Diablo **(1996)**
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Abstract
Shipped out at the very end of 1996, *Diablo* became a hit PC game in 1997, selling more than two million copies and eventually becoming a flagship franchise for Blizzard Entertainment. More importantly, it proved hugely influential in three key domains. *Diablo* opened a new line in the RPG (role-playing game) genre by delineating a new action-RPG category thanks to its quick real-time pace, easy to use point-and-click interface, distinctive ambient gothic art direction powered by CD-ROM audio, and 3-D modeling technology. It popularized the procedural generation mechanics of its roguelike ancestors, for dungeon floors, enemies and items through its loot system, and served as a template for countless "Diablo clones". Finally, its online multiplayer integration built on free matchmaking and dual competitive and cooperative gameplay styles, and the widespread cheating and griefing practices that emerged from its users, set a course for the nascent Internet gaming culture.

Diablo (Blizzard North, 1996) became a hit PC game in 1997[i] with an initial print of 500,000 copies to match its phenomenal 450,000 pre-orders (Next Generation Online, 1996). Hype around the game was building from mid-1996 thanks to enthused advance press coverage and a pre-release demo circulated over the internet and in gaming magazines. *Diablo* dominated computer game sales charts for months, passing two million copies and becoming a flagship franchise for Blizzard Entertainment. It soon received an expansion, *Diablo: Hellfire* (Synergistic Software, 1997), and a successor which dwarfed its popularity: *Diablo II* (Blizzard North, 2000). These, along with other releases (the *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction* expansion [Blizzard North, 2001], *Diablo III* [Blizzard Entertainment, 2012], and other titles in development as of 2021), iterated on the first game's innovations and took the series into the 35 million copies territory. *Diablo* inspired a slew of similar games (labeled "Diablo clones" by critics) and was impactful for concretizing the action-RPG genre, for its approach to complexity and use of random generation, and for its online multiplayer integration.

Aesthetics: A Dark Gothic Fantasy

Diablo can be described as a gothic roguelike action role-playing game. While its gameplay and design are the all-important centerpiece to the discussion about its influence, it is worth covering its audiovisual aspects first. When inserting the CD-ROM into a computer's drive, the AutoPlay function automatically showed a menacing portrait of the giant titular demon with his deep, evil laugh over the ominous music before displaying the options for installing and playing the game. The mood and atmosphere were reinforced in the game's introductory cut-scene, full of slow, shadowy drawn-out images presenting an abandoned town, a crow pecking out the eye of a corpse, hanged bodies dangling in the wind, and a warrior exploring warily. The game's manual also set the tone, with gothic lettering on parchment, citations about Hell and demons from

Dante's *Inferno* (1320), Nietzsche and the Egyptian Book of the Dead among others, and a sprawling 5,000-word epic on the war between Heaven and Hell that serves as backstory to the player's immediate quest of hunting down the Lord of Terror across 16 dungeon floors.

Diablo represented a significant shift from the usual orcs-and-elves medieval fantasy imagery, drawing not only on the gothic, but on the occult and satanic as well. As players venture into the labyrinth, they meet pagan shrines, goat demons, inverted burning crosses, and pentagrams. Environments and characters were modeled and exported as fully-rendered sprites, providing a dreary realistic look and fluid animation – with violence and gore everywhere. Composer and sound designer Matt Uelmen's work is still saluted to this day as a key factor in setting the game's foreboding ambience with the soundtrack's low, deep drums meeting industrial elements, distorted noises, screeches and wails in the dungeons, and the hauntingly tragic 12-string guitar theme in the town of Tristram.

Genre: A Roguelike RPG for the Masses

"The sanctity of this place has been fouled!", your character exclaims as they enter the desecrated church's underground labyrinth. Playing *Diablo* is easy: it's a point-and-click game. Click somewhere on the stone pavement to move there; click on that door to open it. When something moves in the darkened corner of the screen beyond your tenuous ring of light, click on the creature to attack and bring it swift, gory death (most enemies die in one to three hits). If it drops something, click on it to pick it up, before another enemy arrives. Each of these horrors is weak alone, but the danger of being swarmed is ever present. Right-click to cast spells or drink the potions in your belt, a vital skill when you need urgent healing since everything unfolds in real-time. Killing enemies nets you experience points; in a matter of minutes, you gain a level and invest points into your core attributes (Strength, Magic, Dexterity and Vitality), which upgrades your combat efficiency as reported on your "character sheet" in Damage, To Hit, Mana, Life, and Armor Class (perhaps the strongest *Dungeons & Dragons* convention in there). As you collect weapons, armor pieces, gold and potions, your limited inventory space fills up, prompting return trips to buy and sell stuff in town. Even as you progress, the core gameplay remains surprisingly stable: click to attack and retreat, avoid getting swarmed, use your resources well, and buy or find better gear as you explore (and eventually, buy a replacement mouse after all that clicking).

This apparent simplicity is the reason for *Diablo*'s success, especially compared to dungeon-crawler computer role-playing games like the *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech, 1981-2001), *Might & Magic* (New World Computing, 1984-2003), and "Gold Box" series from Strategic Simulations Inc. (1988-1992). These revolve around fantasy hack-and-slash inspired by Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gary Gygax & Dave Arneson, 1974) and they are quite complicated: players must manage parties of four to six characters (which they create by a lengthy process of carefully balancing various intersections of racial bonuses, class requirements, and character attributes), remember lots of rules, statistics, and action possibilities in a complex interface, draw maps, and take notes. Some RPGs had started to move away from traditional turn-based gameplay by incorporating real-time elements, as in *Dungeon Master* (FTL Games, 1987) and series like *Eye of the Beholder* (Westwood Associates / Strategic Simulations Inc, 1991-1993). Compared to

them, *Diablo* plays more like the *Gauntlet* (Atari, 1985) action arcade game, or Blizzard's real-time strategy game, *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* (Blizzard, 1994)

Real-time or turn-based, RPGs remained difficult to approach – aside from *Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos* (Westwood Studios, 1993), with which *Diablo* shares an orientation towards simplicity. As game designer David Brevik recounts in a retrospective interview (Ars Technica, 2020), this starts with the alleviated character creation process: "We wanted to be everything that RPGs weren't, and one of those things was, we want to just press a few buttons and get right into the game." Barton & Stacks concur that the series attracted "millions of gamers who had never played any of the classic CRPGs, much less a tabletop AD&D game" (2019, p. 366). Brevik also acknowledges *Angband* (Alex Cutler & Andy Astrand, 1990) as a major influence for the development of *Diablo*. *Angband* was a popular game in the niche genre of the roguelike, austere text-and-ASCII-characters-based programs popularized by *Rogue* (Michael Toy & Glenn Wichman, 1980) and *Moria* (Robert Alan Koeneke & Jimmey Wayne Todd Jr., 1983) among others*,* and circulated on mainframe computer systems in United States university and research environments through the ARPANET. Roguelikes had a single character to manage, but more complex rules leading to limitless combinations of possibilities, with an even steeper difficulty curve.

Diablo does lift a lot from *Angband*: you must venture ever deeper into dungeon levels with increasingly powerful enemies and treasures, with limited light, to ultimately defeat Morgoth (the final boss), starting in a town with shops providing supplies. More specifically, *Diablo* took two key mechanics from the roguelike genre: *permadeath* (if your singular character dies, you must start over with a new one) and *procedural generation* (each game, a new dungeon, enemies and treasures are randomly generated), but reworked them for greater accessibility to a wide audience. You can save and reload in single-player games (which makes death not permanent), but you cannot have multiple saves, so you must still commit to your progress, just as in roguelikes. More uniquely, the game is designed to not be won on your initial attempt, as the strength of enemies and overall difficulty scale up quickly, and a first run will be full of poor choices. Instead of dying and restarting from scratch (as in typical roguelikes), you can at any time start a new game and transfer your character with all experience and possessions to take on a new randomly generated dungeon. *Diablo* actively encourages this, as there are more enemy types, quests, and unique mini-bosses than you can encounter in a single playthrough, which means starting a new game allows you to discover new content. It also means you can never get stuck in an unwinnable scenario. These design decisions substantially alleviate the difficulty, to the point where dedicated roguelike fans consider Blizzard's game to not qualify, calling it a "roguelite".

Design: A Clockwork Slot Machine Draped in Simplicity

Diablo exemplifies what Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2009, pp. 169-229) calls the *Tale-Spin* effect (after James Meehan's 1976 story generator program), which describes works that appear, on their surface, significantly less complex than they are internally. There's a lot of complexity under the clicking hood of Blizzard's game, as even the seemingly transparent statistics in To Hit % and Armor Class are cogs in a clockwork incorporating more hidden data (Faria, 2001). Comparing *Diablo* to other RPGs that display lists of statistics and virtual dice rolls and

concluding that it's too simple misses the mark: the game eschews its computer RPG and roguelike cohorts' ambition of achieving Wardrip-Fruin's (2009, pp. 299-352) *SimCity* effect (that is, systems that effectively communicate on the surface their underlying computational complexity).

Diablo's complexity manifests in its flexible 3-class system that offers distinct gameplay experiences. Warriors hate chasing archers around, rogues hate open areas where they are exposed, and sorcerers hate switching spells because of enemies' resistances to fire, lightning, or magic. On the surface, warriors can cast spells and sorcerers can use a sword and shield for instance if they invest in their Magic or Strength attributes, but the game upholds soft general orientations through its hidden clockwork: a sorcerer take 0.6 seconds to swing a sword and 0.3 to block an attack, instead of 0.45 and 0.1 respectively for a warrior (Faria 2001, 9-11). These tiny decimals make the difference between withstanding or succumbing to the swarm; *Diablo's* fast pace is not a gimmick, but the structural spindles around which the clockwork operates.

The other site of considerable complexity in the game's design is the loot system, which Brevik describes as a slot machine (Ars Technica, 2020). Opening a chest or killing an enemy grants a spin at the loot subsystem, which has very few unique, hand-built items (with their name displayed in gold). Base items (in white) can be bought or found in the early game, but the vast majority of loot will be magic (blue) items, which are randomly generated by applying a prefix and/or a suffix to a base item. These 176 modifiers are distributed across 26 groups with varying levels of quality as you progress. An iron or mithril weapon gets a bonus to hit between 6% and 10%, or 41% and 60% respectively. With 7 equipment slots (weapon, shield, helmet, armor, amulet and two rings), the possibilities are gigantic and there's always something to improve. Combined with the flexible classes, the loot subsystem creates meaningfully different experiences: a lucky sorcerer finding an Obsidian (40% resistance to all elements) Plate Mail of Sorcery (+20 magic) could consider slowly raising their Strength to eventually wear it. *Diablo*'s color-coded loot subsystem would be reused by Blizzard in *Diablo II* and *World of Warcraft* (2004), and eventually most games incorporating such tiered items logic.

Battle.net: Hell is Other People

Diablo's box exclaims "Compete FREE over the Internet", advertising Blizzard's battle.net service, which let players chat in group channels, and create or join multiplayer games of up to four players. Providing this without a subscription fee was an unusual move in 1996/1997, and battle.net was very successful (Walter, 1997). Multiplayer *Diablo* was subject to different rules: no saving or reloading, and you must restart a game every time you play (but all dungeon zones are unlocked from the start). Dying to monsters has dire consequences: your hard-earned equipment and half your gold fall on the ground. Unless a comrade resurrects you, you must restart in town, hopefully with some leftover gear or the help of friends – assuming they didn't also die – to go back and reclaim your equipment. If everyone quits the (non-persistent) game, your items disappear forever.

While the game allows cooperation, "friendly fire" means players can accidentally hurt teammates. They can also toggle a switch from "Player friendly" to "Player attack" and directly target and backstab others, making them player killers (PKs). The game rewards this with a

trophy collectible: their victim's ear. "PKing" was a major source of contention among players, as expressed in the Usenet newsgroup alt.games.diablo. As dying from a player had benign consequences (you only lose gold), some "griefer" PKs schemed to cause maximum distress, for example by luring players into packs of monsters so they die from them and lose their gear.

This was exacerbated by the much larger problem *Diablo* became infamous for: the rampant cheating that prevailed over battle.net. To reduce lag and costs, the game data was not handled on a Blizzard server, but locally on a player's computer – and hence easily tampered with. As Kücklich (2008, p. 66) writes, the "developers unprepared for the invasion of cheaters that followed its release" resulted in *Diablo* being "the showcase example of the damage cheaters can do to an online role-playing game". Cheaters could "dupe" (duplicate) items, use "trainer" programs to boost their characters to obscene levels or fabricate impossible items. Griefers installed Townkill or Autokill to instantly kill other players, even in town. Soon cheating programs were presented as a necessity for guarding against malicious cheaters and enjoying the game.

Through both its single-player and multiplayer modes, *Diablo* proved influential with its point-and-click interface, distinctive dark gothic art direction, procedural generation mechanics for environments, enemies and items, and its loot system. Parts of the game's legacy on players is yet to be documented. *Diablo* may have been the most successful attempt at turning players into gears for its clockwork to run smoothly, a precursor to contemporary games of the attention and microtransactions economy. The intersection of its aesthetics, mechanics and early online culture may also prompt ethical reflection, as foreshadowed by the game's manual, which cites Nietzsche on the "Multi player instructions" page: "He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster". What kind of player is produced by a gothic slot machine of loot draped under violence and gore, in a world where virtue has no place?

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[i] Retailer shipments started at the end of December 1996 for an early January launch, but some retailers started selling on 31 December, which Blizzard retrospectively decreed to be *Diablo*'s anniversary. See <https://diablo.fandom.com/wiki/Diablo_(Game)> for relevant discussion using interviews, period websites and press releases.