

A person with short dark hair, wearing a black tank top, light blue jeans, and red gloves, stands on a rooftop ledge. They are looking out over a cityscape with various buildings and rooftops. A large red diagonal banner covers the left side of the image, containing the text 'A LEGACY' and 'OF MOVEMENT' in white. The person is holding a bright orange bag and has a black armband on their right arm.

A LEGACY

OF MOVEMENT

By Khoo Hoon Chan



The cover art of the original *Doom* is the very picture of guttural violence and bullet-dispensing frenzy: the lone, muscle-bound space marine firing his submachine gun into a horde of scowling demons, all against a crimson, volcanic sky. It speaks volumes of the game's raw adrenaline, vociferous in its profanity and violence. Be it blazing through its concrete corridors with a hefty shotgun, or eviscerating hell-spawns in close combat till they are pixelated gore, *Doom* had set the stage for the archetypal first-person shooter during the early '90s. A significant number of *Doom* clones were crafted in its wake, its influence still seen in modern shooters over the next few decades.

Yet for all its visual bombast, the genre never quite got the hang of running, leaping and other dexterous activities.

While shooting everything that moves still registers as good old fashioned fun, jumping from one ledge to another, or skipping over short walls feels jarring and unnatural in contrast. Sometimes it's impossible to look down at your legs since they aren't even rendered in first person. Other times they are mere dangling appendages, not quite as attuned to the weight and maneuvers of your body. That's why these movements can't be carried out fluidly; how can we land precisely on our feet when we can't feel – or even see – the flexions on our ankles and knees?

Overcoming this problem of unwieldy movement is *Mirror's Edge*, a first-person platformer that emphasized mobility over combat, and dexterity over brute force. The brainchild of the studio EA DICE, they wanted to realize their vision

of performing free, unconstrained actions within the seemingly boundless universe of first-person shooters – in other words, one that’s as close to a [first-person free running](#) title as possible. This single-minded, almost fervent focus on movement coursed through its development, and is reflected in every aspect of the game – from the minimalist color scheme to its fleeting and metaphorical plot on liberation. Yet, unlike *Doom*, audiences took a while to warm up to the potential of *Mirror’s Edge*. It was only years later that the game became a cult classic. This gambit meant that *Mirror’s Edge* now famously stands as a subversion of first-person shooters. Featuring relatively little gunplay, the game favors daredevil leaps and wall runs along glassy skyscrapers, instead of having players line up countless shots against enemies. Faith, the Asian protagonist in this post-cyberpunk dystopia, is a Runner – a fancy but deliberately chosen name for a courier. She’s tasked with hand-delivering sensitive messages while avoiding surveillance by a despotic government. Her familiarity with the city’s layout proved to be a boon,



allowing her to traverse through its veins efficiently, vaulting across rooftops and scaling impossibly high walls deftly to reach her destinations.

While she still wields the occasional firearms and sniper rifles, Faith overcomes her obstacles – both human and concrete – through parkour, a form of movement that’s typically explored in urban spaces. When she jumps and tumbles, her physical body is animated such that every thud and roll is both impactful and purposeful. No longer do your limbs feel like a bunch of disembodied attachments; in this game, they work in tandem with each other to help you carry out dizzying, athletic feats. When leaping off the rooftop, her steps hastens, her feet nimbly tapping away on the pavement. The surrounding blurs as she sprints, the rush of the wind lightly soughing into her ears. Make a successful jump to a neighboring roof, and she can tuck her legs in to perform a forward roll, lessening the impact of her landing. On the other hand, failure to make the leap will cause Faith’s panic-stricken breathing to intensify, as her body is rapidly hurled towards ground level. The vertigo is palpable, enough to make players and even onlookers wince. It’s an experience that aptly captures this graceful but perilous act of kinesis.

Faith also perceives this city in a way that underscores her keen understanding of her surrounding, seeing walls, fences and constructions as pathways and conduits to her goals rather than obstacles. To replicate her perspective,



players can see with a Runner's vision, which highlights multiple paths in a bright, luminescent shade of red. A cable for ziplining her way down towards a shorter building; a plank from which she can initiate a jump; a thin pipe she can latch on to clamber towards the roof – these would stand out amid a sterile cityscape nearly drained of color. As shared by then Senior Producer [Owen O'Brien](#), this aesthetic choice is a deliberate one, as the team wanted to “give people a sense of the world very quickly and move through it very quickly”. More than just directing players towards the next stop, *Mirror's Edge's* distinct color palette and minimalist art direction are themselves couriers for the game's themes of motion, empowering player to perform seamless, acrobatic runs.

Mirror's Edge's most distinctive features are its slick aesthetics and fluid maneuvers; what comes to mind is usually the thrill of the run, set amid a boldly minimalist canvas. Conversely, barely is remembered about its threadbare plot – one about Faith's sister being framed for a murder she did not commit – which was serviceable but superficial. Within the game's theme of kinesis, however, its presentation is still remarkably thoughtful. Take for instance the city in which the game is set in, which is intentionally kept nameless because there's no use for a commentary on the city's broken system. Instead, the place merely serves a utilitarian function as a environment for Faith to explore movement – not unlike a sandbox. And when its narrative is given a rare spotlight, it's depicted through a

series of animated cutscenes, to avoid detracting from the gameplay itself. It's a demonstration of how the game embraces its themes and works around its limitations, bringing to it a sense of incredible focus.

Remembered for its dedication to slick motion, *Mirror's Edge* was soon referenced by a variety of first-person games, as they attempt the traversal of their virtual spaces in a whole new manner. Particularly true is the game's influence on *Battlefield 3*, even though it's still chiefly about mowing down enemies with guns. In fact, the difference is in the subtle movements of the characters you embody. "So in *Battlefield 3*, when you jump over something, you can see the vaulting, etc. So the whole animation setup has actually changed quite a bit," said then general manager Karl Magnus Troedsson for in a chat with [Engadget](#). Similar parkour moves were also replicated in *Dying Light*, where you can steer a limber Kyle Crane against herds of zombies, which range from the shambling to the impossibly agile. Even the racing sim, *Need For Speed: Shift*, is said to carry some influences. "At high speed

where we're blurring the dashboard and everything in the cockpit is desaturated to blacks and whites, we're pushing the view ahead on the track to give you a farther field of vision," producer Jesse Abney shared in an [interview](#). "It's what drivers call Driver Vision, in that at top speed you don't want to be focused on the things in front of you, you want to be focused down the track."

Taking one of the most glaring shortcomings of first-person shooters – and twisting that into the crux of your game is an audacious move. Admittedly, this design doesn't compensate for its more dated flaws, such as the formulaic plot and linearity, which is at odds with *Mirror's Edge*'s themes of freedom and motion. This is something its 2016 reboot, *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*, has sought to address, even though it was being weighed down with unnecessary side quests and distractions of other sorts. But the original *Mirror's Edge* – now a decade old title – has undeniably redefined movement for many first-person shooters, embedding the game among the echelons of other first-person classics. 🏆

