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Marathon

1:      The Credits

Product Design:	Jason Jones
Story:	Greg Kirkpatrick
Art & Graphics:	J. Reginald Dujour
Programming:	Jason Jones
	Ryan Martell
	Alain Roy
Music & Sounds:	Alexander Seropian
Scenario:	J. Reginald Dujour, Jason Jones,
	Greg Kirkpatrick, Alexander Seropian,
	Doug Zartman
Damage & Spin:	Doug Zartman, Alexander Seropian
Voice of Bob:	Doug Zartman

Marathon began shipping on December 21, 1994, and was published by its authors: Bungie

Software, Chicago, IL. "http://www.bungie.com". It was preceded by Pathways Into

Darkness (Aug. 1993) and followed by Marathon 2: Durandal (Nov. 1995) and Marathon

Infinity (Oct 1996) which together form the Marathon "universe" as it is known today.

2: The Story and The Qualia

        Marathon fits, in the minds of most, into the First Person Shooter, or FPS genre, but the fit is pleasantly inexact. Marathon's gameplay does, on one hand, entail a lot of running around and shooting enemies from a perspective placed just above, and oriented along, the gun which is emitting the shots. But whereas the various Id contributions to the FPS genre contain little more, Marathon treats the running and the shooting as a framework on which to construct a massive and complex story. Indeed the story which Marathon begins (for many purposes) and its three prequels and sequels continue is arguably the most developed of any not attached to a game from a more traditional story-telling genre. You, the player, must repel an invasion attempt on the colony ship of which you are the last remaining security guard. Prosaic as this abstract may appear, the greatness is in the details: I cannot hope to go into them all, but I will provide a brief survey.

        Let us begin with the "you" mentioned in the abstract and qualified, at the time, with "the player". The reason for this qualification is that it is not known (even now several games later) just who, or what "you" really are. One reading of the story, the most superficial, places you as the proverbial last man standing, who just happens to be a security guard and thus armed. You follow the instructions set out for you and (maybe) finish the game. A slight increase in attention, however, and things begin to crack: little inconsistencies show up in offhand story snippets. For example, in the manual pre-story, you bang a control console in frustration, and *dent* it. Certain aliens are characterized as never firing on humans, but they fire on you. The "like syndrome" crops up in communications with otherwise erudite AIs: you are like one of the crew (but not...?). All of these strange bits are surrounded in, and subsumed by a wash of other details. Fragments of diaries and old newspaper articles pop up in the terminals which are scattered around the levels and used to tell the story. And these fragments are meticulously self consistent. Mention of a Nar slave revolt against the invaders in an early level matches up with a mistake to be avoided in later conquests as reported much later by a terminal in one of the invader's ships. How can the attentive player reconcile the fact that some aspects of

your supposed identity just don't mesh with each other with the fact that the entire rest of the story is a model of consistency on par with Tolkien's Middle Earth tales?

The answer is what the most observant player finds. The flecks of oddity in matters to do with the player's character are not, in fact, the result of sloppiness, but rather of immense attention to detail extending into the range of genius. For there are meaningful patterns to be found at many levels in the story. While the top most picture is that of your character coincidentally saving the day, bringing together bits of information like a discrepancy between ten military cyborgs supposedly hidden on the colony ship at launch and nine confirmed destroyed in the invader's initial strike with bits like your character being the biggest and strongest colonist and yet only about 5'3" tall reveals something else entirely. How is one biggest and only 5'3", and how would the military design a cyborg for strength, agility, and maximum fighting efficiency? The same way: short and stocky, like a wrestler. This conclusion suddenly causes resonances throughout the other data on hand: your absurd combat effectiveness, your ability to withstand a several story drop when none of the other colonists can, your *in*ability to remember why such strange responses to combat situations come naturally to you, etc. But do the interpretations end there? Mjolnir Mark IV cyborgs were created by recycling the bodies of fallen soldiers which were recovered and stored in cold sleep. You spend an awful lot of time in cold sleep, and what few memories you have from before your emergence at the beginning of the story are fuzzy, even *unlikely*... As mentioned before, I can't go into every needle of the great haystack of story that is behind Marathon. But fortunately I don't have too: Hamish Sinclair has been combing the story with the help of the fanbase for five years, and the results can be seen at "http://marathon.bungie.org/story/".

3: The Technology and the Design

Marathon's story is the wetware that makes people play it even to this day, when Quake III Arena and Unreal Tournament have consolidated the rest of the market with engines that could run a separate game of Marathon projected in front of each player as they run around. But it is not the only thing that gave Marathon a place in history: Marathon broke gameplay ground for the FPS genre that lay fallow after its passing for years. Marathon was the first, or among the first to give weapons two distinct firing modes, to give the player control (and require it of him or her) over the vertical angle of view as well as the horizontal, to implement a complicated damage model based on damage *types* as well as quantities, and to provide designed-in modifiability and expandability. The entire game system is modular and accessible, and today it has even been opensourced.

The Marathon graphics engine was 2.5D: in other words, it rendered a map defined by regions in plan view and given heights. You could have no sloped surfaces such as ramps, no holes over other holes in the same wall such as windows, and not even genuine light-sources as lighting values were applied directly to wall and floor surfaces. But yet the system of triggers and platform/door controls was sufficiently advanced that all of the entry puzzles for the various ages of Cyan's Myst from the main island were convincingly reproduced in one 3rd party Marathon map (as an example) through insightfully complex interminglings of the triggers' effects.

Multiplayer was also implemented in Marathon to great effect. Although it was not playable over the internet, many a lan party was cheerfully organized, and many an hour of productivity lost on corporate and educational networks. Network play consisted of more than the now ubiquitous deathmatch, with varying goal systems from the tag-like "kill the man with the ball" to territory defense, to team play and even "co-oping" (team play on solo levels). Network games were recorded from every perspective at all times, and could be saved and distributed for the purpose of gloating or training. But perhaps most importantly, skillful play was rewarded beyond twitch reflex. When Thresh says he doesn't play the game so much as the opponent, the Marathon "vidmaster" chuckles because that was the

only way to play Marathon well: listen for the opponent's moves at all times, sweep through chokepoints properly, know which weapons to use in which situation, and know which situation your opponent will put you in next.

Over all, Marathon was built almost flawlessly, with limitations imposed solely by the power of the hardware it had to run on. Replay value was good enough that I played the single player story through more than twice, something I almost never do. In part this was due to the fact that the story left so many stones to be turned and studied, in part it was because the game reached such a perfect balance between the satisfaction of blowing stuff up and the art of doing so elegantly. Network play taught skills that bridged subsequent titles, sometimes even waiting for game generations to pass before they became possible to apply again.

4: Success and failure

In some senses Marathon was a failure. Because it was a Mac only game, it was overshadowed by the likes of Doom and Quake. Jason Jones is hardly a name as well known as John Carmack, and the world champion FPS players are crowned in Quake, not Marathon. But in another sense it was a roaring success. No other FPS game has captured the imagination of its players so thoroughly as Marathon did, and by capturing their imaginations as well as their trigger fingers Marathon's fanbase developed in a unique way. Almost without exception, Marathon players (ex players) don't cheat. They don't speak in 31337 (eleet) ASCII slang. They didn't drop out of high school. Instead, Marathon was loved, and is still followed by a core set of fans who are capable of speaking in full sentences, and like the War Simulation crowd "don't bounce checks." The result is that they make for a closely knit bunch with low turnover. Low turnover is not a phrase favored in business schools world wide, but when a game is near its seventh birthday a durable cult following is certainly one measure of success. At the very least, Marathon must be credited with prior art on many of its successors' (re)inventions, even if it didn't actually register on enough people's radars to be responsible for those changes when they came to pass.