Diametric Oppositions: a deconstruction of the Diablo-clone ARPG genre

ToC

1. Introduction and Scope
2. Design Analysis
3. Developments and Optimizations
4. Case study: Path of Exile
5. Resolutions and Revolutions
6. In adieu
7. Introduction and scope

1.1 A scene of blood

Click, flicker, and attack. Animations are abound as the player avatar attacks a horde of monsters. Maybe minions are under the player’s command, summoned beasts of nature or ungodly abominations, freshly arisen. Maybe the player themselves are in the fray, fresh blood flying furious as the player slashes and hacks his way through the mob, his vitality topped off with that of his enemies. There are options, choices; a magical or a brutish approach, an assassin’s step or a brigand’s strike. Enemies fall beneath the very feet of the player, the character decked out in powerful gear, renowned equipment, and abundance empowering auras.

Soon, in either split seconds or through calculated encounters, the player stands still for a moment, soaking it in. There is likely blood and gore, a scene graced with the visage of murder. Corpses lie strewn across the corridors, a literal trail of blood behind the character. Aside from growls of forthcoming beasts and horrors crafting the ambiance, there is also a distraction from the gratuitous death. On the ground, objects sparkle, shiny shiny. Weapons, armors, gems, powerups, more, any number of these lie on the ground, ready for the character to discover, identify, analyze, and should the loot be of better value, equip and utilize.

The bodies adequately pillaged, the player takes his randomly generated loot and heads to the next mob, ready to kill it even faster or more vigorously than before.

Thusly describes but a scene in one of many randomized, loot based, action role playing games that exist in the world, often inspired by the granddaddy of them all, Diablo 1 and 2.

1.2 I’m not here for the murder, I’m here for the murderous atmosphere

While not all of the Diablo clones are so bloody, it’d be harder to not think of one even worse; from mass torture dungeons in Diablo inspired Path of Exile (PoE) to similar grim-dark action role playing game (ARPG) Dark Souls, violence in copious amounts can be found rooted in the gaming and RPG traditions. This is not a condemnation of the fact, merely an observation on its efficacy in presenting a vicarious and immersive experience.

Acknowledging this begins one to wonder why the connection is so inherent. Answers are considered. Its derivations from the RPG conventions helps to explain the death and murder, as progression in classical RPG style related itself to grinding easily, needing to gain experience through artificially inflated repetitive actions. What it brings is a great sense of achievement in experiencing the fruits of your grind. In one way, the grittiness of many games of the Diablo clone genre enhances this effect. Its departures from traditional RPG style, be it western tabletop RPG or eastern JRPG mechanics, brought along the grinding. It seemed to be that RPGs meshed with action nicely, so the constant murder never really needed to depart. The growth of hardware and capability allowed for more expression of ideas, aesthetics, of which horror and conflict are commonly found in every culture. What follows from this is a hyper realization of the ‘victory’ of these games, and the ‘defeat’ of the enemies and monster through graphics and gore. Never in history can you see the whites of your enemies’ eyes as you decapitate them.

Manipulating the vicariousness is something the game designers of the loot based ARPG genre enjoy doing. Enhancing difficulty is common, as is differentiation of build paths. The core gameplay remains similar; a hack and slash of searching for stronger loot. The genre is expanded by every game, each taking their own unique twist on the shtick. Some enjoy different aesthetics, be it pleasing like Torchlight and Fate, or oppressing like Diablo. Most innovate classes and growth, customization and personalization systems. Some incorporate more from the action origins, such as Bastion which didn’t go for excessive customization or loot much, and others integrate its RPG roots more with a focus on loot collection and numeric growth. Most have very detached, haphazard, and seriously lacking stories, and instead focus upon atmosphere and immersion into the world over the characters. This is not to say story is necessarily disregarded, but would oft take a backseat to other features.

Truly, what matters is immersion, is a nudge that continually inches you forward while you play. It takes a page from the Civilization style of enjoyment: one more mob, maybe, and I’ll quit then. Oh, I’m almost to the next level, maybe I’ll stop then. I’ve allocated my points, and I’m near the exit, that’s when I shut the game down. The growth and enjoyment of the power fantasy moving these games pushes the next action, the next cycle of spells, drip feeding you experience, power, and growth that adds up. The game becomes mechanical sometimes, the actions and reactions of spell usage practiced and known. Whether you’re using a single button or spamming dozens or projectiles, there’s a sinking feeling into the gameplay itself.

The uniqueness of each game in varying the core genre and its mesmeric affection for the core grind defines each game of the Diablo clone genre. It is specifically what a game does different, well, and interestingly that matters (a fair and expected assessment). People that enjoy the genre would likely be able to identify with these breakdown, along with their own reasons and motivations.

1.3 Things happened the last couple dozen years that are relevant to games

There are many Diablo clones and ARPG games, but as a modern hybridization merely a generation old, it’s not implausible to list the core games, and possibly even itemize the largest notables in the genre. A demarcation is required for what to consider a Diablo clone, or whether a game is merely a very related but distinct ARPG. Dark Souls/Demon Souls can be considered Diablo style and influenced, or more prudently, Rogue influenced or a Roguelite. Following such a logic, Diablo can source its inspirations to Nethack and Rogue itself. So, where does our demarcation begin?

Well, here the Roguelike genre is made clear and different from a Diablo clone; Diablo itself incorporated hack and slash, randomized loot based procedurally generated dungeons. Forked very directly from the same RPG idea, it very essentially incorporated statistics, loot, weapons, punishing difficulty, customization, and procedural generation. What it added would then be core and distinct from Roguelikes: 3D graphics environments and animations, real time actions, continuous movement and positioning, pseudo-intensive action and twitch gameplay, as well as multiplayer options. These aspects would be refined and enhanced through the years, as seen in the company Blizzard’s cinematics or the smooth gameplay of The Adventures of Van Helsing.

This lies the foundation of the Diablo clones, wherein we choose to begin with Diablo. Thusly established, the following are relevant entries that will be primarily considered in the analyses of the genre.

* + 1. Attack of the Clones
* **Diablo** (1996) – Developed by Blizzard North. A staple of the serious, it is an ARPG hack and slash loot based video game. Relevant is the expansion Diablo: Hellfire later released.
* **Diablo 2** (2000) and Diablo 3 (2012) – sequels of the original. Diablo 2 is known for the polish and community that would build around it and its updates and the innovations it continued. Diablo 3 was okay and got better.
* **Titan Quest** (2006) – developed by Iron Lore Entertainment. This game is a well-polished clone directly inspired by Diablo 1 and 2, although it doesn’t have randomized dungeons.
* **Fate** (2005) – developed by Wild Tangent studios, it was a fairly lighter atmosphere and much more casual game than its peers, although it generally fulfilled all the major aspects of the genre. Fishing and pets are features that would be staples of series.
* **Torchlight** (2010) – influenced by Fate through its same designer and Runic Games, it would polish and create a unique aesthetic full of color that continued to it sequel. The series was very polished and kept core gameplay smooth, as well as extensive official modding tools and support by the community.
* **Sacred** (2004) – a game published by Microsoft, it featured a very large and explorable world and some semblances of consequential choices (i.e., racial beginnings and reactions). It would spawn a series containing more derivatives. Many Easter eggs and references.
* **Dungeon** **Siege** (2002) – developed through Gas Powered Games, the Sacred series would be more RPG than not, involving tactical and party management in a hack and slash setting. It would spawn a series that explored different designs,
* **The Incredible Adventures of Van Helsing** (2013) – From Neocore Games, a straightforward and polished Transylvanian romp that had strong hints of lampshading, comedy, and breaking the fourth wall. It would spawn a series that would actually rebalance and revamp the game into quite an involving journey. Its ghost companion created an interesting set of build paths around Katarina or Helsing, offering something of actually one and a half characters to manage.
* **Path of Exile** (2013) – a heavily Diablo 2 inspired game that added many unique mechanics, builds, options, and variety to the core gameplay, courtesy of Chris Wilson and Grinding Gear games. It is a very much ‘hardcore gamers’ game in the vein of its predecessors, and is designed as such. It features extensive customization, randomization, and prayers to RNGesus.
* **Grim dawn** (2016) – Created from many of the same developers as Titan Quest, the game is a well-polished ARPG that attempts its own unique flair to the genre; faction systems, bounties, quests, exploration, and loot farming is encouraged.

Obviously this list is not extensive, but is a quick primer on some major games in the series, as well as the ones I’m most familiar with to establish a frame of reference.

Its legacy draws from the Diablo clones, but draws from ARPGs as much as Diablo does (and influences). The following are also ARPGs noted for either popularity or renown, interesting and relevant gameplay, or a game design of similar heritage.

* Demon’s Souls (2009) – from FromSoftware, the Souls series (both Demon and Dark Souls) feature a dark fantasy
* Bastion (2011)
* Dragon’s Dogma (2013)
* Fallout 3: NV
* Borderlands