with more and

One of the lasting side effects of this enthusiasm is the community project, a group event that welcomes submissions from anyone in the forum community (though whether all submissions are accepted is up to the individual project managers). The first real community project, 10 Sectors, was held as a contest, with the top 32 submissions making up the final megawad. Three years later, the original Community Chest megawad created the model for nearly every community project that followed: put out an open call for submissions, and fill up map slots until you run out of room.

Between the source port explosion and the community project explosion, it's no wonder the 2000s are seen as a period of wild experimentalism. With the majority of big releases coming out these new waves, it must have seemed like practically nobody was doing traditional mapping anymore. But it's worth noting that community projects may have partly contributed to the rise of neoclassic mapping in later years. ZDoom's advanced feature set is difficult to wrangle within the context of a big group project where the project manager has little control over contributions—particularly when you bring scripting and custom assets into the equation. Creating a community project for ZDoom invites even more inconsistency and confusion over guidelines than a regular community project, and that's perhaps why most CPs have been limited to vanilla, limit-removing, or Boom maps. Since community projects are petri dishes for new talent, this means that the genre has encouraged a great many new mappers to work in classic formats. The controversial ZPack stood as the lone major ZDoom community project for many years, and it's only recently that CPs have begun to encompass UDMF, the main ZDoom format, and serve as a way for mappers to learn to use that format.

Between the source port explosion and the community project explosion, it's no wonder the 2000s are seen as

Another interesting side-effect of the CP ideology is the creation of national community projects. The Japanese, French, and Czech subcommunities have all launched projects for mappers within their specific countries using their own forums, collaborating in their own native languages, and leading to releases whose maps subtly reflect the culture of the parent nation. The Russian Doom community, which I mentioned earlier, is the poster child for national community projects, as the success of Sacrament led to a variety of other releases such as A.L.T. and the Whitemare series, all of which embody a very distinct national character.

I'm getting ahead of myself, though. Let's look at where these types of projects really got off the ground.

Community Chest 2 – Various (2004)

One Big Mappy Family

CC2 captured people's hearts and imaginations in a way that its predecessor didn't quite manage, though CC1 carried the seeds for many of the same ideas. And whether you break it down into individual maps or view it as a larger flow from beginning to end, it's fairly easy to see why. CC1 has a lot of voices, but it's fundamentally a set of basic Doom maps, representing common conventions of the era; only the relatively new mapper Magikal approached the project with a particularly grand and unique ambition, and his "Citadel at the Edge of Eternity" (map 29) drew extremely mixed reactions even at the time. The end result was something like a '90s team megawad with less quality control or experience behind it. Mappers weren't approaching it as a way to showcase their best work, to outdo each other, to stun the audience with how unique and impressive their ideas could be.
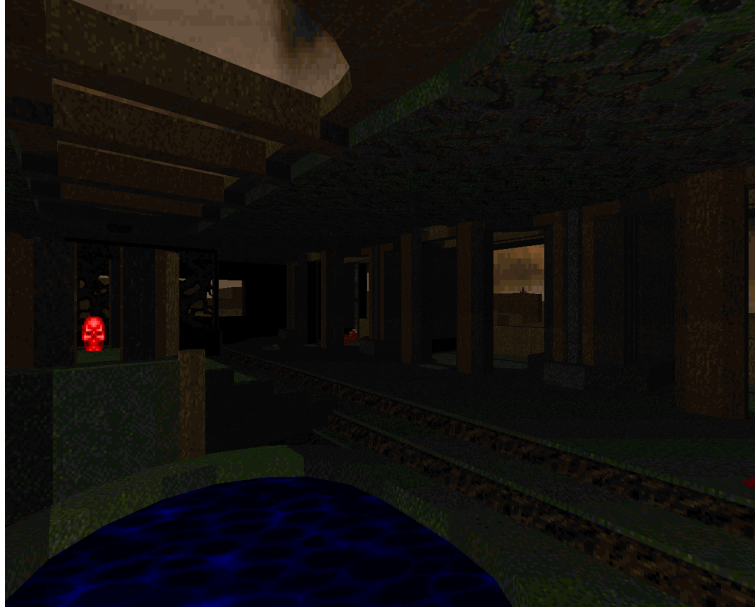
CC1 must have sparked something, though, because CC2 followed a little over a year later, and I believe the wild fervor with which many of its mappers approached their contributions was the flame that ignited the whole community project genre, which has produced dozens of releases (and many vaporware projects) to this day. A list of the megawad's many standout maps gives some sense of just how diverse they are: Iori's flowy, Knee-Deep in the Dead-themed "Coolant Platform" (map 02); The Flange Peddler's highly modern, detail-laden "Slige Control" (map 03) and "To Hell and Back" (map 07); Lutrov71's "The View" (map 06), a wide-open epic with denser combat and many sweeping vistas; The Ultimate Doomer's gonzo sandbox adventure "City Heat" (map 15), with its perpetual-motion river and numbered objectives; Andy Leaver's sinister, Alien Vendetta-esque "Through the Black" (map 17); Kaiser's huge, complex dungeon crawl "Internal Reaches 3" (map 18); Hirogen2's "The Marbelous Three," an archeological dig site that blends heavy atmosphere and doomcute sector detailing; The Flange Peddler's lovely Limbo homage, "Enigma" (map 20); Cyber-Menace's "Death Mountain," which remakes a locale from A Link to the Past, complete with cavern shortcuts and one hundred thousand sector stalagmites; Dr. Zin's incredibly creepy haunted space station, "Geist Halls" (map 26); Use 3D's "Gethsemane" (map 27) and Linguica's "No Room" (map 28), a pair of massive hell maps with plenty of memorable scenes; Boris's narrative-driven "Event Horizon" (map 29), with its advanced

Boom features and sector art monster invader; and Chopkinsca's "Sodding Death" (map 32), a glorious adventure map with an intricate temple crawl at its heart. Even some of the weaker maps are joyfully concept-driven, such as RjY's "Elixir" (map 05), which is stuffed to the gills with popcorn zombie hordes.

There's something about having all those wildly different maps together that makes each one more exciting to play, like going through a box of chocolates

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Padding out a paragraph with a long list of individual maps isn't something I take lightly; but the fact is, a great community project is defined by its individual maps. If you're talking about a conventional megawad created by one or two people, or even a medium-sized hand-picked team, you're going to look at overarching project goals, the basic stuff that binds the whole set together; you probably wouldn't mention more than a few of the best maps as examples, and typically those best maps are simply the best at doing the same things that define the rest of the megawad. But while most megawads are about the whole, a community project is really about the sum of its parts. There's something about having all those wildly different maps together in a more or less random sequence that makes each one more exciting to play, like going through a box of chocolates. Sure, you'll get a coconut or one of those weird chewy things every now and then, and there will be some basic nut clusters and whatnot, but it's worth it for the raspberry cremes and salted caramels—or, depending on your tastes, perhaps the other way around—and because you never really know what you're biting into, there's a certain thrill that you can never truly get from a single-author or small-team mapset. The variety itself lends weight and vitality to the project, creating a sort of emergent property that makes each community mapset distinct and memorable—though of course you need to have a lot of good maps in the lineup for it to be the right kind of memorable.
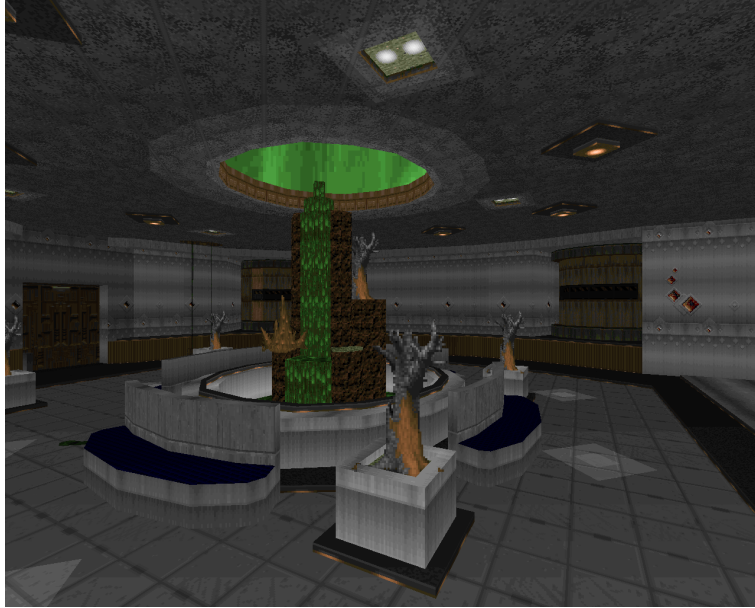
Towering over every other map in CC2 is B.P.R.D.'s legendary "The Mucus Flow" (map 24), which is almost certainly the first map anyone thinks of when they think of the megawad. Following in the footsteps of "Misri Halek," it was the second great "That One Map" in a megawad, and it both entrenched the idea that every large project should have at least one completely unique standout megamap and helped to shape what future megamaps would look like, particularly the impression that many of them would seek to leave behind. In the midst of everything else in CC2, "The Mucus Flow" is completely alien, surreally beautiful, hinting at worlds beyond worlds but only giving you the tip of the iceberg, as though Doomguy's ten thousand adventures in Hell are just part of a broader multiverse and suddenly you've gotten the merest glimpse of something akin to heaven. The ethereal music, towering structures, and enigmatic custom textures all contribute to this feeling. But on top of that, it's also a very conceptual map; ammo and health only exist in a few large caches throughout the map, one of which requires running an infinitely respawning chaingunner gantlet to return to and the rest of which require keys, forcing you to think hard about how, and whether, you'll tackle the whole thing or if it's better to simply make a break for the exit. All of this makes it virtually impossible to talk about CC2 without looking at the impact that "The Mucus Flow" has on the experience of playing every other map in the

megawad, and conversely, the way that the presence of all the other maps allows "The Mucus Flow" to stand even taller.

Since Community Chest 2, every major community project has had mappers vying to create That One Map

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Since CC2, every major community project has had multiple mappers vying to create That One Map; RottKing's "Black Rain" from CC3 (map 12) is one of the more notable and successful examples. But when it comes to community projects, everything can be a double-edged sword. CC4 is so full of magnum opuses that it becomes a source of fatigue, and it's easy for players to start wishing for some shorter and simpler maps to lend more meaning to the big, awe-inspiring ones—although lupinx-Kassman's "Interstellar Sickness" and "Shaman's Device" (maps 20 and 21) still manage to be That One Map in spite of it all.

It goes without saying that the other potential problem of community projects is that they'll always have weaker maps in them, even the projects that value quality control. It's simply a consequence of allowing anyone to contribute, the tradeoff that every community project makes for the added

value that its inclusivity offers to the broader community. CC2 itself certainly has its share of maps that are perceived as weak, and when it was released, it was accused of adding in a lot of filler to pad itself out to megawad length. In recent years, large invite-only group projects like Back to Saturn X appear to have signaled the gradual dying-out of truly high-profile community projects, simply because they are an easier way to ensure high quality. In this day and age, community projects tend to be more of a way for newer mappers to grow and showcase what they're capable of, which carries on the genre's legacy of welcoming people into the community. But in my opinion, that volatile blend of contrasting mapping styles and sensibilities, along with the inevitable handful of even more unique maps that stand out above the rest, is something that can't be replicated by any other means, and the rare exceptional community project remains something special.

Congestion 1024 - Various (2005)

Thinking Inside the Box
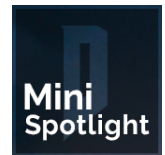
Within the field of community projects, there's a popular subgenre of projects that are built around seemingly restrictive limitations. 10 Sectors was the first mapset of this type, but Congestion 1024, which required mappers to build the playable space of their maps within a square of 1024 by 1024 map units (which is super tiny, for those of you who may not know what a map unit is), was the megawad that popularized limitations. This community megawad was followed by wave after wave of projects with similar restrictions, not only community projects but also solo mapsets like Dutch Devil's Zero Tolerance (which also uses the 1024 by 1024 limitation).

The idea behind these projects, and the reason they've been so successful, is that their limitations are designed to require clever thinking, which sparks creativity and often leads to surprising results. They also create a unifying theme, something to tie the whole project together, even as each of the many mappers involved tackles the problem in a completely different way, with a different stylistic approach.


Their limitations are designed to require clever thinking, which sparks creativity and often leads to surprising results

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Congestion 1024 and its direct spiritual successors were particularly compelling in that their restriction inherently ensured that every map was bite-sized and easy to digest, with the whole megawad being extremely quick and breezy to play through. Limitation projects have never been limited exclusively to size restrictions, though—their restrictions over the years have covered everything from texture and monster usage to the size of editor grid that mappers are allowed to use.

The rise of social media resulted in a corresponding rise in social Doom projects - most notably in the self-styled "community" projects, which rose to prominence during the 2000s, enlisting any and all eager Doomers to contribute to whatever struck their fancy.
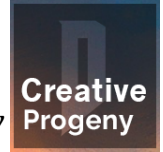
- Newdoom Community Project 1 and 2
- 1 Monster
- Community Chest 3 and 4
- Claustrophobia 1024 1 and 2
- Mayhem 2048
- Whitemare 2
- Zones of Fear
- 50 Shades of Graytall
- Nova 2
- Mutiny
- Japanese Community Project
- 3 Heures d'Agonie 3
- Super Mayhem 17
- 1000 Line Community Project
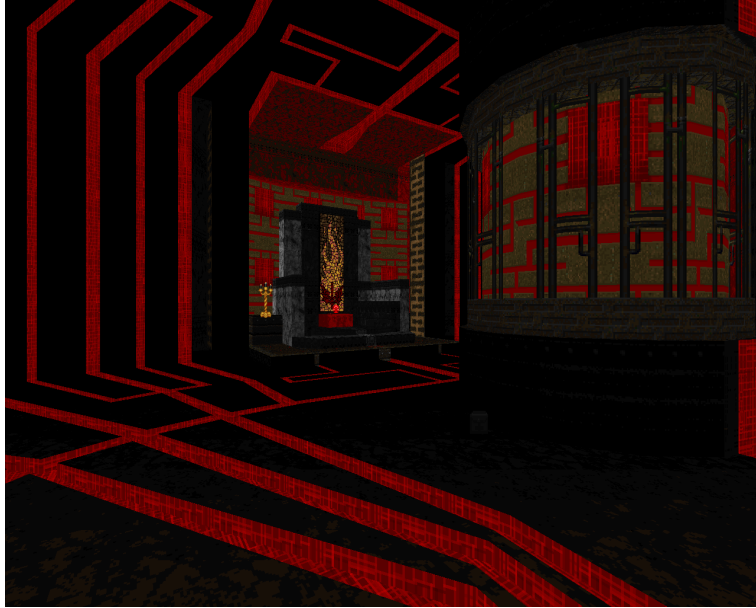
Japanese Community Project (2016)

Chapter 8:

The Second Coming

With all of this experimentation in the early to mid-2000s, it's no wonder the community felt a little…unmoored. On the one hand, you had the growth of source ports turning Doom into a completely new game, and on the other you had free-for-all community projects with bizarre ideas and an arguably greater emphasis on enthusiasm than consistency or quality. An unspoken question loomed over everything: *what was even Doom anymore?* The mapping community's heavyweights had created Alien Vendetta to lay a treasured memory to rest as they moved on to other games, an epitaph marking the pinnacle of what seemed possible to accomplish with their favorite aging engine; who were all these upstart mappers crawling out of the woodwork and carrying on the tradition in weird new ways?

You'll hear many people say that Scythe 2 was a rebirth of classic gameplay, a renewal of commitment to the ideals of the community's early mappers and players at a time when people feared those ideals were fading out of existence. And to some extent, that's true—especially the part about the fears. The community has seen many warring ideologies, many trends that came and went and came back, and people are always worried that the things they love will be forgotten.

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*Many feel that Scythe 2 was a rebirth of classic
gameplay, a renewal of commitment to early ideals at
a time when people feared those ideals were fading out
of existence*

But consider that Scythe 2 came out in 2005, just three years after Alien Vendetta—and even that small gap was bridged by the first Scythe as well as Vrack 3 in 2003, Deus Vult in 2004, and Kama Sutra earlier in 2005.

Mapping never died; it never had to be resurrected. Erik Alm's magnum opus was simply the next natural step in the evolution of the megawad. For that matter, Scythe 2 wasn't much of a throwback, and it certainly wasn't nostalgic. The intensity of the large-scale combat, the beauty it achieves through mass detailing, the format in which it's presented—none of that has any real analog in the 1990s. It's drawing directly from Alien Vendetta and its other successors. It felt incredibly modern at the time, and that was exactly why everyone adored it.

Scythe 2 - Erik Alm (2005)

The Very Model of a Modern Major Megawad

That said, Scythe 2's ripple effect on later mappers is truly immense, and it's hard to disagree with *dew's* claim that it is probably the second most influential PWAD of all time after Alien Vendetta. Never mind the host of direct imitators; Scythe 2 hit on a certain something, a magic formula, that modern mappers tend to draw on regardless of what mapping school they're in or who they credit as their most direct influences. Simply put, this megawad defined what a modern mapset looks and feels like; it tapped into the bloodstream of the Doom community and fed us a drug. It's only in the last few years that people have really begun to challenge the idea that good mapping is synonymous with Erik Alm's mapping principles, but those principles remain extremely influential nonetheless—probably because Alm's maps were so damn good.
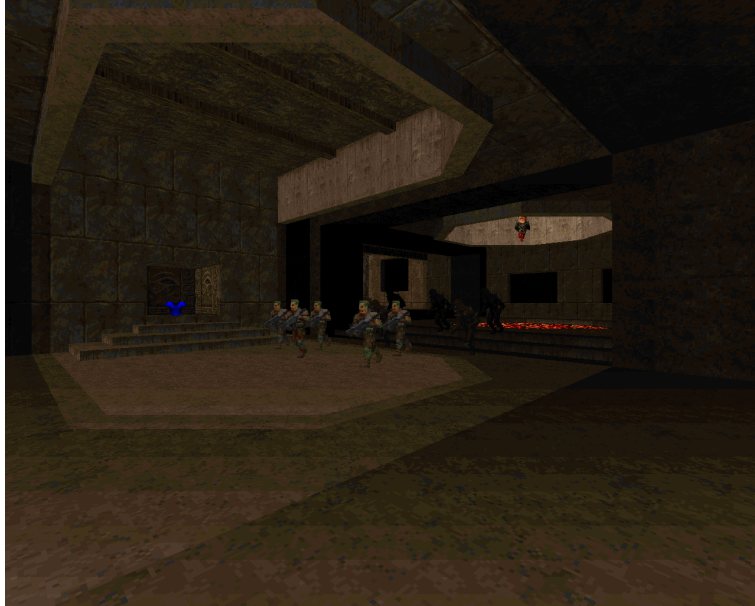
Alm's most significant contribution to Doomdom was his sense of pacing—both the pacing of individual maps and the pacing across a larger mapset. The driving principle of a typical Alm map is that it never stops moving—there's always something to do, something to try to pick up, something you need to kill or escape from, and you can always see pretty clearly with some quick observation where you need to go next to avoid any lull in the action. "Conveyance" is a term I've heard used to describe this—it's the idea that the map design is conveying you to wherever you need to be, whether it's through visual clarity or the direction of the combat or items placed in your path. Of course, the mapper can use conveyance as a weapon against the player by drawing them into a trap, but it's usually more about the positive reward of having the map be a nonstop, well-choreographed experience. The other key element of Alm's pacing is a sense of variety, which is usually created by moving back and forth smoothly between incidental combat—the quick random combat that you engage in while moving between major points in the level—and setpiece combat—the larger choreographed fights that happen at major points in the progression or in specially designed arenas. The sense of constantly rising and falling action keeps the player engaged over the course of the map, demanding constant attention and providing consistent gratification.

The overall pacing of the megawad is handled in a similar fashion. Whereas Scythe 1 provides a steady ramp-up from very quick, simple maps to challenging, monster-dense ones over the course of the entire megawad (which was itself a pretty strong way of hooking the player's interest), Scythe 2 refines the formula quite a bit through the use of shorter five-map episodes, each with its own difficulty ramp. Map 01 is easy, and then the maps gradually become harder through map 05, the final map of the first episode; then you start the first map of the next episode, which is a drop down in difficulty from the end of the previous episode, but an increase in difficulty from the earlier maps of that episode; difficulty ramps up again, and the end of episode 2 is harder than the end of episode 1; and so on. In this way, Alm was able to create the sense of rising and falling action over the course of the megawad and keep the pacing varied, while still gradually increasing the challenge from beginning to end. A key tool in creating this sense of pacing is the then-controversial death exits, which force a pistol start at the beginning of each episode, allowing for more precise control of each individual difficulty curve—a trope that many of Alm's successors have copied directly. Even if they're not working in an episodic format, post-Alm mappers tend to recognize the need to vary a mapset's pacing through mini-climaxes, breather maps, and surprise concept maps (an idea that Alm also helped to pioneer in Scythe 2 by inserting maps like the single-monster horror scene "Mr. X" (map 16) and the pistol/rocket launcher/chainsaw-only "Doom Gardens" (map 21) into his lineup).
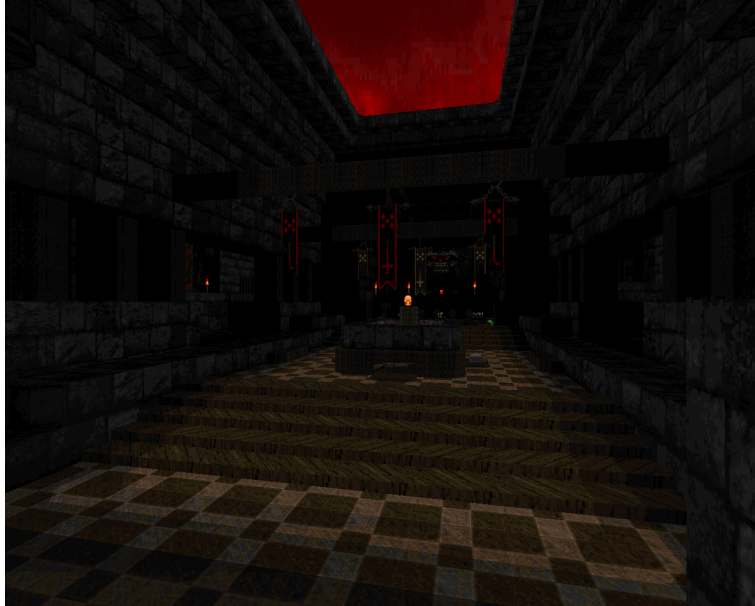
Similar to Alien Vendetta, Scythe 2 aims for a strong blend of combat and aesthetics, but it offers improvements in both areas. Rather than just falling back on the siege warfare of Hell Revealed and Alien Vendetta, where the player pushes forward through entrenched opposition and the greatest danger comes from being flooded by large mobs, Alm mixes it up with a primary combat mode that's more fluid or dynamic, with a lot of attention to creating multiple angles of pressure so that the player isn't truly safe anywhere and either can't retreat to a point of safety or isn't particularly advantaged by attempting to do so. It uses conveyance to draw you into dangerous situations, but it also lets you behave aggressively in response, giving you room to maneuver, a chance to prioritize targets from among a highly mixed array of enemies, and above all a way to deal with threats relatively quickly. The player's firepower is commensurate with threat level —the more you're facing, the more ammo and better weapons you have, which helps to avoid grind.

Almost every major megawad since Scythe 2 has drawn heavily from the tropes used by Scythe 2

In a similar way, the maps in Scythe 2 are more aesthetically detailed than Alien Vendetta, but also cleaner. Building on AV's aesthetic, Alm keeps the

playable space functionally clear while focusing the detail on the walls, ceilings, and areas the player can't reach, which also has the effect of placing the detail at an easily viewable distance, concentrated on areas that draw the player's eye. Alm enhances his relatively moderate line count with specific detail tropes such as roof cornices around the upper edges of buildings, ceilings composed of patterns of metal bars, jagged walls, stacks of gently curved rock structures with liquid falls, and arrays of draping vines, all of which have become foundational elements of modern detailing. It would be a bit silly to say that Alm invented all of these visual elements —indeed, many of them are borrowed and heavily refined from Alien Vendetta and Eternal Doom—but he certainly brought them together into a distinctive, definitive look. Even the idea that an individual map maintains consistency by being constructed entirely from permutations on a single visual theme, with a handful of textures used throughout, is most easily traceable back to Scythe 2's episodes.
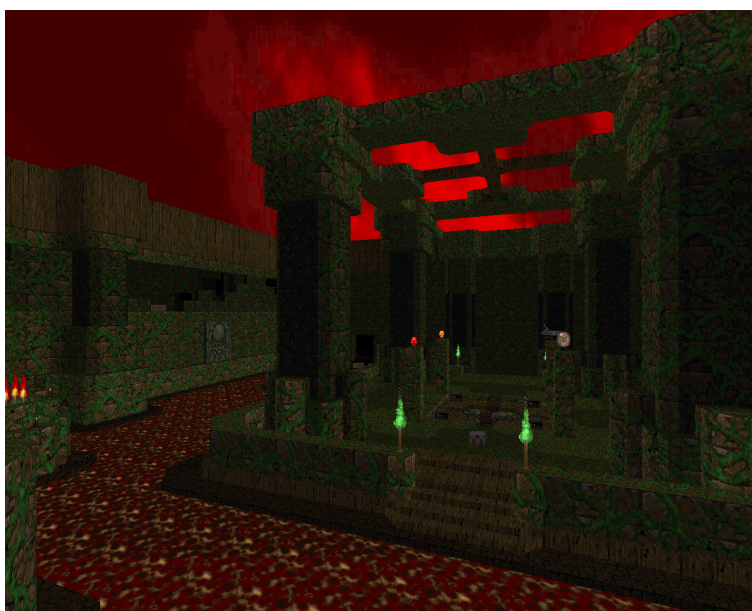
Whether it's episodic or traditionally linear, stock or custom textured, with custom monsters or without, almost every major megawad since Scythe 2 has drawn heavily from the tropes that Scythe 2 used. Even Eviternity, which as of this writing is the latest blockbuster megawad, fits Alm's model to a tee—five-map episodes with death exits, a stepped difficulty curve, combat that's driven as much by speed as challenge, a few new monsters to keep things interesting. The Scythe 2 formula certainly isn't the only way to

make great maps, but it's so oft-repeated because it hit the sweet spot that seems to make the most people happy: simple but not too simplistic, hard but not too hard, varied but controlled, beautiful but not distracting or confusing. It's the middle ground that most people can agree on, which is why a PWAD rarely manages to approach the popularity of Scythe 2 without beating it at its own game.

Plutonia 2 - Various (2008)

The Tipping Point

Though its visual style, certain elements of monster placement, and a handful of homage maps are reminiscent of the original Plutonia, this sequel is notorious for having gameplay and atmosphere that bear little resemblance to its namesake. After years of troubled development, Plutonia 2 saw a change in leadership, and its new manager, Vincent Catalaa, masterminded an influx of passionate new mappers along with contemporary heavy-hitters like Gusta, Thomas van der Velden, and Eternal.
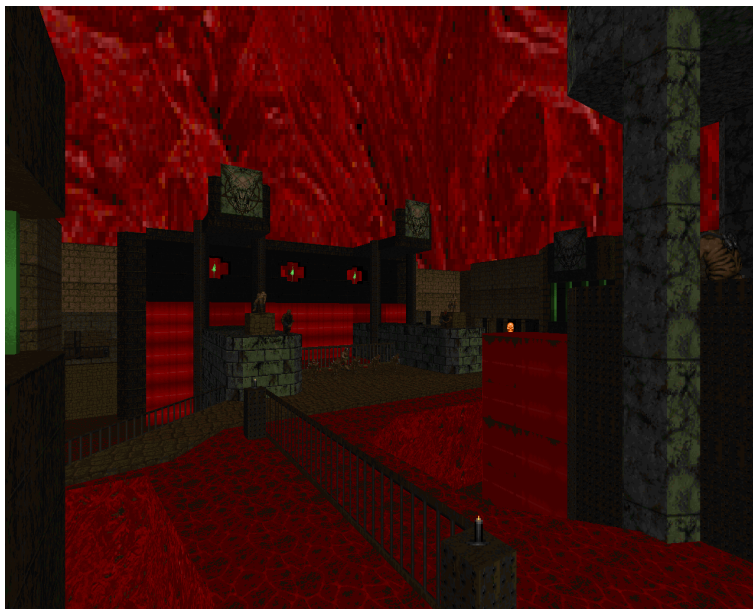
As a result, the project received a major "overhaul" that resulted in its map lineup being almost entirely gutted and replaced, mostly in the name of improving gameplay; despite the enormous amount of work involved, this

ironically helped to finally get it across the finish line. The result mainly takes its cues from the hard-hitting megawads of the mid-2000s, including Alm's style of design; in particular, Gusta's many contributions to Plutonia 2 draw from and expand upon the lessons that he learned while creating Kama Sutra.

*The release of Plutonia 2 was the major tipping point for the era of Scythe-inspired mapping*

The release of Plutonia 2 was the major tipping point for the era of Scythe-inspired mapping. The following year saw the release of the high-speed darkwave0000/Joshy tag-team megawad Speed of Doom, and from there came the cascade of combat-driven limit-removing and Boom mapsets that dominated much of the 2010s.

Valiant - Skillsaw (2015)

Up to Eleven
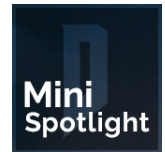
If there's any one person who brought Scythe-style design to the next level, someone who is even more Alm than Alm himself, it's skillsaw. 2011's Vanguard and Lunatic saw refinements on the episodic formula and streamlined combat of Scythe 2, but it was Valiant that seemed to reach the highest heights of what a modern Boom megawad could achieve.
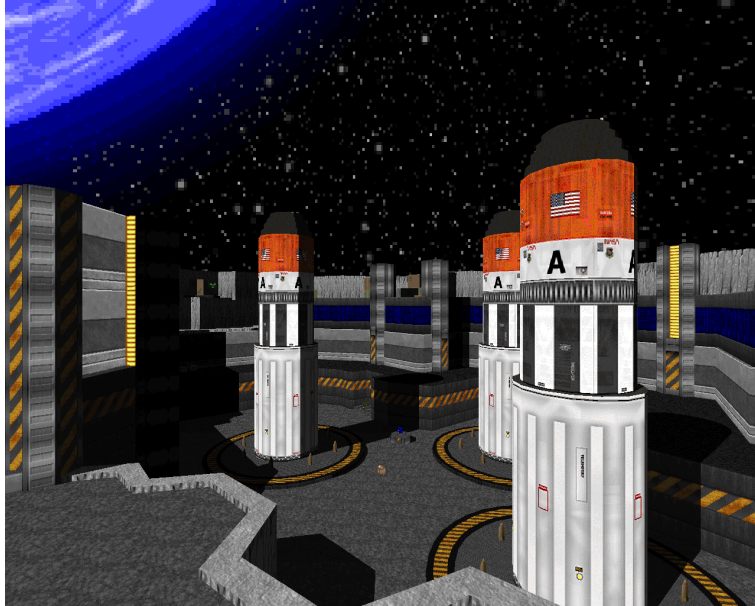
Skillsaw took everything that was stylistically great about Scythe 2 and dialed it up to eleven, while also making it even more fun and accessible for the typical Doom player. The episodes are still there, but they're more flexible; the number of maps in each episode varies as needed to accommodate skillsaw's flair for in-map storytelling, and there's a lot more variety within each episode theme—for instance, the way the hell episode shifts from hot, rocky hell to cyberflesh hell to fragmented void hell to a gothic fortress that integrates elements of all of the previous subthemes—which makes the whole megawad feel constantly fresh throughout its significant length.

Valiant seemed to reach the highest heights of what a modern Boom megawad could achieve

Skillsaw is also a master of using concept maps and varied mechanics to keep the gameplay fresh, as seen in the infamous escort mission of "The Mancubian Candidate" (map 07), the suspense of "14 Angrier Archviles" (map 09), the barrel-themed "Implosion" (map 14), the extremely impolite welcome from the suicide bombers in "Screams Aren't a Crime…Yet" (map 15), and the climactic boss fight of "Electric Nightmare" (map 30), among others. Skillsaw's maps tend to be more nonlinear than Alm's, while

still keeping (and improving upon) the strong sense of conveyance and clarity, which provides a more variable experience while still allowing the mapper to maintain sufficient control over what happens. On top of all that, you have even more beautiful texture themes and settings, even smoother interplay between incidental and setpiece combat, and custom weapons and monsters that fit more smoothly with the stock resources. Add it all up, and you have a megawad that's immensely satisfying for a huge range of players, perhaps the closest anyone has gotten to universal appeal.

In a time when the Doom community was unsure of what road to take, Scythe 2 provided a convincing argument for embracing certain classic gameplay elements and technical limitations while expanding the core Doom mechanics in subtle and unexpected ways.

Creative Progeny
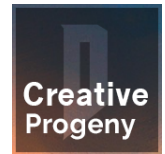
- Deus Vult 2
- UAC Ultra
- Speed of Doom
- Jenesis
- Vanguard and Lunatic
- Fuel Devourer
- Rush
- The Eye
- Hellbound
- Unholy Realms
- Mayan Mishap
- Resurgence

- Return to Hadron E1 and E2

- 50 Monsters

- Bloodstain

- Ancient Aliens

- Man on the Moon

- Eviternity
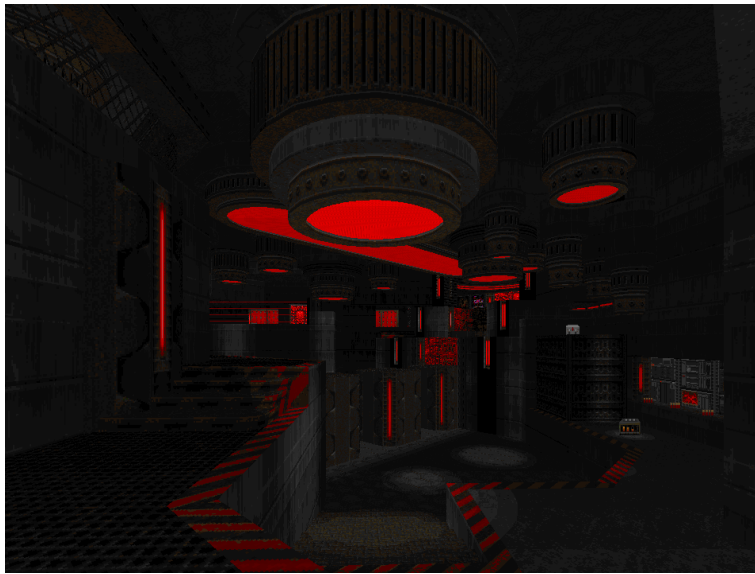
Eviternity (2018)

The Vanilla Resurgence

By the mid-2000s, Doom mapping had gotten pretty complex. ZDoom (and the then-new GZDoom) were becoming more advanced, and mapping projects became more ambitious as a result, with people trying to push more and more out of a game engine that was now over 10 years old. Scythe 2 and its immediate successors, despite their simpler source port choices, were no exception; they were huge in scale, highly detailed, and very challenging for the time, with gameplay that bore little resemblance to what people had enjoyed in the '90s. Then, as now, people would often complain that it was no fun to face down a mob of 30 Revenants appearing out of nowhere. Then, as now, many felt that advanced port features were nothing more than a distraction from what made Doom great: its original core gameplay. And so the question remained: What was even Doom anymore?

At the same time, people were becoming interested in limitations. Just as many community projects began to revolve around restrictions in order to get people's creative juices flowing, the vanilla format itself became a limitation through which mappers sought to challenge themselves. Mapping without any bells and whistles, and with very little leeway for complex architectural detailing, forced people to home in on the most basic elements of design, which many would say made them better level designers. These mappers believed that the removal of Doom's engine limitations had led to haphazard design and poor gameplay quality, and the focus on self-imposed limits was a direct reaction to that.

Just as many community projects began to revolve around restrictions, the vanilla format itself became a limitation through which mappers sought to challenge themselves


I don't believe there was ever a gap in which no one was mapping for vanilla Doom anymore—Alien Vendetta and Kama Sutra are both vanilla, for instance, which is easy to forget given the size and beauty of their maps. However, there's no doubt that the late 2000s and early to mid-2010s saw a huge revival of vanilla mapping, and specifically of people who wanted to return to the old school and create projects that felt like they could have come out of the '90s. The vanilla resurgence was about going back to the beginning: simplicity as a response to complexity, purity of design as a response to perceived excess. Mappers with this mindset aren't exclusive to vanilla—there have been plenty of limit-removing and even occasional Boom releases that still adhere to simplicity as a core design tenet—but vanilla compatibility has certainly been the major figurehead for the whole movement.

Suspended in Dusk - Espi (2005)

The Lovely Bones

Although Espi didn't limit himself exclusively to the vanilla format over the course of his mapping career—arguably his most famous individual map requires ZDoom—he kept coming back to the idea that a little can go a long way, and that perfectly cultivated simplicity can accomplish the same amount as far more complex designs. Espi's design sense is so exquisite that it's often hard to wrap your head around just how little you're actually looking at, and in Suspended in Dusk in particular, the overall layouts and individual scenes tend to give the impression of being more intricate than they actually are (indeed, more complex than it is physically possible for them to be, given the format). And that's just because they're so economical in the way they're constructed.
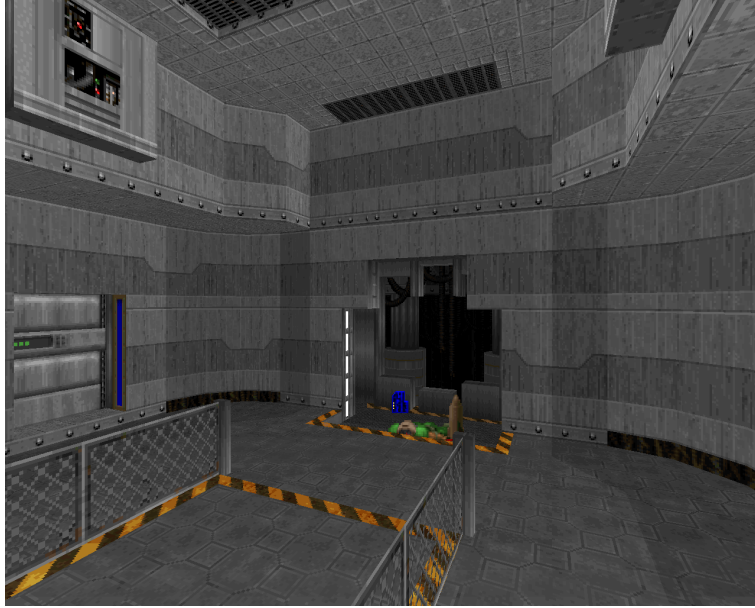
Vanilla Doom can't handle nearly as much detailing or architectural complexity as other mapping formats, or even as much as "limit-removing" maps that use vanilla format but are intended for more advanced source ports. The key to Espi's design is to rely on sector detailing as little as possible, instead conveying most of what reads as "detail" through good use of basic architectural shaping and texturing. Espi was a master of what esselfortium refers to as "material texturing"—the idea that textures should be treated as though they're actual building materials rather than wallpaper pasted over a surface. The natural lines of the textures line up perfectly with the lines of the architecture (doors, windows, ledges, etc.), and the overall length of any given surface is a multiple of the size of the texture that it uses, so that there aren't any odd cutoffs—even if the lines aren't vertical or horizontal and therefore can't conveniently be snapped to a grid. Needless to say, this requires a lot of attention to detail.
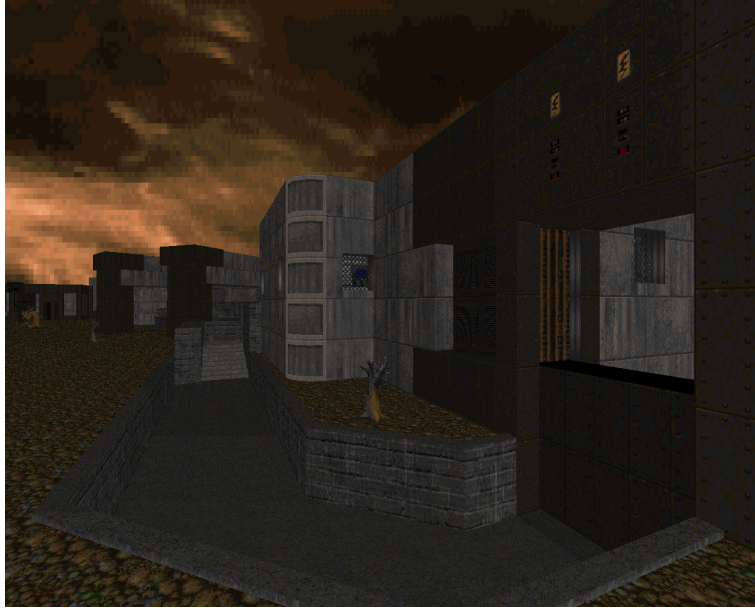
The larger architectural structures, particularly the ones you can see when you're outdoors and have a larger field of view, have interesting shapes and frequently use contrasting textures to develop the sense of interplay between overlapping/connected structures. Larger details are landscaped out of these structures in a way that makes their profile interesting to look at from varying angles. The smaller detailing that exists is generally formed via nesting, in accordance with the concept of material texturing; a section is cut out of a texture that matches up with the lines of that texture, and the hole it leaves is occupied by another texture that is perfectly sized to fit the gap.

Espi was a master of "material texturing" – the idea that textures should be treated as though they are building materials rather than wallpaper pasted over a surface

Espi also uses a lot of midtextures (grates, fences, hanging cables) in place of sector details, which helps keep the line count down and makes certain details much easier to construct (such as the spaceship that forms the exit of the last map). Like Romero's maps in Knee-Deep in the Dead, Suspended in Dusk is full of spots where you can look through an opening or across a

chasm and see other parts of the map, which adds to the feeling of complexity; the midtexture wizardry augments the visual interest of these views while also frequently forming a natural-looking barrier. Every detail in Suspended in Dusk is very individualized, in contrast to the "copy-paste" style of detailing that is sometimes used in more complex maps and frequently derided by critics of those maps—so you never really see the same thing twice, but the aesthetic feels very cohesive because it's all constructed using consistent methodology and techniques.
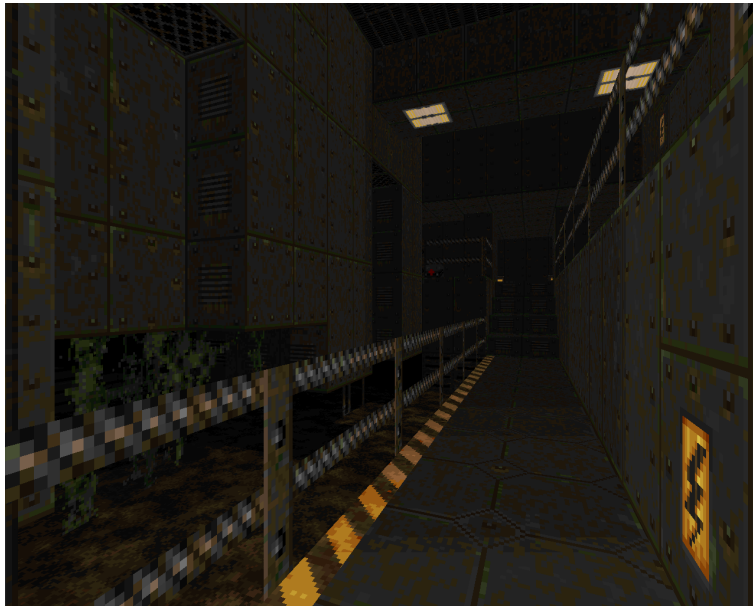
Espi's mapping style is one of those that gets away with not being particularly combat oriented, because despite its simplicity, the player has plenty of other things to focus on, and because the combat design is also simple, you have the opportunity to focus on those things. Challenging or monster-dense combat certainly isn't outside the realm of possibility in vanilla mapping—Hell Revealed, Kama Sutra, and Back to Saturn X would all have something to say about that—but I think Espi would probably have felt that such combat detracted from his style of design. Suspended in Dusk is all about atmosphere, after all.

The vanilla resurgence was about going back to the beginning: simplicity as a response to complexity, purity of design as a response to perceived excess

And when it comes to vanilla maps, atmosphere is achieved more through suggestion than through effects, which is one reason Suspended in Dusk feels so artful. Partly it's the dusky sky and the grungy textures that suggest the ache of things long gone. Partly it's the subtle lighting and the feeling that the base is a derelict, frozen in mid-motion, its absences all the more conspicuous because of how realistic every detail feels. Partly it's the little bits of story, the approach through rocky canyons and the way the buildings suddenly loom into view, the rooms and pieces of machinery that seem to have a lost purpose, hinting at things unseen and unknown. Partly it's the way the map always seems to extend far beyond the spaces you can interact with, as though it fits into a wider world. But most of all, it's the starkness itself that makes the mapset so vividly haunting. Even the monster placement is a part of that; because it's more about presentation than bite, it gives you the feeling of carefully carving your way through a realistic setting, revealing new pieces as you go, again hearkening all the way back to Knee-Deep in the Dead. The vast majority of modern retro mappers have followed suit, though not all; for a mapper whose core goal is simplicity, any perceived complexity is a distraction, whether it's complexity of combat or aesthetics or features. It's not just that working within the limits of vanilla Doom forces a mapper to accomplish more with less, thereby honing their skills; it's the idea that the bare bones of map design are beautiful in and of themselves.

Back to Saturn X E1 and E2 - esselfortium et al. (2012/2014)
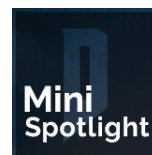
To the Limit

Esselfortium has pointed to Espi as one of her biggest influences, and a number of maps in her three-megawad uber-project employ techniques used in Suspended in Dusk, particularly the maps made by essel herself. It's quite a bit more than a simple tribute, though. Back to Saturn X is more about the question of just how much juice can be squeezed out of the vanilla Doom engine, both in terms of technical achievements and

gameplay. The incredibly detailed artwork and highly efficient, highly saturated palette are suggestive of something far more modern than you ever would have seen in the '90s, almost like an idealized, retro-futurist version of the Doom community's standard nostalgia. The combat, too, feels more modern, taking its ideas about map flow and combat pressure from the Scythe 2 lineage to create something of a hybrid between contemporary complexity and the simplicity of the classics.
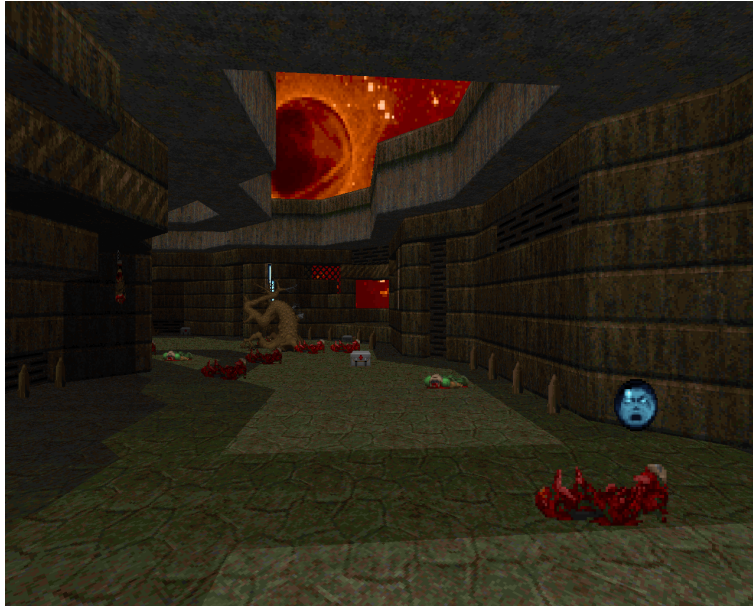

The two currently released megawads manage to sneak in all sorts of cool geometric voodoo to create lighting and other effects that appear more advanced than vanilla should allow. But above all, the scale and beauty of the maps push the absolute limits of vanilla Doom, to the point that "Speedtraps for the Bee Kingdom" (E2 map 20) and "Unstable Journey" (E2 map 25) are both at the blockmap size limit, meaning that adding just one more sector to either of them would cause a crash (incidentally, there's one other vanilla map known to be at this limit: none other than "Misri Halek").

Back to Saturn X is about how much juice can be squeezed out of the vanilla Doom engine, both in terms of technical achievements and gameplay

In short, BTSX packs in a lot of wow factor, which amplifies the message that all the crazy things it gets away with shouldn't be possible in vanilla Doom at all. As a result, it's become something of a paragon for many vanilla enthusiasts—why bother with advanced port features or mapping formats at all when you can create something like this in vanilla? My impression is that this was always the message BTSX wanted to send, the *raison d'etre* for mappers like esselfortium.

There has always been a certain nostalgic element to the Doom community, and in the mid-2000s, faced with ZDoom feature creep, it began to find an outlet in creating new and increasingly elaborate WADs for the original DOS game, with its familiar limits, warts, and all.
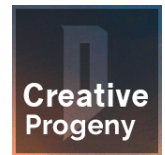
- Back to Basics
- Plutonia 2
- Doom the Way id Did and Doom 2 the Way id Did
- Base Ganymede
- Reverie
- Interception
- Kuchitsu
- Erkatanne
- No Sleep for the Dead
- Alpha Accident
- Nihility: Infinite Teeth
- Absolutely Killed
- No End in Sight

- Altitude
- Rekkr
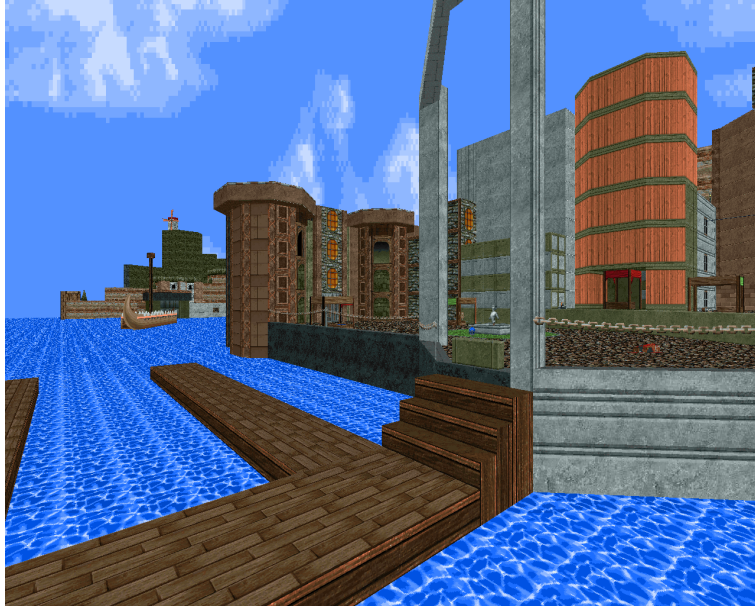
Rekkr (2018)

Chapter 10:

Murder Machines

As you've probably gathered, the Doom community's neo-classicists can be grouped into a few different schools of mapping. If Scythe 2 and its successors are a continuation of Alien Vendetta's legacy, and Suspended in Dusk and its children are often a throwback to Doom itself, then it's no surprise that people are still carrying on the challenge-oriented ideals of Plutonia and Hell Revealed as well. Hardcore players keep getting better, after all, and nothing is going to be able to keep them at bay for very long.

It's hard to have a conversation about challenging combat in the Doom community without someone bringing up the term "slaughter"— usually derogatorily, since the challenge aficionados tend to prefer terms like "combat puzzle" and "stuff that isn't boring." There are always plenty of people fanning the flames on both sides, and it's a common joke at this point that inexperienced players will describe virtually anything that they find difficult as "slaughter," including mapsets more in the vein of Plutonia or the Scythe series. Plutonia's "Go 2 It" is widely regarded as the first slaughtermap, but you're not likely to find any exact consensus on what the word means, and its origins are somewhat uncertain—though classic mappers like Anders Johnsen have noted that similar terms were in circulation as early as the '90s to describe WADs like Hell Revealed, and they gained traction on forums and in text files for mapsets like Alien Vendetta and Deus Vult 2 throughout the 2000s.

It's hard to talk about combat in the Doom community without someone bringing up the term "slaughter"— but you're not likely to find any consensus on what the word means

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Hardcore players will generally recognize that "slaughter," despite being a fraught term, does refer to a distinct genre of mapping—though its branches don't all necessarily trace back to the same trunk. Matt Tropiano's "For We Are Many" (Community Chest 3 map 29) and Huy Pham's Deus Vult series, which were early examples of hyper-dense slaughtermaps and distant forerunners of the modern genre, evolved out of the type of combat you see in the later maps of Scythe 2 and Alien Vendetta. Meanwhile, death-destiny was developing a Plutonia/Chord-inspired mapping style that revolved around the extremely unfriendly placement of small groups of monsters but frequently extrapolated that type of combat into much larger, denser playgrounds. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, TimeofDeath developed multiple unusual combat modes guided by a variety of eclectic interests, including coop play and rocket jumping, often featuring them in enormous maps with many hundreds or thousands of monsters. Call it convergent evolution, if you will. But the primary school of design that has dominated hardcore challenge mapping throughout the 2010s can easily be traced back to one insane level designer.

Sunder - Insane_Gazebo (2009)

The Hornets' Nest

The first thing anyone will notice about Sunder is that it's huge. Huge and visually intricate, creating a sense of scale that was previously unrivaled and has rarely been matched even in the decade since its initial unfinished release—probably because it's very difficult to pull off successfully with the classic sidedef limits, and perhaps because its many creative children have "known better" than to try and chain every other design choice in the service of creating that enormous scope. Certainly Sunder goes all in—the feeling it gives you of being completely dwarfed, of being surrounded by fractal patterns of detail expanding outward at a cosmic scale, is so jaw-dropping that it alone is worth the price of admission. The early maps are large and atmospheric, but you get your first true taste of this feeling while attempting to traverse the massive grounds of "Pale Monument" (map 08), and then again as you descend the elevator at the beginning of "The Cage" (map 09), watching what seems like an entire

world unfolding before you. "Hag's Finger" (map 10) does one better, though at the opening standstill you might not even realize it; it's not until you take your first steps forward and your vision's 3D triangulation kicks in that you realize how utterly enormous the structure you're looking at actually is. The visual style reaches its pinnacle in "The Furnace" (map 11), which is so mind-bogglingly huge that it's almost impossible to absorb any given view of it.
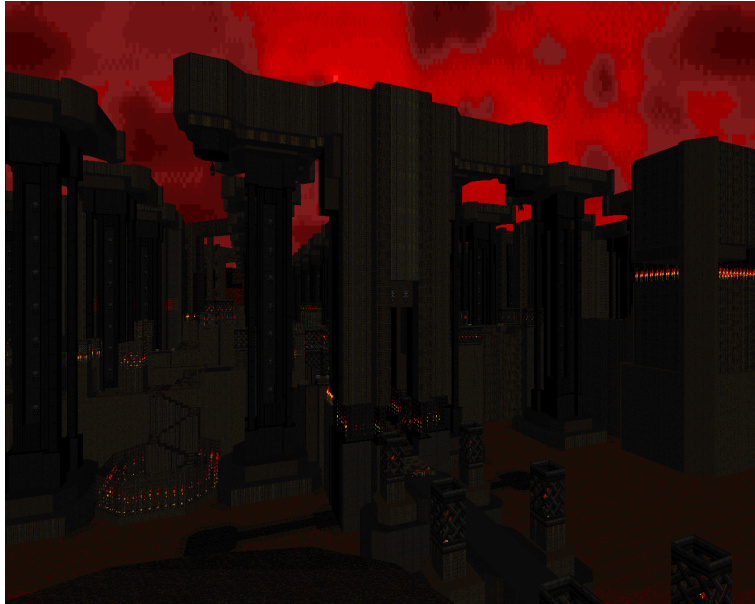
It's not just that the spaces are large, but more importantly that they keep giving you a sense of an enormous view that stretches on into infinity, no matter where you are, and that view seems to always be filled with complex structure. The detailing is a dramatically scaled-up version of Scythe 2's simple but easily expandable style—tons of borders and fringes, elaborate pillars, rocks with liquid falls, attention to silhouettes where sky is showing —but with a twist of madness that perhaps comes from the art of H.R. Giger: so much complexity, and with individual shapes that are so illogical, that it creates a sense of something totally alien and unfathomable. More than the size of the maps, this visual style is what later slaughter works have tended to imitate, though again, few have managed to match Insane_Gazebo's levels of awe-inspiring structure because their vision is tempered by sanity, both for better and for worse.

*More than the size of the maps, the visual style is what
later slaughter works have tended to imitate, though
few have managed to match Insane_Gazebo's levels of
awe-inspiring structure*

In Sunder, the thematic concept, atmosphere, and psychological impact of
the map come first, and the combat mechanics and choreography generally
come second. Though some seasoned mappers may tell you otherwise, this
is an option that you have as a level designer; if you're expected to marry
visuals and gameplay into one unified whole, then you can approach it from
either end just as effectively, establishing whatever your first priority is and
building everything else to work around it. In Sunder's case, the combat
appears to grow out of the author's deep fascination for the scale and
otherworldliness of the settings as he's creating them, using the density and
enormity of the combat as yet another psychological element while creating
(for the time) complex and challenging fights around the spaces that already
exist.
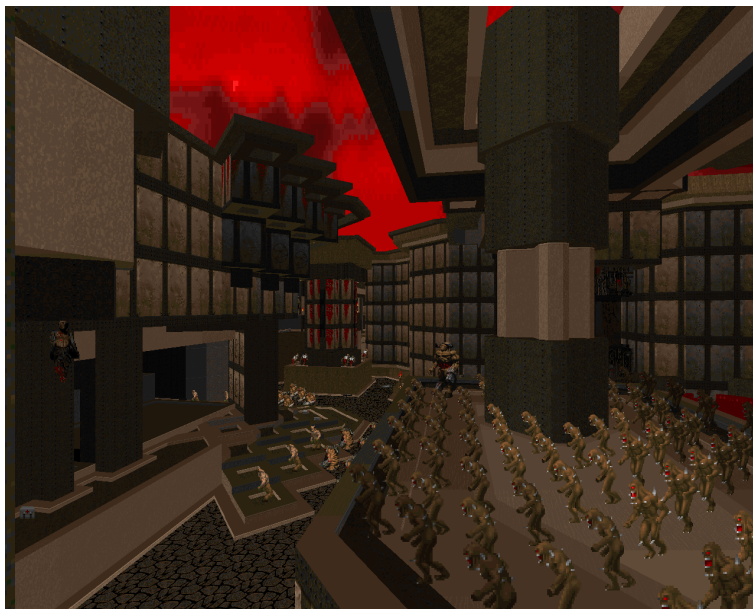
This willingness to play with and take inspiration from spaces as they're
being created, to allow them to expand and have a life of their own, is
perhaps what led to Sunder's greatest breakthrough with regard to

gameplay. Sunder's combat puzzles take place on a scale as enormous as the maps themselves. Virtually all earlier slaughter-scale hardcore maps followed in the style of Hell Revealed—including the larger late-game maps in Scythe and Scythe 2—meaning that the combat happened a piece at a time, allowing you to carve out your foothold, clean up, and move on to the next challenge or slide across the center of the map to deal with the next block of entrenched enemies. The discrete chunks of action don't blend unless the player actively tries to blend them, if at all. In Sunder's larger spaces, the entire map can become one gigantic fight, almost effortlessly, a hornet's nest that you can stir up at will. Even in the smaller earlier maps where the arenas do tend to be presented as discrete units, there's a lot of play in how you can approach them. Insane_Gazebo was the first, or among the first, to develop combat puzzle choreography on such an extensive scale. And because of the freeform nature of these combat sprawls, and the extent to which the monsters themselves are free-roaming, the enemies rather than the player become the besiegers, in direct contrast to the old Hell Revealed style. In this new mode, evasion and mobile crowd dynamics become the key to success, and the player's ability to react to a changing environment is critical. The importance for modern slaughter can't be overstated; simply put, hardcore challenge mappers locked into Sunder's new gameplay mode and never, ever went back.

Hardcore challenge mappers locked into Sunder's new gameplay mode and never, ever went back

The beautiful thing about having the monsters and the environment so blended as a unified, overarching threat is how hostile it makes the maps feel. That feeling of total hostility is exemplified early on in "Precarious" (map 05), which sees you running tight platforming sequences while under heavy fire, a chasm of deadly lava far below—but it's a major part of the experience in every map in the set, even when the environmental hazards are lighter, partly because the scale and atmosphere of the maps get deep inside your head and partly because the thousands of monsters that populate

each map seem to be crawling out of the walls most of the time. It's as though the map itself is a malevolent living thing that lusts for your demise.
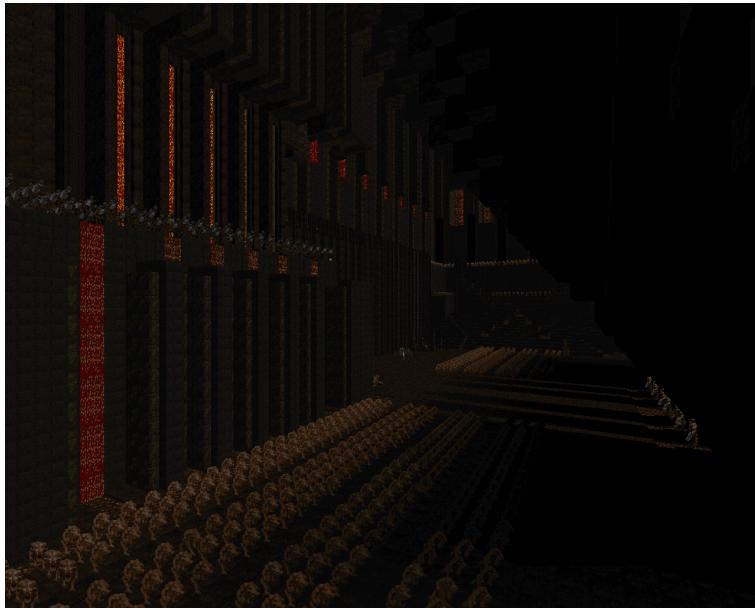

Interestingly, you could just as easily frame it as the exact opposite, and say that the map is a cold, dead machine, totally unfeeling, a construct whose only purpose to kill you. In some ways, Sunder builds on the ideology of '90s challenge mapsets like Plutonia and Hell Revealed, where nothing else matters except the player's sense of being pressured and challenged, and takes it to its logical conclusion. But with Sunder, the aesthetics finally become an important aspect of that. The sheer enormity of the environments, the alien complexity and mad structure, and the hostility of the challenges—it all comes together to create the sense that you're nothing more than a rat trapped in an endless god machine, and there's never any way to truly escape, just some new trial of skill around the next corner. And really, isn't that what hardcore players wanted all along?

Sunder offers the feeling of being up against overwhelming odds, rather than actually pitting you against overwhelming odds

Compared to modern hardcore mapsets, Sunder usually doesn't push all that hard (though a handful of segments remain pretty harsh). The niche that it created has come to be populated by absurdly skilled players, and it demands much tougher and more refined challenges. But maybe that was never the point of Sunder, per se. Sunder is so much about the impression it leaves on you, the spectacle of everything you encounter. For players who are newer to the genre—or those who existed at the time of its semi-release, who didn't have the benefit of having played Sunlust or other more dynamic works that owe their existence to Sunder—the mapset offers the feeling of being up against overwhelming odds, rather than actually pitting you against overwhelming odds. Part of Sunder's widespread appeal is that its psychological experience and beauty are fairly accessible because the gameplay doesn't shut as many people out of them. Players who have a decent amount of experience with Doom and really commit to it will generally be able to overcome its challenges…and because the spectacle is so intense, they'll gain immense satisfaction from doing so.

Stardate 20X6 and Swim With the Whales - Ribbiks (2013)
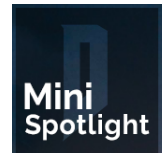
Killer Colors

If you were around in 2013 or have read the Cacowards from that year, you probably know how big a deal it was when Ribbiks showed up with his first two major mapsets. Sunder was something of an art piece—complicated to replicate and notably unrefined in some ways, it was a pretty difficult concept for other mappers to work with, especially those who were fond of Scythe 2's sleek gameplay style (i.e., everyone). It was Ribbiks who finally made it work.
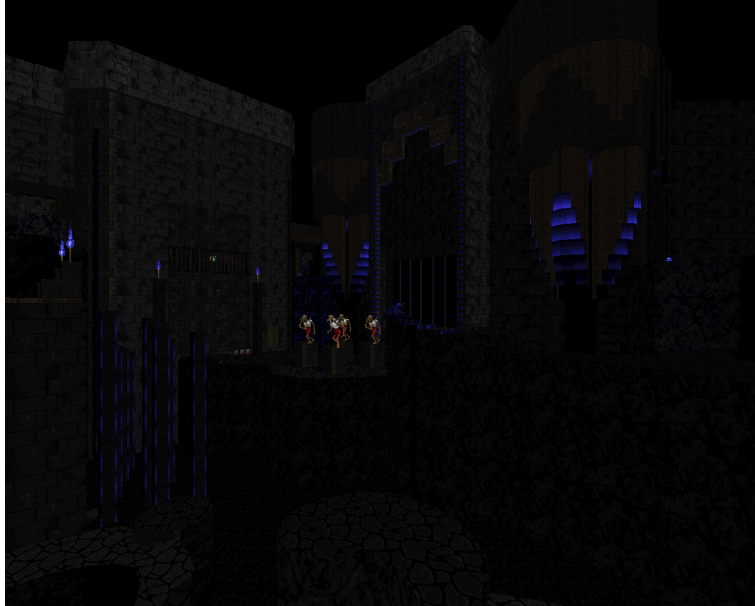
Ribbiks's visual style is more simplified than Sunder's, closer to its Almian influences and typically working on a much smaller scale. Each mapset is built around visual unity a la Scythe 2's episodes, but with a color rather than a texture scheme as the unifying factor. The use of color was strikingly unique at the time, since most maps before then had been based around Doom's color palette, which doesn't offer deep representation for cool colors like blue and purple; each of Ribbiks's mapsets required the creation of a new palette. The maps rely on strong contrast to set the aesthetic, with the primary color serving as bright highlights against grungy metal and other dark, nearly colorless texturing.

This type of setting may well be the ultimate expression of the map as unfeeling machine

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Despite all the differences, this style retains a lot of Sunder's mood elements, particularly the sense that the environment is a pure mechanical construct. Ribbiks uses a ton of metal, usually in jagged or geometric patterns that work like a smaller version of Insane_Gazebo's aesthetic; in the midst of this, he places distinct landmark details, such as the towers in "Magnus" (Stardate 20X6 map 07) and the glowing metal spirals in "Swim With the Whales" (SWTW map 03), which call to mind Sunder's visual

complexity without expanding it to the entire map. Ribbiks is well known for establishing his environments as a series of islands in the midst of pitch-black void space, which aids both the color contrast and the sense that the setting is abstract and isolated. This type of setting may well be the ultimate expression of the map as unfeeling machine, which is probably why it's so hard to find a post-Ribbiks hardcore mapset that doesn't use it.
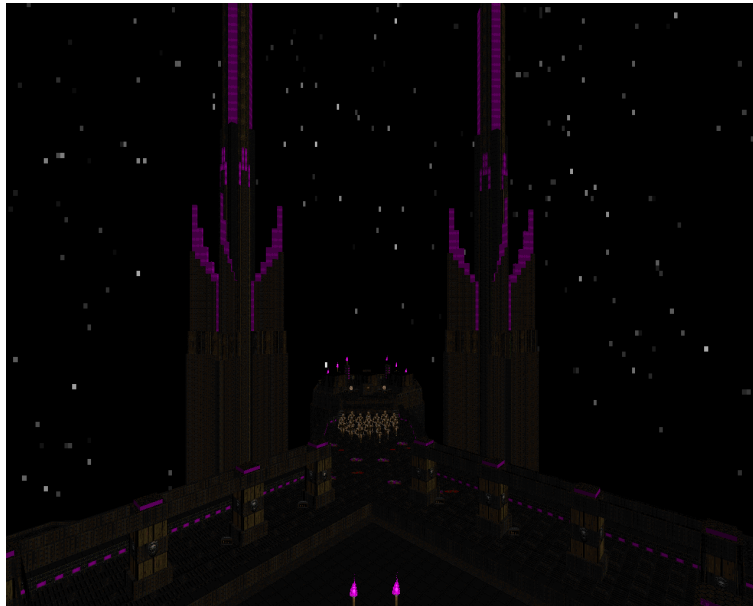
And for Ribbiks, the psychological feeling of hostility simply is not enough —the maps have to be hostile in the truest sense. They have to murder the shit out of you. Like an evolved version of the challenges present in Plutonia, the Chord series, and death-destiny's work, Ribbiks's gameplay (combat dynamics and everything else) frequently toes the line between acceptable design and being a total asshole, appealing to the best players because it pushes their skills – his more moderate maps demand a solid baseline of knowledge and skill, and his harder ones are designed so that you can only beat them if you're extremely good, which has led to Ribbiks being one of the few voices championing Hurt Me Plenty as the "intended" experience and Ultra-Violence as a step beyond (though Ribbiks's HMP is still harder than Sunder). His work is full of actively belligerent setpieces and other challenges—such as the fight with teleporting conveyor-belt Cyberdemons in "Ride the Dolphins" (SWTW map 02), the extended platforming sequence in "Vehelits" (SD20X6 map 06), and the truly unforgiving Arch-Vile horde fight at the end of "Magnus," where a single

misstep is death—that could easily induce a ragequit from many players but are welcome changes of pace for their intended audience. Ribbiks's later work perhaps exemplifies this even more; the most famous example is certainly the Arch-Vile carousel in "Go Fuck Yourself" (Sunlust map 29), but the more avant-garde Magnolia deals almost entirely in challenges that are, shall we say, exclusive. Though Ribbiks's popularity shows that his maps are more manageable than they may seem, his gameplay stylings have opened the gate for modern hardcore mapping to ascend to a truly niche domain, with more fine-tuned combat mechanics and more refined combat puzzles that cater to the best of the best.

Sunder and its children have defined the "slaughter" style of Doom mapping, where elaborate heartless traps in elaborate heartless maps attempt to murder the player in increasingly baroque fashion.

Creative Progeny
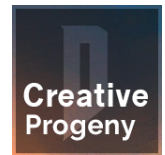
- Combat Shock and Combat Shock 2
- Sunlust
- Miasma
- Toilet of the Gods
- Eden
- Water Spirit
- Saturnine Chapel
- Stardate 20X7
- Disjunction
- Cryogenics
- Mayhem 18 Orange and Purple
- Breathless and Entropy

- Abandon
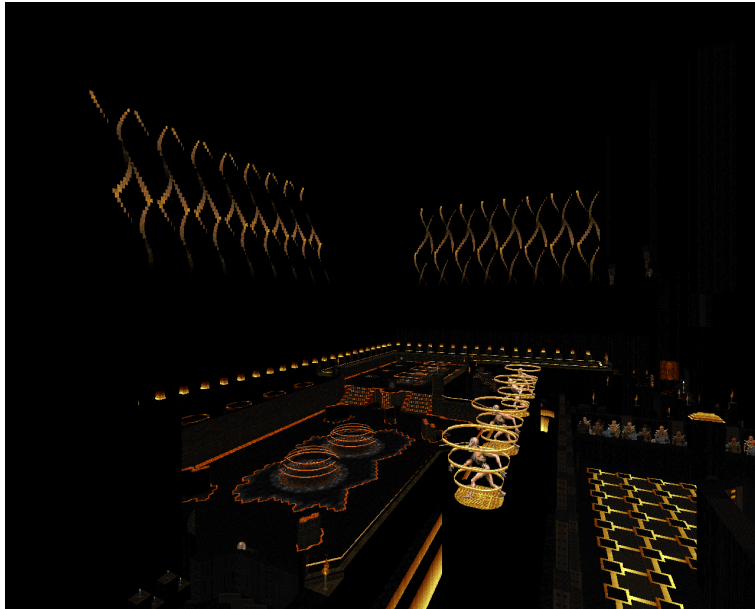
Entropy (2019)

Chapter 11:

The Great Synthesis, Part 2

If you've been following the implications of this article at all, or if you've been hanging around the Doom community since the 2000s or early 2010s, you'll know that there has historically been a huge rift. On the one hand, you have people with a classical ideology, who prefer either the original '90s experience of Doom or an enhanced, combat-driven version thereof; on the other hand, you have ZDoomers who prefer a more modern or feature-complex experience, using advanced features to transform Doom into something completely different. You could just as easily draw the divide between people who talk about "gameplay" (by which they usually mean combat intensity) vs. people who are more interested in aesthetics or concepts, regardless of the target port. But one thing that's abundantly clear is that the wave of experimentalism in the 2000s, which was focused primarily on the Z-ports, led to a vehement reaction among the classicists, which gave birth to the more classical or combat-focused mapping schools that heavily dominated the period from about 2009 to 2016.

But as happens with all great divides in art, we've started to see mappers whose artistic sensibilities are rooted in both worlds, who want to create a fusion that represents the best of both. That isn't to say that you can't find much earlier examples of this synthesis if you look back through the history of ZDoom mapping; Winter's Fury offers a very Doomy sort of combat intensity with a high level of polish, while fan-made Doom-engine games like Urban Brawl, Harmony, and Chex Quest 3 use port features to supplement a very retro style of gameplay. Even Simplicity, the creative grandparent of most ultra-modern ZDoom releases, was created as a partial return to old-school gameplay. But these releases were few and far between.

The wave of experimentalism in the Z-ports led to a reaction among the classicists, which gave birth to the

In the last few years, however, there's been a tremendous explosion of releases that draw on more traditional or combat-driven ideologies while also taking inspiration from all of the advanced features and greater breadth of design choices that GZDoom offers. The concept at the heart of this movement is versatility—if a mapper's vision requires some element that can't be achieved within the limits of the classic formats, then why not move to a mapping format that can accommodate it? In other words, the new-school ZDoom mapper isn't necessarily gathering features into a massive treasure hoard that's built to impress; instead, they're hand-picking the specific features that they need to accomplish a set of concrete design goals. If you need more custom monsters and weapons than you can add with Dehacked, then add them; if you want to create a visual aesthetic that's fundamentally rooted in Boom mapping but augment it with slopes and 3D floors, then do it; if you want to build a map around a gameplay feature that doesn't exist outside of UDMF, then use it. In the same way that Boom has been viewed as an expanded, more user-friendly alternative to vanilla format, GZDoom with a curated feature palette is becoming the new Boom, allowing mappers to expand even further.

The Adventures of Square - BigBrik Games (2014)

Nobody Puts Mapping in a Corner

Adventures of Square is a retro indie game. It might seem like somebody decided to ask the age-old question, "What would another '90s Doom-engine game have looked like?" and then came up with the answer—but that's not really what it is. Almost all great 2010s retro indie games (of which there are dozens if not hundreds at this point) are hybrids—they use (mostly) authentic aesthetics to create a sense of nostalgia, and they make

every nod they can to the games of the past, but they're also building on decades of hard-won knowledge about game design to iron out the kinks and create games too polished to have existed in the 1990s. In other words, they're not afraid to throw in some modernisms if they have a good reason.
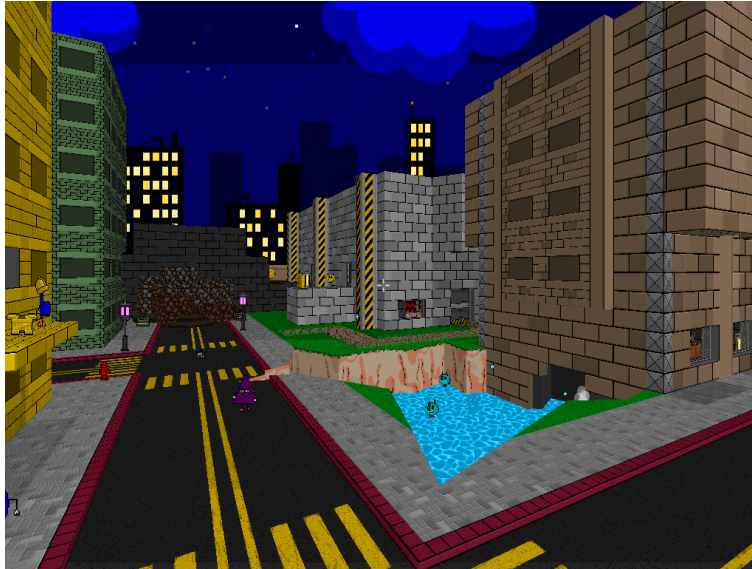

In creating their own Doom engine game, BigBrik had the opportunity to create a completely unique universe and aesthetic, and it's no surprise they chose not to be limited by the specific set of features that's available in the classic Doom engine. They needed something more flexible than that. Adventures of Square operates on a pan-'90s nostalgia, taking elements from later Doom-engine games, Build-engine games, console platformers, action movies, and more. It creates a world in which 3D floors and slopes fit in seamlessly with simplistic, cartoony texturing and sprites, a world where much-maligned post-Doom features like particle fountains (here used to create cute bubbles rising up from fountain splashes) are coopted as just another natural part of the cartoon aesthetic. Perhaps the most modern element of the game is its hipster-tier ludicrous gibs, as it tosses far more paint splatters and smashed mechanical parts around every time you kill an enemy than the vanilla Doom engine could have handled—and yet it fits perfectly with our nostalgic memories of '90s gaming as a hurricane of stylized guts and explosions. BigBrik even revamped the game menu and added goofy story/info screens in the style of old PC platformers like Bio Menace to give the game an extra bit of charm.

It's worth calling attention to the sound design as well, as it far exceeds anything that would be possible without GZDoom. A huge part of the game's nostalgia is its cheesy wit, which is partly delivered through timely one-liners from the protagonist. Every enemy has multiple wakeup and attack quips, which adds a ton of character and keeps the game fresh and engaging even as you're bombarded by sounds in the monster-dense levels. Ambient sounds abound, and caverns, tunnels, and basements all give an echoing quality to everything that you hear inside of them.

Adventures of Square represents a meeting of worlds,
a bridge between fragments of the Doom community
that had previously been isolated from each other

Adventures of Square also takes advantage of its target port by using tons of custom enemies and other actors, far more than would be possible even with MBF's expanded set of replaceables for Boom-format maps. This is one of classic Doom's most restrictive limits, as mappers can't exceed the number of actors that are already in the game (resulting in often clever hacks in vanilla/Boom maps, like Valiant's final boss, which replaces a blue torch). Adventures of Square has a large enemy roster, lots of item pickups, and tons of scenery (and it needed room to expand even further for later episodes)—but I doubt many would say that it's excessive. Everything in the game feels like it has a purpose, even if that purpose is just to be cute. Friendly units in a variety of shapes run around in a panic in many levels, creating an interesting obstacle for empathetic players and adding silly drama. Multiple variants of cow bystanders appear in different environments as a running joke, and plenty of extra decorations exist just for easter egg gags. The game also throws in extra enemies for fun and variety, including special minibosses or enemies that only appear in secret levels. Stuff like this is actually an important part of the game, since Square's aesthetic revolves so heavily around charm. It's a game where the world feels extensive and oozes character, and all of the custom content is a major part of that.
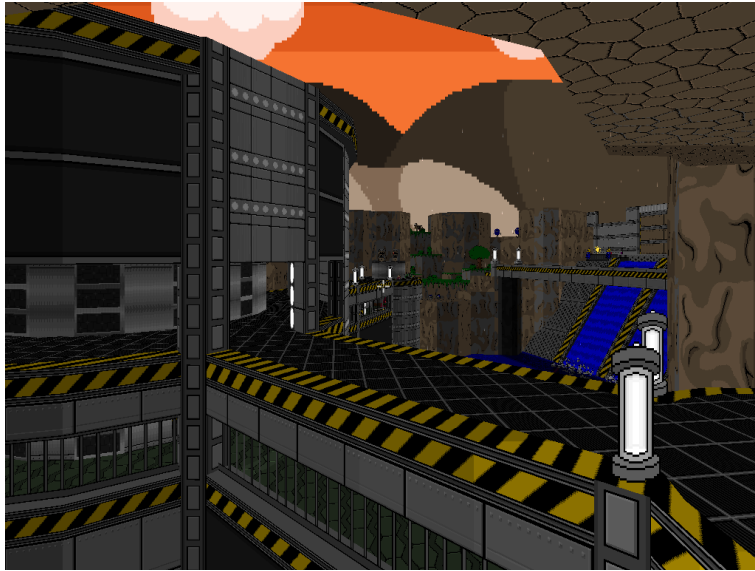
But at the same time, BigBrik kept a tight rein on their bestiary and approached their gameplay with a modern mindset. The enemies are designed to balance with the player's weapons, and to present a challenge within the freeform, movement-oriented maps. The enemy set is designed as a legion, a diverse population that can threaten from multiple angles at once within large spaces without being frustrating for less skilled players. Its enemies aren't always as differentiated into starkly different combat niches as Doom 2's are, and it tends to steer away from very dangerous individual enemies (except for minibosses and bosses); instead, the combat is about responding quickly to variations, but each variation still has a purpose. Essentially, it offers a balance between the enemies-as-flavor approach of Tormentor's mapping style and the enemies-as-pure-mechanics approach of modern Doom 2 challenge mapping—and in doing so, it's able to appeal to a broad audience that includes both newer indie gamers and seasoned Doomers.

Every feature in Adventures of Square is implemented from a game design perspective, not simply for the sake of being cool

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In other words, every feature in Adventures of Square is implemented from a game design perspective, not simply for the sake of being cool. Lethal

forcefields and insta-kill liquids help shape the flow of the levels and gate the progression in intelligent ways; deep water becomes a normal part of navigation that integrates with other level design decisions, or a way to find cool secrets; rain and snow add to the atmosphere of maps but are tastefully limited and fit with the cartoon art style. A new, comically powerful type of explosive is first introduced as a way of ambushing enemies at the start of a level, in such a way that you can't possibly miss the mechanical implications of it. Walls that can only be damaged by explosives—and explosives that the player can pick up and move around—are used to add mild puzzle progression or test the player's memory and observational skills for accessing secrets. Bosses and other powerful enemies choose randomly from multiple attacks, which adds to the complexity of battles.
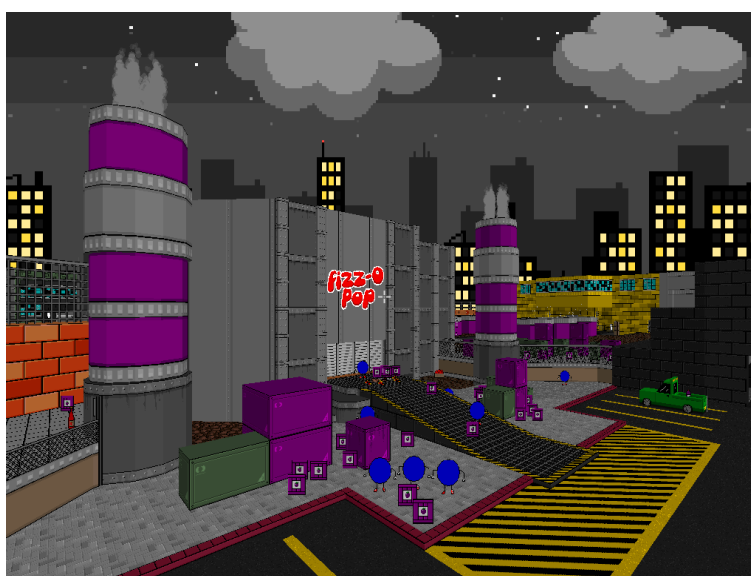
Episode 2, which was released in 2018, expands on the game's core ideas in even more awesome ways, introducing major new mechanics as a key part of the level design—low-gravity jumping, airless outdoor areas that require special respawning gear to traverse safely, and even an elaborate lava chase sequence. The new Strongman enemy has the ability to pick you up and throw you around or hook you from afar and pull you in close, which allows it to play a major mechanical role in the maps; it's often used as an added threat in areas with platforming sequences. But no matter how many cool features are added, they've always been thought through carefully and are always executed with a high level of polish.

Like Alien Vendetta, Adventures of Square represents a meeting of worlds, a bridge between fragments of the Doom community that had previously been isolated from each other. It offers a flawless blend of classic appeal, neo-classic combat, and modern features that are used in really neat ways—basically, there's nothing it doesn't do, and do well. And now, five years later, we're starting to really see the ripple effects as many new mappers release projects with a similar energy.

The Alfonzone - Pinchy (2017)

The Great Gonzo, Now in 3D!
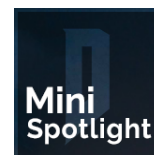
Adventures of Square may be a completely different game, but The Alfonzone brings that ideology a bit closer to home. Pinchy's megawad delivers the author's signature classic-style combat, complete with ubiquitious hordes of popcorn enemies to blast to smithereens—but it's also full of zany ZDoom mechanics that make the vast majority of its whopping 50 maps feel totally unique.
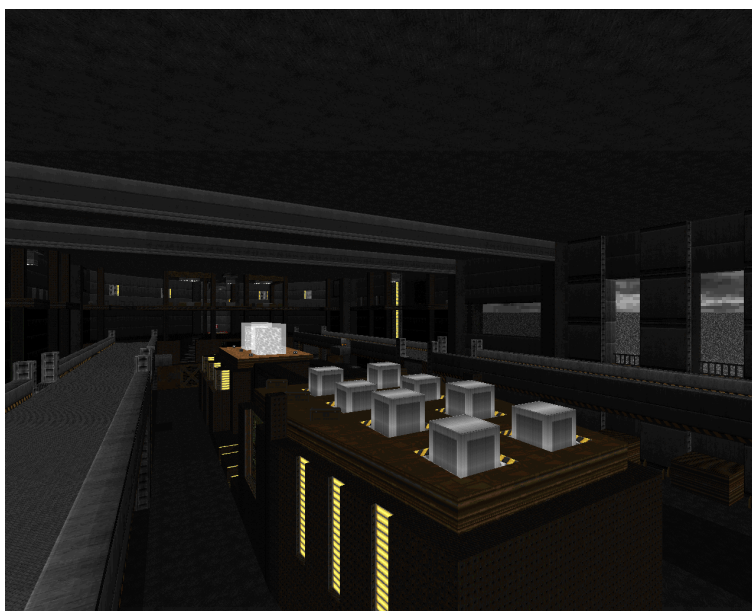
Ridiculously fast liquid currents rocket you around, architecture unfolds (and then re-folds, and unfolds again, and...) into a tour of every theme in the megawad, and a sentient sea of liquid pursues you upward through an

entire episode. Adding to the bizarre and nonsensical sense of progression are the story texts before every map, courtesy of ZDoom's Mapinfo. The map architecture is handled the same way as the gameplay—fundamentally rooted in Boomisms, but with incredible 3D elements like a towering crane and a battleship with floor-over-floor architecture that fit in perfectly and often add to the combat or progression. It's totally classic Doom, but totally ZDoom at the same time, and like Square, it just goes to show how much both worlds have to offer.

The Slaughter Spectrum - Bridgeburner56 (2019)

Mini Spotlight
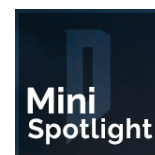
The Nouveau-Hardcore

GZDoom and slaughter combat were bound to collide eventually—and although The Slaughter Spectrum was created by a relatively inexperienced mapper and doesn't exert nearly as much pressure on the most hardcore players as they have come to expect, it's the first of it's kind, so perhaps that's beside the point. Bridgeburner's mapset barely draws from Insane_Gazebo and Ribbiks at all; instead, it blazes its own trail and creates its own very distinct style. GZDoom features are everywhere, including tons of 3D architecture and floating objects that glow, bob, rotate, and revolve around. These 3D features work in conjunction with an aesthetic style that several new mappers, particularly Bridgeburner, have begun to champion—a style that revolves heavily around ultra-smooth curves, sharp points, and repeating stacks of border sectors and seems to take a lot of its sleek appeal from graphic/logo arts and tattoo art.
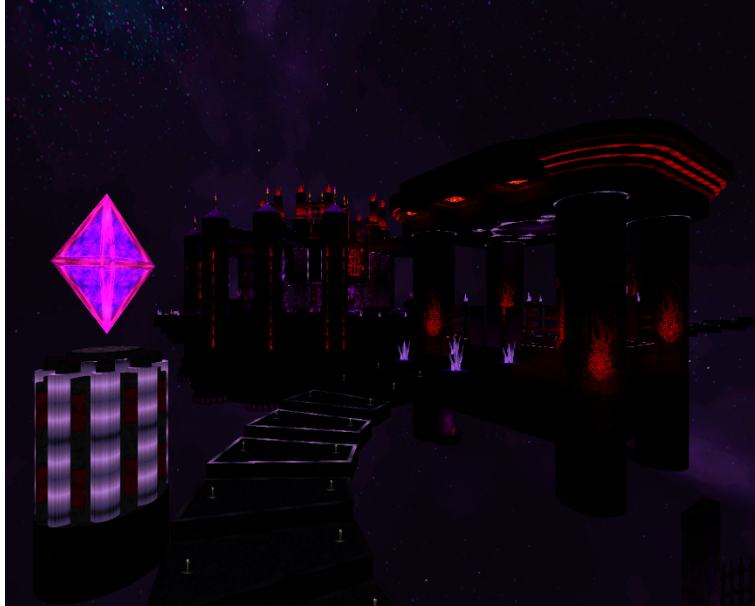
This whole style goes hand in hand with GZDoom's version of the classic limitless void, which has served as the primary setting for slaughter maps since Ribbiks first appeared. Gameplay-wise, Bridgeburner seems to be reimagining slaughter gameplay from the ground up and gearing it toward the new audience of players who have arrived in the Doom scene following the release of Doom 2016, which is why it's still a bit rough as yet. In any case, The Slaughter Spectrum was only released this past spring, but a quick look around will show you just how many people are already creating maps with a similar style.

Dimension of the Boomed - Urthar (2018)

I Can't Believe It's Not ZDoom

DotB is a Boom-compatible mapset, but it feels so much like Quake that it's hard to believe it doesn't require a more advanced port. That's because it pushes Boom features to the absolute limit, and has a lot of specialized tricks up its sleeve to boot.
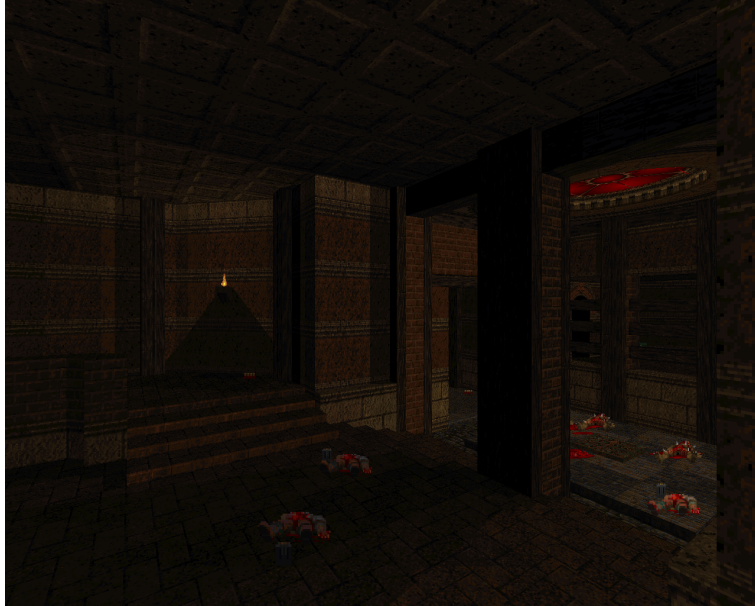
It makes extensive use of the features that are shared by both ports, such as scrolling skies and Boom's version of deep water, as well as conveyor floors used to create wind tunnels and in-game OGG tracks that help replicate Quake's creepy atmosphere. It also uses a ton of midtextures to create seemingly 3D objects or curved surfaces such as arches in believable ways, which is becoming quite common in Boom mapping.

Modern Boom releases continue to borrow tropes from GZDoom mappers—partly to show that it can be done without GZDoom

Perhaps the most mind-boggling element in the mapset is the appearance of slanted lighting against the walls, which shouldn't be possible—and it turns out to be baked into the textures themselves, rather than actual cast light. Even as new GZDoom mapsets take lessons from neo-classic combat and level design, modern Boom releases like DotB, Maskim Xul, and Remnant continue to borrow aesthetic and stylistic tropes from GZDoom mappers—partly in an effort to show people that it can be done without GZDoom, but also, I suspect, partly because those tropes are too good for people not to want to use them.

Eviternity - Dragonfly et al. (2018)

An Audience in Every Port

      If you're new to Doom and you've only heard of one megawad in your life, it's likely Eviternity, which was released in the midst of a huge influx of modern gamers into the Doom community via the new Doom games and rode in on a year-long marketing campaign targeted at that expanded player base.


Eviternity is an MBF-compatible megawad that's mainly styled after Scythe 2 and Valiant, but it also makes a very interesting set of accommodations for more modern players: optional GZDoom features. If you play it in GZDoom, you'll see cool particle effects coming from the portals at the start of each episode, as well as weather systems such as snow in certain maps. If you play in a Boom-derived port, these effects simply won't appear, but the maps will otherwise appear as normal.

It remains to be seen whether other mappers will implement optional GZDoom features, but my money says it's too good an idea to pass up


In the old days, if you'd added GZDoom features, it would have made your mapset GZDoom-only; Eviternity's features are made optional through the new ZScript language. The various special effects add a more modern vibe to the maps while remaining unobtrusive and allowing the megawad to retain a mostly classic feel—essentially, it allows the megawad to broaden its target audience. It remains to be seen whether other mappers will implement advanced features in this way, but my money says it's too good an idea to pass up.

Following in the wake of The Adventures of Square, modern Doom designers increasingly curate the features they wish to work with, rather than letting the technology dictate their choices. The future belongs to projects that acknowledge that march of progress, even as they tip their hat to established community traditions.

Creative Progeny
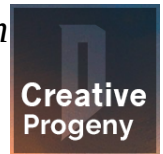
- Doom: The Golden Souls 1 and 2
- Skulldash
- Shadow of the Wool-Ball and Rise of the Wool-Ball
- Mercury Rain
- Strange Aeons
- Elf Gets Pissed
- Echelon
- Ashes 2063
- Verdant Citadel
- Boom-Stick in the Mud
- The Wayfarer
- Paradise

- Hell-Forged

- Alienated
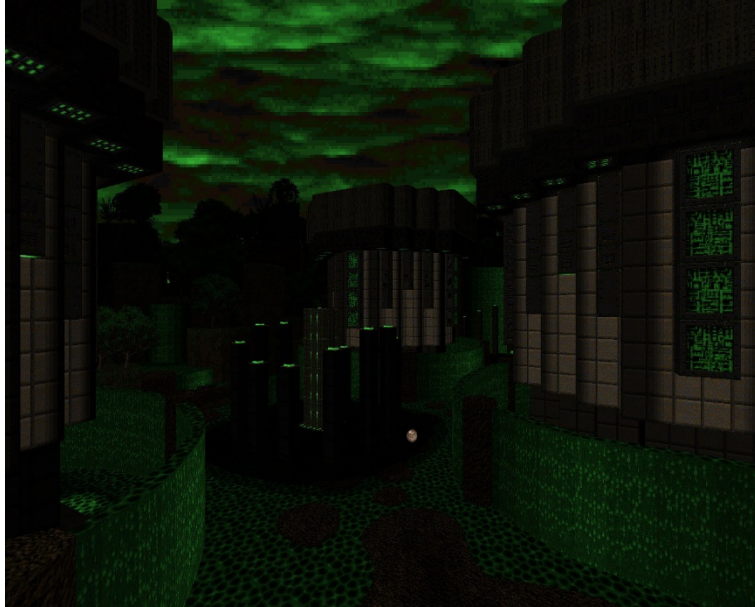
Paradise (2019)

Conclusion

The whole history of Doom mapping is wonderfully complex and varied, and there's no way to truly sum it up in a few simple statements. But at the same time, studying the history and writing this article helped me appreciate the long-term narrative in ways I never had before. When I stepped back and looked at everything in chronological order, I saw the same narrative arc repeating twice, forming two halves of the Doom community's history, one beginning almost exactly where the other ended. In the beginning, you had experimentation with priorities, people trying to understand combat and aesthetics separately, until Alien Vendetta came along and wrapped it all up in a neat little bow. Then, just as people thought their work was done and Alien Vendetta appeared to be set in stone as the last great classic megawad, people started showing up and creating all sorts of oddball experiments, from maps crammed with advanced port features to community projects where there were no rules or parents and anything was fair game. Dismayed by this seemingly endless party time, many mappers sought to return to the classics and create maps defined by traditional ideologies, presenting their neo-old-school styles with a level of polish that had never been seen before. And now here we are, watching a new generation of mappers grow up as they find ways to combine the best of everything that's come before into a single mapping movement—one that seems to be centered on GZDoom, which so many people once considered antithetical to great mapping. The story of Doom is the story of division and synthesis.
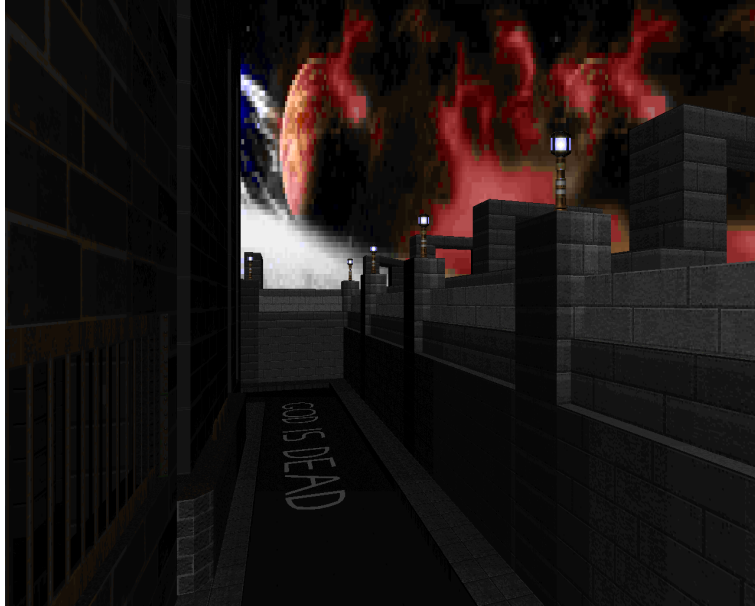
A.L.T. (2012)

This article is definitely not the whole picture. It has been a very broad overview of what I consider to be the main schools of Doom mapping so far, as exemplified by the creations that inspired or revitalized them. It goes without saying that there's a lot I wasn't able to cover here. There are the great classic Doom clone megawads of the 1990s, like Memento Mori and Requiem, and there's the cozy 2000s classic-with-tons-of-detail style of folks like Paul Corfiatis and Dutch Devil. There's the timeless trend of faux-realistic sector furniture and objects, or "Doomcute," which began with Evilution, was epitomized by the likes of TVR! and Kama Sutra, and lives on to this day. I haven't even begun to talk about joke maps, the entire history of multiplayer mapping, or the extremely prolific gameplay modding scene that GZDoom has enabled.

The same narrative arc repeats twice, forming two halves of the Doom community's history, one beginning almost exactly where the other ended

There's nothing new under the sun, and as I've alluded to a few times in this article, a lot of people's inspiration comes from outside of Doom— from other video games, other media, or the grand circus of Real Life. I

certainly don't mean to suggest that concepts like conveyance, mood lighting, and the uncanny were invented by Doom mappers; clearly that's not true. But it took innovative people to take those concepts and give them a context within Doom as an art medium, to use them in a way that is uniquely Doom. This article has been about those people.

Nor do I wish to imply that the evolution of mapping trends has simply been a series of straight lines. The family tree of mapping influence is more like a spiderweb. Take Speed of Doom: it was created by two mappers, one of whom built super-fast but tough maps in the vein of late-game Scythe 1, and the other of whom combined the style of Scythe 2 with the mood and aesthetic of death-destiny's Disturbia. Disturbia itself was basically Hell Revealed meets The Mucus Flows, while Scythe 2 combined Alien Vendetta with the amped-up feel of side-scrolling action games and the smooth flow of Knee-Deep in the Dead, perhaps. Nobody has just one source of inspiration, and it's rarely a mapper's conscious decisions that define their mapping style—it's the unconscious ones. It's only by looking at overarching trends that you can get a real sense of where all the ideas are coming from. But that also doesn't diminish the value of individual creative voices, and there's no telling what sorts of cool combinations we'll see in the future.

Lilith.pk3 (2017)

Caveats and disclaimers aside, the coolest thing about writing this article has been the realization that change is inevitable, and it's what keeps the mapping community alive. Doom is already in the middle of moving on to great new things. Even just a few years ago in the mid-2010s, when we were getting incredible releases like Valiant and Sunlust delivered to us on a silver platter, it was hard to see how things could get any better than they already were. I think a lot of us at the time were worried that Doom had reached a plateau and might start to stagnate. But here we are, as overwhelmed by the awesomeness of new releases as we've ever been—and it's not because we kept trying to fine-tune what we were already doing, but because we found a way to strike off in a new direction. Or maybe, in reality, it's a bit of both.

Total Chaos (2018)

So the old question remains: what is even Doom anymore? Fellow Doomers, I believe it is whatever you want it to be. You'll never find another game that offers a single person the artistic flexibility or the decades of accumulated design knowledge that this one does—and you can still bring something unique to the table. Go forth and create!

– NotJabba

Acknowledgements

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Screenshot on the front cover art from *Sunder megawad* (Insane_Gazebo, Map 15). Map layout on the back cover art from *Ancient Aliens megawad* (Skillsaw et al. 2016, Map 26) taken from www.wad-archive.com. Front and back cover design and ebook conversion by *elend*. Ebook created with Calibre 4.21 by *Kovid Goyal*.

Disclaimer

…and remember,

to kill the Cyberdemon

shoot it until it dies!