Why Gamers Can't Stop Playing First-Person Shooters

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The New Yorker:

In the fall of 1992, a twentysomething college dropout and former juvenile offender named John Carmack was hard at work in Mesquite, Texas, on a new concept for a video game. It would merge the first-person perspective of a game like Myst with the direct combat of the shooter game Wolfenstein 3-D and the multi-player capacity of Spectre, and it would do so in a more realistic three-dimensional environment than any game before it. The following year, Carmack and his five colleagues at id Software released the product of that vision: Doom.

They knew that they were on to something big. "We noticed that the janitor coming in to empty the trash had just been sitting there staring at the game—for a long time," Carmack told *Time* magazine. By August, 1996, Doom had sold two million copies, prompting *Wired* to name it "the most popular computer game of all time," and it had spawned a new sub-genre of video game, the so-called "Doom clone." Though Doom itself was not the original first-person shooter (a game in which, as Nicholson Baker wrote in his 2010 article about video games, "you are a gun who moves—in fact, you are many guns, because with a touch of your Y button you can switch from one gun to another"), it catalyzed the genre's popularity. First-person shooters are now responsible for billions of dollars in sales a year, and dominate the best-seller lists of current-generation gaming consoles.

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What is it that has made this type of game such a success? It's not simply the first-person perspective, the three-dimensionality, the violence, or the escape. These are features of many video games today. But the first-person shooter combines them in a distinct way: a virtual environment that maximizes a player's potential to attain a state that the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow"—a condition of absolute presence and happiness.

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