The Rules of the Game:

**Evil Dead II** ... Meet Thy Doom

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The Evil Is Unleashed—Science Fiction and Horror Meet the Shoot-'em-Up

Interdimensional doorways finally make possible space travel between the two moons of Mars: Phobos and Deimos. The Union Aerospace Corporation's research into interdimensional travel is a success. Or is it? In a climactic series of events, things start to go terribly wrong. Some people sent through the gateways disappear. Others return from Mars's moons as zombies. Then the moon Deimos vanishes without a trace. Enter the hero-leader of a specialized team of space marines. He sends his troops ahead of him through the interdimensional gateway; armed with a Space Marine Corporation gun, he follows them through, but once on Phobos his worldview changes. The space marines have vanished. Instead, dark surroundings envelop him, and eerie, atmospheric music accentuates the suspense-filled moments. The marine leader begins to scour the corporate installation in search of any living human being... but it's not the living who come to greet him. Seemingly out of nowhere, an array of bizarre creatures charge down dim-lit corridors and through automatic doors: zombified humans, demons, imps, minotaur-like forms, evil spirits. And so it begins. He must explore the installation to find out what happened, then get the hell out of there at any cost! Picking up weapons along the way, he attacks the monsters like a man gone berserk—with fists, chainsaw, gun, rifle, and missile launcher. His body takes a beating, but his victims also pay the price. Hundreds of those demonic bodies audibly erupt, explode, and splatter before him—and he revels in every gory detail. A sequel to *Aliens: Aliens Meets the Demons of Hell?* Or perhaps *Evil Dead II* in outer space? This is no film space. The horror of this story belongs to the cult computer game released by id Software in 1993: *Doom: Evil Unleashed*.

*Doom* reveals the complex relationships that currently exist between entertainment structures. The cross-over between popular culture forms such as films and computer games tests the clear separation between diverse media forms, and this overlap has ramifications for genre analysis. Hans Jauiss has argued that a genre's development involves both the repetition of previous conventions within a genre, and the introduction of elements that extend and alter those conventions. Each new addition to a genre calls upon "rules of the game," or sets of generic conventions, which are familiar to the audience. These rules can "be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced." Genres are viewed as language games that can introduce radical changes within a category, even leading to the "transformation into another genre through the invention of a new 'rule to the game.'" One question that needs to be addressed is what happens when the "rules of the game" extend beyond the one medium? Do genres cross media borders?

A more flexible account of genre's functions in contemporary media would acknowledge the dynamic interchange between various popular culture forms. Genre films and computer games are not closed systems drawing purely on their own genre and media specific conventions. Their "meaning" also crosses into other media. Clearly, audience familiarity with genres from related media is economically advantageous to computer game and film companies. This is especially the case given the horizontal integration currently operating across a variety of entertainment media.

Genre and media hybridization is crucial to creating a larger cross-over market. Economic motivations aside, this cross-over suggests that the
boundaries of our critical models must expand to consider cross-media hybrids such as the “interactive” computer games Under a Killing Moon and Phantasmagoria. Not only do both these games depend on mise-en-scènes and cinematography that owe a great deal to filmic modes of production, but their very structures are influenced by film genres. Under a Killing Moon combines its game format with detective, noir, and science-fiction conventions, and Phantasmagoria is a combination of the psycho-killer and splatter horror films.

While the game Doom: Evil Unleashed does not employ film production techniques in the way these other two examples do (including film actors and directors), the game does depend on player familiarity with science fiction and horror conventions, especially those evoked by Aliens (James Cameron, 1986) and Evil Dead II (Sam Raimi, 1987). As a superhybrid form that ruptures generic and medium-specific boundaries, Doom has become the blockbuster success of the gaming industry. Doom, and its equally addictive sequel Doom II: Hell on Earth, introduced a filmic quality to game spaces and thus helped to broaden the digital market. An analysis of the Doom games reveals how film genres have extended and opened their borders; the “old rules” of the generic game spill outward from films into new media products such as computer games. The Doom games created new generic rules and new audience responses: not only did the games alter the rules of the genre in their own medium, but their impact also reveals the potential computer games have for influencing the development of film genres.

In Doom we play the main protagonist (a marine). The aim of the game is to navigate this character through the three worlds of Phobos, Deimos, and Hell to discover what went wrong with the interdimensional experiments. In the process, we must also destroy all monsters that come within shooting distance. When (and if) we get to the end of the game, we will have defeated the demon hordes, returning to Earth victoriously... until the sequel Doom II. The sequel was made possible because someone left open one of the dimensional doors. The result? Demons of Hell gained access to Earth. So, it begins again. We reprise our role as hero and return to kick some more demon butt as we struggle to save humanity from being transformed into a population of zombies. The full dramatic—and at times horrific—effects of this story would have been impossible to experience without the genre’s technically innovative three-dimensional graphics and texture and the atmospheric sound effects; these effects added to the hyperviolent and hyperaction dimensions of the game.

Before Doom graced our computer screens, the game effects of id software’s Wolfenstein 3-D (1991) had transformed the two-dimensional game format known as the “platform game” into a separate genre known as the corridor game, or shoot-’em-up genre. Before Wolfenstein 3-D, platform games like Donkey Kong had stressed action that took place on a two-dimensional plane that ran parallel to the computer screen. The layout of the games resembled a mazelike ant farm; the player navigated a two-dimensional, cartoonish character through this maze while trying to avoid obstacles placed in his/her path. Corridor games like Wolfenstein 3-D were instrumental in transforming this two-dimensional platform space into a more convincing three-dimensional environment. Rather than moving characters across a series of platforms that ran parallel to the screen, the player maneuvered them through a series of corridors; the corridor format stressed movement into the simulated depth of the computer screen space. The title “corridor games” has recently been superseded by the term “shoot-’em-up” (or first-person shooter) because shoot-’em-up action is the main emphasis in much of the game play. The most common example of the corridor games, therefore, is these “shoot-’em-up,” body count variations that require the player to move through corridors shooting all enemies that come toward him/her.
However, even a game like *Wolfenstein 3-D* (which was groundbreaking for its time) remains "unrealistic" when compared to *Doom.* Further extended the conventions of the shoot-'em-up. The differences between *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3-D* are visible primarily in the ways we experience the environment that the hero, and we, immerse ourselves. In most shoot-'em-ups we adopt the viewpoint of the main protagonist. The player does not see the hero’s entire body; often only his hands and the weapon he wields are visible at the bottom of the screen. The game play logic is that our own body—which exists beyond the computer screen—"fills in" the protagonist's body. Despite the movement into a simulated three-dimensional space, in *Wolfenstein 3-D* the cartoonish, two-dimensional articulation of that three-dimensional space persists. We discover a game world based upon blocky, monotonous environments composed of minimal color arrangements and flat surfaces lacking in texture and attention to detail. *Doom,* on the other hand, envelops us in environments filled with realistic details, details that flesh out laboratories, torture rooms, infernal landscapes, and military installations. Such visual details are accompanied by sound effects: background music, the demons’ cries of attack, and groans of pain coming from the hero’s aching body. The result is an atmosphere of suspense, action, horror, and grueling tension. The movements of the hero further enhance this convincing experience of an alien world. In *Wolfenstein 3-D,* we slide robotically along the corridors and confront our enemy (a continual assault of identical, cartoon-like Nazis) with a limited range of weapons. In *Doom,* not only do we face a whole barrage of demonic forms of different shapes and sizes (complete with matching arsenal of weapons with multiple sound and visual effects), but we also move along corridors and up and down stairs in bobbing, jerky motions that simulate running actions more realistically.

*Doom’s* articulation of more realistic and atmospheric effects in the shoot-'em-up emphasizes Jauss's argument that some new additions to a genre can alter the rules so much that a new genre can emerge. Working with the conventions of many of its shoot-'em-up predecessors, *Doom* introduced enough new rules to allow for a redirection in the aesthetics of the shoot-'em-up genre. The redirection cemented the break between platforms and shoot-'em-ups instigated by *Wolfenstein 3-D* and made possible our more convincing immersion into the game narrative spaces. The game was also pivotal in broadening the conventions and expectations of the shoot-'em-up genre. *Doom* became the form that all shoot-'em-ups would aspire to and was even compared to other “classic” examples of other genres from other media. As one review noted, "To describe *Doom* as a first-person perspective action adventure would be like calling *Blade Runner* 'a film about robots.'"

The *Doom* duo triggered a craze in *Doom*-like shoot-'em-ups. These included games that repeated conventions formulaically such as *Alien vs. Predator* (also an offshoot of Dark Horse comics); *In Extremis* (which borrows heavily from *Aliens*); and *Terminator Rampage* (also influenced by the *Terminator* films). However, innovative new additions such as *Dark Forces,* *System Shock,* *Duke Nuke 'em 3D,* and *Quake* have expanded the boundaries of the genre by incorporating new features, adding an even greater realism and more intensive form of gameplay. Graphics and sound effects have become even more detailed and three-dimensional, and the character movement includes greater mobility: aside from walking, running, and turning, heroes can now also look up and down, jump, swim, and crouch.

Besides influencing the genre within its own medium, *Doom’s* entry onto the shoot-'em-up scene technically and creatively bridged the gap between the genres and styles of two separate media. The enhanced graphics, special effects, digital sound effects, musical track, as well as the level
and articulation of violence and "realism," amplified the shoot-'em-up genre's connections with contemporary Hollywood cinema. Discussing *Doom*'s influences, Jay Wilbur, the chief executive officer of id, stated that "[id] wanted to make an *Alien*-like game that captured the fast-paced action, brutality and fear of those movies. Another fine influence was the movie *Evil Dead II*—chainsaws and shotguns are an unbeatable combination!" While the games draw upon various science fiction and horror film conventions, these two specific film sources—*Aliens* and *Evil Dead II*—stand out when playing both *Doom* games.

**The Doom Duo, the Shoot-’em-Up, and Action Sensibilities**

While emerging from a different tradition, many conventions of action cinema intersect with those of the shoot-'em-up game genre, reflecting the hybrid nature of entertainment media. In *Aliens*, the hero Ripley goes back to an alien-infested planet with a specialized marine squadron to discover the whereabouts of the inhabitants (who have been used as incubators for the alien spawn). The film's hybrid structure collapses the boundaries of several genres—science fiction, horror, and the combat film—into one by incorporating all these genre forms into an overriding action cinema trajectory. For example, a dominant plot concern of the film is a science fiction interest in corrupt corporations that misuse technology and science and endanger humanity. Often, however, this story is frozen for the sheer spectacle displays of bodies, special effects, violence, and blood-pumping action. The film invites us to take part in a series of adrenaline-rushing scenes that focus on chases, explosions, gun blasts, and spectacular special effects as humans hunt aliens and aliens stalk humans.

A comparison of action cinema with the shoot-’em-ups reveals interesting parallels. Shoot-'em-ups (along with beat-'em-ups like *Mortal Kombat*, *Street Fighter*, and *Rise of the Robots*) corner the action game market. As with action cinema, both game genres reveal their capacity for generic surfing. Examples of this surfing include the referencing of science fiction (*Rise of the Robots* and *Duke Nuke'Em 3D*), science fiction-horror (*Doom, Doom II*), war/combat (*Wolfenstein 3-D*), science fiction-mediieval-horror (*Quake*), and martial arts and fantasy (*Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter, Virtual Fighter*). The articulation of the "'em" becomes the means by which iconography associated with film genres is called upon. The "them" gives form and shape to the visuals, particularly to the environment we move around in, and to the appearance of the antagonists that we destroy. In *Doom* and *Doom II* the visual generic references vacillate between an array of creatures—specters, imps, cacodemons, hell knights (thus calling up horror iconography and character types), as well as a series of cyberdemons, arachnotrons, and corporate military zombiemen (which merge science fiction-horror components with the combat film). In addition, we're thrust into science fiction environments that consist of moon bases, technological gadgets, and teleporters; these are coupled with an atmosphere dominated by dim lighting and eerie sound effects that recall the ghoulish backdrops that dominate in horror films. As with action cinema, generic specificity of an iconographic, narrative, or thematic kind is no longer central to the genre. The only stable, defining characteristics that exist are those prolonged moments of pure, adrenaline-rushing action.

The role required of the game player adds a further action cinema sensibility to the game experience. Action cinema is defined by the physically active roles required of the protagonists. This genre of games is also classified according to the dominant action it requires of its player: to shoot "them" up. The games not only contain the role of sole vigilante against a multitude of no-good futuristic demonic spawn (complete with arsenal of weapons), but also focus on spectacles of action
encapsulated in the never-ending gun battles and fist fights that players engage in as they fend off their enemies. The physiques of some of the “human” baddies (“The Heavy Weapon Dude” and “The Shot Gun Guy”) also reflect the connection with action cinema. Their chunky, muscular bodies and assortment of machine guns and bullets recall characters who populate action films like Commando and Broken Arrow. Action cinema, however, focuses its spectacles of action around the bodies of its muscular, half-naked protagonists—the most popular being Bruce Willis, Jean Claude Van Damme, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. But in shoot-’em-up action games like Doom, Duke Nuke ’em, Quake, and Dark Forces, we are invariably the protagonists. Rather than seeing a display of main protagonist hyperbodies on the computer screen, we have to make do with the knowledge that our own muscular, well-oiled, and sweaty bodies occupy the real space beyond the screen.

The action of the Doom games has enough in common with action films to allow for a two-way flow between these media. Universal Studios had been seriously considering producing a film version of Doom with Arnold Schwarzenegger—the man who brought the capital A into Action—everyone’s favorite for the lead role.8 Jay Wilbur saw the Doom film as likely following the game’s lead in providing “mainly, just nonstop seat-of-your-pants sweat-of-your-brow action.” 9 Contemporary blockbuster movies’ greater emphasis on action and spectacle at the expense of tighter, more literary-oriented narratives is no new phenomenon to the cinema. It is, however, an aesthetic that has become more pronounced because of the exchange with computer and arcade game formats. The chase and action scenes that take place in corridorlike spaces in films like Die Hard 3 and Under Siege 2, for example, reflect a certain “shoot-’em-up” sensibility.

While these overlaps reveal the extent of the convergence of popular culture forms, the games themselves provide a different experience to that provided by action films. In action cinema, no matter how economically pruned down the narrative and no matter how often the story is frozen for the spectacles of action, the action is still placed within a rigidly ordered sequence of narrative events. For example, in the final, climactic scene in Aliens (after Ripley and Newt’s tension-riddled and action-packed “escape” from the alien mother’s den), we find ourselves engrossed in the duel between the alien mother and Ripley. As viewers, we are enticed by the action in its own right: the build up of nail-biting suspense as the alien mother stalks Newt; Ripley’s exit to change into her “transformer/terminator” outfit; and the final explosive encounter as alien and human engage in hand-to-hand combat. However, the presentation of these events is unchangeable. And, eventually, this action sequence returns us to a storyline concerned with unraveling events about the Corporation, Ripley and Newt, and the aliens.

In the shoot-’em-ups (overt connections to film aside), game players would profoundly resent the freezing of the visuals, spectacle, and action for the sake of the linear unraveling of the story. The Doom storyline outlined earlier may sound like the foundations of a great action-science-fiction-horror film and may soon be one, but when we play this game (and others like it), we desire different experiences than we do as film spectators. In game play reality is the last thing a Doom player thinks of when in the throes of shoot-’em-up action for the higher purpose of saving humanity. Intricate science fiction-horror plot details are difficult to glean (and of little interest) once within the game itself. The primary directive is to exterminate (and revel in exterminating) the barrage of aliens as they pour out of corridors, secret pas sageways, and multidimensional doors and come straight for us. As protagonists, we work according to the principle: “shoot first, and shoot anything that moves—and don’t even bother about asking questions later.” The game revels in those mo-
ments of spectacle so typical of action cinema, but now the action has become the essence of the game experience.

The Aesthetics of Gore: Doom Meets Evil Dead II

Aliens' impact on Doom is reflected in the way the action tendencies in the game move beyond the generically specific. The influence of Evil Dead II, however, draws Doom back to the specifics of horror. In Aliens and Evil Dead II, different kinds of action spectacle are evoked. The display of bodies and violence is a feature that sprawls across several genres and is present especially in action cinema. However, horror differentiates its brand of body horror and bodily destruction through the self-conscious play and graphic articulation of the visual (and aural) sense of horror. Splatter horror films like Evil Dead II amplify the gore factor that runs across many contemporary horror films; the audience responds to spectacles of action that radiate around bodies in revolting states of destruction. This visual assault of splatter horror aims at extracting an emotive response from the audience and targets a gut-level reaction. This reaction vacillates between revulsion and comedy and, like action, is always at the expense of the narrative. The playful intensification of the sound and visual effects of gore and the splatters of blood and flesh in Doom and Doom II reveal an undeniable debt to the erupting and audibly splattering bodies of the Evil Dead films, particularly the over-the-top quality of the second film. The Evil Dead films and Doom computer games depend on games played with the spectator; these games converge around gore and, through this gore, around issues of genre.

The “buckets of blood” attitude to bodily destruction finds its perfect expression in Evil Dead II in a frenzied series of morbidly hysterical scenes. The story begins in a way that recalls the prequel. A couple—Ash and Linda—arrive at a cabin in the woods only to discover that an evil has been unleashed from the Realm of Darkness. Only minutes into the film, Ash’s girlfriend Linda becomes possessed. After Linda’s death, a group of travelers join Ash and, one by one, similarly become possessed, leaving Ash behind to play the hero. From the beginning of the film, we are thrust into what can only be described as a rollercoaster ride of gore and splatter. Three examples will suffice. Gore moment number 1: Within the first few minutes of the film, Ash dispenses with his demonically possessed girlfriend by chopping off her head with an axe; later that evening, he sees her decaying, decapitated body performing pirouettes in the woods outside the cabin—with her head rolling along the ground in accompaniment. In a series of events that deal with this struggle between the living (Ash) and the dead (Linda), Linda’s body (minus the head) attacks Ash with a buzzing chainsaw. But since Linda’s head is lying on a bench in the tool shed, her body has no access to vision, and she accidentally slices her own body in half from the neck down. The result? Every inch of space in the tool shed is flooded with sprays of blood. Gore moment number 2: Ash’s hand becomes possessed. The solution? First he stabs it, tacking it onto the floor. Then he saws it off with the chainsaw, complete with more blood-spraying effects as the blood gushes over Ash’s face, and he victoriously cries out, “Who’s laughing now?” Gore moment number 3: Ash tries to push a demon spawn into the basement by slamming the trapdoor down on its head. He succeeds. In the process, however, one of the demon’s eyeballs vacates its socket at a super velocity, making its way full speed across the room and into the mouth (and, presumably, down the throat) of a hysterical, screaming character. While blood may not be involved, the abject events we witness make our own blood curdle and our flesh tingle in a combination of revulsion and humor.

We are invited to participate in a film that takes the violence and gore of horror cinema to their absolute sensory limits. The horror genre is reduced to moments of excess: excess of style and excess gore. Besides the gut reactions that the
film’s bloody sequences provoke in us, this sensory involvement is also present on a stylistic level—especially through the hyperkinetic camera movements that thrust our vision into the narrative space. This is nowhere more evident than in the high-velocity tracking shot used in the beginning of the film. The camera glides rapidly through the woods and cabin, then collides into Ash, sending him spinning in a clockwise direction at an incredible speed. All along, sound effects amplify the visual disorientation that assaults us.

In calling upon *Evil Dead II* and the tradition of the “gross-out” splatter film, the *Doom* games deploy the destructive sensibilities of the splatter film. Many shoot-'em-ups also have this crucial link to the splatter factor of horror cinema; while the narrative and iconography may alter, the combination of violence, gore, and splatter remains stable. But by the time this spectacle of gore emerges in *Doom* and *Doom II*, it has reached a state of transcendental purity. In a homage to Ash, the *Doom* hero has the option of replacing his hand with a chainsaw appendage while (again, like Ash) also having access to a shotgun. With these two weapons (among many others), the hero exposes the game player to a series of visual and sound extravaganzas that circulate around bodies in states of destruction. Masses of these evil beings erupt and explode as they become the recipients of the hero’s punches, chainsaw attacks, and shotgun bursts. Even the visual style of the games recalls *Evil Dead II*: the high-velocity, out-of-control, point-of-view tracking shots of *Evil Dead II* find their parallel in the point-of-view movements of the game hero. *Evil Dead II* and the *Doom* games invite us to interact with an experience that is intent on the aestheticization of gore.

*Lights, Camera, Interaction!* . . .

*Let the Games Begin*

Despite overlaps, it’s inevitable that the shift of a genre from one medium into another alters the presentation of various conventions and formulæ. In the shift of films to games, a main difference is found in the role of the audience/game player. In film the extent of our physical involvement within the film space is limited; a linear narrative exists before we see it and has been preorganized in a precise temporal sequence. Unlike their filmic counterparts, computer games provide us with “narratives” that transform and extend the nature of film spectatorship. In computer games, rather than perceiving the narrative through the protagonists of a predetermined narrative, we often are the protagonists.

In her exploration of the human-computer interface, Brenda Laurel attempts to articulate the precise nature of the interaction between human and computer. She imagines a situation: if, during a theatrical performance, audience members were taken up onto a stage and made to perform, their relationship to the performance would shift from that of spectators to that of “audience-as-active-participant.” Computer games display precisely this sense for theatrical and performative possibilities that allow the game player a more active role. The player must interact with and propel the narrative events that are taking place. The programming of the games appears to offer limitless (though often highly controlled) options and choices in the sequence of these narrative events. In *Doom* and *Doom II*, the temporal structure branches off like a web into multiple directions that break up any signs of strict linearity. When re-playing a specific game level, for example, we can change the direction and order of our character’s movements; we can take different routes; we can fight a different sequence of demons; we can die in a variety of ways, then return to the game reborn again. In other words, the same “story” is retold—or, rather, replayed—in a series of different ways, and the notion of the singular, linear narrative no longer holds sway.

This alteration and loosening up of closed narrative structures can be taken further still through the use of patches or .wad files. While not allowing the player to alter the actual game play itself, the
.wad files can modify the sound effects and the level data that affect the look and texture of the game environment (the walls, lifts, doors, ceilings, sky, landscape, etc.) and can also transform the appearance of the aliens. If we were to categorize the Doom games according to film genre categories that place a great deal of emphasis on setting and iconographic details, the .wad files would actually allow the player to take an active part in altering the genre of the game itself. For example, popular .wads include “Porndoom” (which decorates the game architecture with pornographic images of women, thus aligning the game to pornographic genres); “Pacdoorn” (which transforms some of the nasty demons into not-so-nasty-looking Pac Men, therefore reliving the game’s links with the platform game format); “Simpsons Doom” (which swaps the characters of Doom with characters from The Simpsons); and “Aliens Doom” (which samples Hudson’s voice from the film Aliens and transforms the Doom demons into the film’s aliens). In other words, despite the plot layout as outlined on the Doom game cover, in the game itself, due to cheats, .wads, and general game play, the “narrative,” character types, setting, iconography, and sound effects do not stay still long enough for us to impose on the games the generic form of categorization more traditionally aligned with film.

The types of interaction required of the spectator and game player therefore differ between the two media. However, it is problematic to assume that computer games provide an active type of involvement and a “truer” form of interaction, while films only offer the audience passive levels of engagement. Brenda Laurel has suggested that the notion of “interactivity” is a troublesome term. One assumption is that “interactivity” is viewed as the “unique cultural discovery of the electronic age.” Interaction can, however, also be achieved in other ways—including “sensory immersion” into an illusory space. This idea of interactivity and immersion depends greatly on feeling as if you are participating; in this process of participation, the imagination and “playful instincts” have an important role to play in collapsing the boundaries between illusion and reality. In the human-computer interface experienced in playing computer games, the illusion or representation “invite(s) us to extend our minds, feelings, and senses to envelop” the games as if they were real.

While not a computer game, Evil Dead II extends just such an invitation. Not only are we thrust into the narrative space through our emotional reaction to the gore, but our senses are also plunged into the film every time our point of view merges with the view of the camera as it races through the narrative space.

“Interaction” encompasses a dual function. The first is concerned with an interactivity particular to the computer game medium. This consists of a more active interaction in shaping the game “narrative.” The second form of interaction is not restricted by medium limits. Besides reflecting our willingness to immerse ourselves in illusionary spaces as if they were real, interaction also depends upon our more active and critical engagement with these fictive spaces. The Doom games and Evil Dead II achieve this in the way they dare us to become engrossed in a game about genre.

In particular, Doom II and Evil Dead II ask us to consider the function of the sequel in a genre. Jauss has argued that the relationship between author, the work, and the public is never a passive one. Active participation of the public is central to the production of a genre’s meaning. Evil Dead II and Doom II acknowledge the central role the audience plays in actively shaping and participating in a genre’s conventions.

Generic Game Play and the Sequel:
Evil Dead II

In her book Broken Mirrors, Broken Minds, Maitland McDonagh makes a comment about Dario Argento that could easily have been written about
Sam Raimi. Argento's films, she argues, often "sublimate their narratives to mise-en-scenes whose escalating complexity is characterized... by a series of baroque stylish devices." This function of excess is an important component of the post-1980s horror film and, as McDonagh points out regarding Argento, excess does not just imply "more." Excess involves a process that causes the mind of the spectator to rebel because expectations have been shattered and everything does not seem to make sense "according to the rules." In *Evil Dead II*, Raimi produces precisely such a response from the spectator, forcing us to stand outside the film and interrogate its structure.

*Evil Dead II* is preoccupied with its status as a sequel. This fact becomes one of the most challenging aspects of the film's interaction with its audience. In the prequel *The Evil Dead*, a group of vacationing teenagers—including Ash and Linda—arrive at a cabin in the woods. In the cabin they discover a book called *The Book of the Dead*, which unleashes an evil spirit from the depths of hell itself. This evil spirit attacks and possesses the characters—including Ash's girlfriend Linda—leaving Ash alone to fend off the forces of darkness. The film ends with Ash emerging from the cabin in broad daylight. We, and he, assume that his struggle has been successful, but in the final shot of the film we are plummeted into a high-speed tracking shot that we associate with a demon's viewpoint as it races through the woods and the cabin and, finally, toward Ash. And so the film ends.

In case the viewer missed the first film, the opening scene of *Evil Dead II* provides the audience with a brief narration that outlines the significance of *The Book of the Dead*. This narration commences: "Legend has it that it was written by the dark ones. Necronomicon ex Mortus, roughly translated *Book of the Dead*. The book served as a passageway to the evil world beyond." After this opening sequence, the film's status as a continuation of the first film is further driven home. The film is literally marked as sequel when a "II" insignia stamps itself visibly and audibly through the "Evil Dead" titles. From its beginning, the film tells us "I am a sequel" and establishes an expectation in the audience of the sequel as repetition of the "original."

After the opening narration and the opening titles, we're introduced to the two main characters, Ash and Linda, as they drive up toward the cabin. This sequence presents us with a minifilm that is quite self-consciously presented as a reduced version of the events that occurred in the first film, *The Evil Dead*. We are introduced to the same lead actor (Bruce Campbell) with the same name (Ash); in a similar drive through similar woods with a similar girlfriend, they come across a similar bridge and arrive at a similar cabin in the woods; then, as the ominous feeling of doom mounts, they profess their love to each other in a similar way (with the narrative dwelling on the locket that Ash gives to Linda). All these cues wreak of copy, formula, and repetition of the "original." On the one hand, we have this familiarity to cling to. On the other, something is not quite right and our expectations for the familiar are undercut. A series of details begin to accumulate and the opening scene not only focuses on points of repetition and familiarity that connect the film to *The Evil Dead*, but also introduces several variations that contradict its status as sequel.

The differences pile up. While Ash is familiar, the girlfriend is not the same. She has the same name—Linda—but is played by a different actress. Additionally, this cannot be the identical event depicted in *The Evil Dead* because none of the other characters are present. In the sequel, only Ash and Linda make the trip to the cabin. An alternative interpretation would be that it's just the beginning of another, different story also starring Bruce Campbell, who appears as a "different guy" who coincidentally happens to be named Ash. But things are still not quite right. If Campbell plays some "other guy," and if the story taking place in
the first five minutes is taking place sometime after the events in the first film, then the bridge that Linda and Ash drive by (which was destroyed in The Evil Dead) should not be present at the beginning of Evil Dead II. Raimi presents us with a puzzle to be solved, and this puzzle dares us to become involved in a game of actively interrogating the film's structure.

The beginning of the film therefore introduces us to false leads that depend on our sense of generic and sequel expectations. There are enough familiar elements to suggest a reworking of The Evil Dead as a reduced flashback. However, the opening story also establishes itself as a new story that is intent on denying the fact that Ash was ever in the woods in The Evil Dead, that is, until the death and burial of the possessed girlfriend (which occurred halfway through the first film and occurs only minutes into the sequel). At this point, Evil Dead II picks up at the precise point that The Evil Dead left off: with the high-speed tracking shot through the cabin headed at breakneck speed for Ash. This movement seems to send the camera and our vision spinning in all sorts of acrobatic directions, making us feel as if we truly are on a rollercoaster ride that takes us on a one-way trip back to the prequel. It takes about seven minutes before our desire for repetition appears to be unproblematically fulfilled, and the film suddenly seems to remember it is a sequel. Or does it? Again, issues of generic repetition are complicated because, even in this tracking shot, the beginning of the film again presents itself as a film that both is and is not a sequel, a narrative that is and is not a narrative continuation. In the "sequel" version of the tracking shot, the camera propels forward in an "over-the-top" way that is eager to establish its superiority to the first film. The camera does not stop once it arrives at Ash's location; it follows Ash as he is sent flying and somersaulting through the air.

This poses some riddling questions. Is this a sequel to the first film, or is this a continuation of the events that we see in the opening sequence of the beginning of Evil Dead II? Is the opening scene, perhaps, the prequel to the rest of the film? Is this a copy or an original? Are these old rules or new rules? Somehow, the film is all these things, with two "narratives" (one present in the prequel and one in the sequel) coexisting and struggling with each other and with the audience. The contradictions, the plays on repetition, the undercutting of expectations, all have the effect of making us contemplate the production of generic "meaning" and how we extract it. Rather than passively accepting Evil Dead II as a sequel, the film invites the audience to ask the question "what is a sequel?" and furthermore "what is a sequel's relationship to genre?" Raimi refuses to give us a continuation or sequel that is about sameness and repetition. Instead, the beginning of the film plays on the idea of a sequel as similar to and different from the original. Like genre films, Evil Dead II draws on our expectations while simultaneously altering and adjusting those anticipated conventions and patterns. As extensions of both The Evil Dead and of the horror genre, Evil Dead II's refusal to repeat formulaically the prequel explores the generic process as a dynamic system. While doing this, the film does not deny us the thrill of the ride that we are taking.

Generic Game Play and the Sequel: Doom II

The kind of interaction involved in our critical immersion in Evil Dead II suggests an audience interaction that exists at the level of generic game play. While the notion of game play and interactivity may be more literal in the Doom games (in the way the medium itself embraces player interaction), interaction also works on this second level in computer games. This level of interactivity depends on the audience's critical awareness and recognition of the way the games self-reflexively and deliberately manipulate generic conventions. Both Doom games exhibit an obvious playfulness in the
references they make to *Evil Dead II*. Besides the splatter sensibility already mentioned, the most obvious allusion is the way both games allow the hero to part with his hand and brandish a chainsaw arm in the style of Ash in *Evil Dead II*. Beyond this, as with *Evil Dead II*, the sequel *Doom II* develops a tongue-in-cheek attitude that goes further than *Doom*. Not only does the latter game acknowledge some of its sources, but, like *Evil Dead II*, it also explores the relationship that exists between generic repetition and generic variation in the extension of a genre's vocabulary.

Taking its lead from *Evil Dead II*, *Doom II* plays a clever game with the genre of its own medium. *Doom II* consists of thirty levels (and two secret levels) located on Earth, Mars, and Hell. Having traveled through fourteen levels of gore, destruction, and mayhem, the hero arrives at the richly textured and layered settings of *Doom II*’s "Industrial Zone" (level 15). Having undergone some genuinely hair-raising and heart-pumping moments fighting an array of imps and demons (to the accompaniment of atmospheric music tracks, sound effects, and suspense-filled horror lighting), the player enters not one but two secret levels hidden behind a secret doorway on this level. This secret doorway transports us to the corridors of *Wolfenstein 3-D*, id Software’s predecessor to *Doom*. The first secret level ("Wolfenstein") takes us back to the first level of *Wolfenstein 3-D*, and the second ("Grosse") to the final level of *Wolfenstein 3-D*. After the hyperrealism of *Doom II*, we find ourselves in the rigidly angular, monotonously decorated and colored corridors of *Wolfenstein 3-D*, where we battle against two-dimensional images of soldiers that all look exactly the same. This shift of game experience is both a treat and a disappointment. It is hysterically funny and quite jolting. The atmospheric game play of *Doom II* is suddenly replaced by a type of game play that had, before the emergence of *Doom*, been quite innovative and exciting. But to quote one reviewer who grappled with the differences in the game play experience between *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3-D*: "Next to the horrors of *Doom*, *Wolfenstein* is a front seat at a Johnny Mathis concert (or something like that)."23

One of the most disorienting experiences while in the *Wolfenstein 3-D* levels occurs when touches of *Doom II* spill into this game predecessor, making the "3-D" addition to the "Wolfenstein" title seem quite hollow when compared to changes that have been introduced into the genre since *Wolfenstein 3-D*. Occasionally we encounter this spill as three-dimensional decor (e.g., in the textured, 3-D trees and skies) that invades the two-dimensional space of the *Wolfenstein 3-D* world. We are also continually reminded of *Doom II*s presence through the superweapons still at our disposal; these contrast to the limited and primitive weapons used in *Wolfenstein 3-D*. The player also experiences the occasional and unexpected minotaur figures that charge forward, catching the player off guard by introducing a blast of suspense and horror that is so much the trademark of *Doom II* (now buried deep in other levels of the game). The most spine-tingling moment that escapes into this secret "Wolfenstein" level from the depths of *Doom II* occurs when the cyberdemon (the most awesome creature in the game) comes seemingly out of nowhere—intent on never allowing us access to the *Doom* levels again. The processes of generic variation emphasized in this exchange between predecessor and successor reflect the crucial impact that innovative graphics and design had on the development of this shoot-'em-up genre during and post-*Doom*.

The play on the *Wolfenstein 3-D* secret levels reveals an awareness of an audience familiar with the generic conventions of these games and with the filmic tradition being referred to. As Brophy states in reference to the contemporary horror film, we are dealing with a genre that “mimics itself mercilessly” and exposes a “violent awareness of itself as a saturated genre.”24 Exactly the same point may be made of the shoot-'em-up genre in
the wake of the *Doom* games, which are to the shoot-‘em-up what the *Evil Dead* films were to the splatter film. As Brophy argues in response to the horror film, *Doom II* in particular recognizes that the player is aware of its place within the shoot-‘em-up genre’s historical development. It “knows that you’ve seen it before. It knows that you know it knows you know.” In laying out its film and game predecessors, the makers of *Doom II* are telling us that they have outdone their predecessors. The predecessors, however, are not only *Wolfenstein* and earlier, more primitive shoot-‘em-ups; they also include *Doom II*’s prequel *Doom*. This idea of an example saturated with allusions that stress its generic superiority is driven home quite jarringly when we roam back through the door that separates the *Wolfenstein 3-D* levels from level fifteen of *Doom II*: we shift from the angular, simplistic visuals into the labyrinthine, weaving complexities and hyperreal environments of *Doom II*—and its accompanying mayhem, monsters, and ultragore.

In an interview on his film *The Evil Dead*, Sam Raimi discussed the role of allusion in the horror film. Discussing Wes Craven’s allusion to *Jaws* (via a poster) in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), Raimi stated that in Craven’s film the poster was there to make the point that *Jaws* was “pop” horror whereas *The Hills Have Eyes* was “real” horror. The subsequent appearance of a *The Hills Have Eyes* poster in the basement in *The Evil Dead* undercuts its predecessor by suggesting that, by 1983, it was Craven’s film that produced “pop” horror and Raimi’s that presented “real” horror. It is precisely this sentiment that the makers of *Doom II* are expressing, and often, as with Raimi’s films, with a wicked sense of humor. The inclusion of the “Wolfenstein” level asks us to ponder the differences between the “real” game horror of *Doom II* and the “pop” game horror of *Wolfenstein 3-D*.

The “Grosse” level (which is also the exit level out of level 15) introduces a different game—one filled with humor. Having successfully pulverized the cyberdemon, in order to exit level 15 and move on to the “Suburbs” (level 16), we must enter the exit room. In this room we find four identical cartoonlike figures hanging from nooses on a futuristic gallows in the center of the room. To complete this level the player must first shoot these characters down, releasing them from the nooses that keep their two-dimensional, primitive, cardboard-cutout little bodies swaying in midair. These “cute” little additions to the level have some historical significance. These characters are clones of “Commander Keen,” another id Software product dating back to 1990; *Commander Keen* even predated *Wolfenstein 3-D* and reigned back in the days when id was still making platform games. Again, the joke involves *Doom II*’s sense of historicity. The game asks its audience to celebrate the advances made in extending the shoot-‘em-up genre’s rules.

The humor stays with us until the end of the game. When we enter level 30, an onslaught of demons attacks us. Finally, we make our way to the doorway decorated with a ram’s head—the doorway that separates us from the exit to the entire game. Once beyond the ram (in my case, thanks to the cheat codes that not only made me invincible and powered me up with every weapon under the *Doom* sun but also allowed me to walk through walls), we find ourselves face to face with John Romero, or, more to the point, his head on a stake. Romero was one of the game’s programmers and one of the individuals who made every *Doom II* player’s life both a joy and a nightmare for many weeks and months of torturous game play. Having played (and suffered because of having played) the game, we can now destroy one of its makers. Just as post-1970s horror cinema treads a fine line that distinguishes it from comedy, *Doom II* plays off the same sentiment. The game injects a refreshing bout of comedy into the shoot-‘em-up and, taking its cue from *Evil Dead II*, is very much a virtuoso performance that displays the ease with which it has perfected and developed the conven-
tions that preexisted it and into which it has injected new life.

In all these scenarios, a game is being played with the spectator, a game that depends on audience familiarity with conventions of the genre—a game that bargains on outdoing and outgrossing examples that preceded it. It is a game that celebrates its genre's rules while also actively altering those rules, inviting the audience to acknowledge that alteration. Those exhilarating moments in which the Doom II game player is transported back to a past time when Wolfenstein 3-D ruled the shoot-'em-up genre are precisely about such a ploy. In response to the horror film, William Paul has argued that "there are values in gross-out horror...(that have) more to do with the immediacy of play than the delayed satisfaction of ultimate purpose." For both film spectator and game player, the experience of Evil Dead II, Doom, or Doom II is about an immediacy of play that greatly depends on audience recognition of the conventions of horror and shoot-'em-ups—conventions that celebrate, parody, and take to absurd limits the codes drawn upon.

Popular culture forms have evolved into a complex web of interconnections, connections that often refuse the enclosed, self-contained structures imposed by many genre critics. The movements within and beyond generic and medium borders fluctuate in perpetual motion, refusing to be contained in any definitive way. Aliens, Evil Dead II, and the Doom games reveal the way the boundaries between film genres, computer game genres, and other media are continually shifting as they intersect with diverse media in a multitude of ways. This nexus of popular media will further expand as vertical mergers in the entertainment industries continue. Our methods of analysis need to be revised to consider generic processes in light of cross-media overlaps. John Hartley has discussed the blurring of boundaries currently witnessed in television, describing this cross-fertilization between different types of programming as categories of "dirt." Within these categories of dirt, it becomes difficult to discern a clear separation between one text and another. It is at this point of intersection, in this "ambiguity of boundaries" rather than in the "clear oppositions and demarcations," that the "power of (generic) dirt lies."29

Notes

This chapter was written in 1994 at the peak of Doom frenzy.
1 Hans Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 88.
2 Ibid., 90.
3 The economic viability entailed in this intersection of entertainment media has not been missed by the Spielberg, Geffen, and Katzenberg "Dreamworks" project. The Dreamworks company focuses on the integration of a variety of popular culture forms—including films and computer games.
4 This cross-over and intermingling of genres is, of course, nothing new. The difference is that in recent years this trend has become more pronounced. Not only have generic borders become more malleable, but this cross-over is now occurring on a grander, blockbuster level that emphasizes spectacle.
5 The same may be said now of the Doom games following the release of new breeds of shoot-'em-up realism in games like Duke Nukem 3D and Quake in 1996.
8 "Doom the Movie!" PC Zone (December 1994): 8. The question of who will be the lead protagonist of Doom the film was a topic of great discussion on the Net, and Schwarzenegger was a hot favorite.
Laurel states that "people who are participating in the representation aren't audience members anymore. It's not that the audience joins the actors on stage; it's that they become actors—and the notion of the "passive" observer disappears." *Computers as Theatre* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991), 17.

In relation to *The Evil Dead*, Scott McQuire argues that "the movement of this film is structured around a series of dares, the tension spring-boarding the viewer into realms of dismemberment and disembowelment. You wonder how far the film will go. It dares you to watch it and go further and constantly takes your breath away with its obviousness and its unrestrained transgressions, its (technical) sophistication and its (narrative) bluntness." See "Horror: Re-makes and Offspring," *Antithesis* 1(1) (1987): 23. This dare factor and transgression of boundaries goes even further in the sequel.

Similarly, on this issue of variation, the tracking shot may duplicate the ending of the first film, but the two holes present in the cabin door in the first film (the damage caused when Ash was attacked by a demon who thrust his hand through the door) are no longer there.

This question of original or copy is further complicated by the fact that the film reveals the impossibility of the existence of such a thing as "the original," especially as far as genre is concerned. While the use and assimilation of conventions may reveal originality and may instigate new directions in a genre, genre films depend greatly on that which has gone before, even if only to contest or reject a previous form. As an example, while *Evil Dead II*'s absurd, darkly hysterical, and over-the-top nature may appear original and new within the context of the horror genre, this morbid humor owes a great deal to the tradition of EC comics, which influenced the deconstructive tendencies of contemporary horror cinema. For more information on the comic book/horror film connections, see Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968–88* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), 18, 207; Farrah Anwar, "Bloody and Absurd," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 57(683) (December 1990): 347; Philip Brophy, "Horrality—The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films," *Screen* 27 (January-February 1986): 12.

Steve Neale has convincingly argued that in genre, repetition and difference are inseparable and that "they function as a relation." Therefore, rather than revealing the generic process as "repetition and difference," it is more appropriate to claim for "repetition in difference." See *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 50. This point is aptly illustrated in the opening minutes of *Evil Dead II*.


Brophy, "Horrality," 3.

Ibid., 5.


id Software is, of course, also presenting us with an homage to the company's own contribution to the development of the shoot-'em-up genre—particularly its crucial role in transforming its own platform game *Commander Keen*, to corridor/shoot-'em-up games like *Wolfenstein 3-D* and the *Doom* games.


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