

# Marathon: Game Review

## A Classic Is Born

I well remember the month of March in 1995 while I was a sophomore in high school. Never mind the fact that my wisdom teeth had just been pulled and that my cheeks were swollen and aching. I remained oblivious to the pain as I immersed myself in a futuristic space world, firing away at hostile aliens in *Marathon*, the newest and hottest game for the Apple Macintosh.

### Marathon's Creators

product design	Jason Jones
story	Greg Kirkpatrick
art director and graphics	J. Reginald Dujour
programming	Jason Jones Ryan Martell Alain Roy
music and sounds	Alexander Seropian
scenario design	J. Reginald Dujour Jason Jones Greg Kirkpatrick Alexander Seropian Doug Zartman

*Marathon* was developed and published by Bungie Software Products Corporation, a game studio founded by Alexander Seropian in 1991 and located in Chicago. Bungie was already well-known to the Macintosh gaming community for a network dungeon game *Minotaur*, written by Seropian and one of his college friends Jason Jones, and a more recent popular first-person shooter called *Pathways Into Darkness*. But when *Marathon* was released in December 1994, it thrilled players with its high-speed action, unprecedented freedom of movement, stunningly detailed graphics, and compelling science-fiction story. It quickly became a classic in Macintosh gaming history.

## Story and Design

The game is set in the distant future, with technology and artificial intelligence vastly superior than it is today. Humans occupy not only Earth, but also a number of space colonies in nearby galaxies. You play a security officer aboard a shuttle that receives news of a surprise attack by unknown alien forces on the UESC Marathon Space Station. When you arrive, you find that there have been numerous security breaches all over the station, and most communications with the colonists have been interrupted.

The Marathon is equipped with three Artificial Intelligence units, named Leela, Durandal, and Tycho. It is believed that Leela and Durandal are severely damaged by the attack, while Tycho is utterly destroyed. Your mission in the game is to reactivate the defense systems of the Marathon and eradicate the alien invasion. Unfortunately, because of the damage that the UESC Marathon has sustained, Leela is no longer fully operational and her information is at times unreliable. To make matters worse, Durandal appears to have gone “rampant” and is playing a deadly game, making it unclear if he is an ally or an enemy.

The game itself is level-based and presented in first-person perspective. You start off with a single pistol and limited ammunition. As you explore the opening level, you find additional ammunition and supplies, but more importantly, you find computer terminals that let you communicate with Leela, who explains your mission and provides helpful information. As you navigate through the space station, you encounter hostile aliens, some of whom you need to kill, some of which are better to avoid. You sustain damage when attacked by aliens, and can only recover your energy by finding shield stations located in a few spots throughout each level. Similarly, you must find special “pattern buffers” which allow you to save your game; you cannot save the game at an arbitrary point in a level. The game ends when you successfully complete all of the levels, or if you are killed.

The game’s interface is clean and intuitive. Players can control the game using both the mouse and the keyboard and can customize the controls to their liking. The visual interface displays the player’s current shield and oxygen levels, the currently selected weapon, and the amount of ammunition available for that weapon. There are two other useful (and somewhat uncommon) features: the motion sensor and the overhead map. The motion sensor alerts you to nearby moving aliens and civilians. While very handy and accurate most of the time, certain scenarios are subjected to a strong magnetic field, causing the motion sensor to malfunction. The overhead map allows a player to see which part of a level she has visited. As a player explores, the computer automatically generates and stores a map of these areas that the player can refer to. It is a nice way of preventing a player from getting hopelessly lost in such a complex world.

As you advance through the game’s levels, the aliens become progressively more cunning and ruthless. Fortunately, the arsenal of futuristic weaponry at your disposal expands as well. In addition to the standard hand pistol, you can obtain an assault rifle, fusion energy pistol, and missile launcher, among others.

Each weapon is effective against some alien species and less so against others.

*Marathon* draws the player forward through the game using a sequence of computer terminals in each level that reveal a part of the story at a time. Players often find terminals in well-guarded, dangerous areas. Some terminals reveal instructions directly related to the player's mission, while others relate the history of the various alien species. Although players progress more or less linearly towards the end goal, the story is not always revealed in linear fashion, since the AI systems are malfunctioning. Thus, players need to pay attention in order to piece the various parts of the story together cohesively.

## **Game Engine**

The *Marathon* graphics engine is clearly dated compared to those of the latest 3D action titles. Six years ago, games did not have the benefit of hardware acceleration, which meant that game programmers had to keep the engine relatively simple. Even so, when *Marathon* was released in 1994, it was visually superior to virtually all other shooters on the market. It was the second game on the Macintosh to support texture mapping in real time (the first was Bungie's own *Pathways Into Darkness*). It also introduced support for non-orthogonal spaces, allowing arbitrarily-shaped rooms. This allowed Bungie's map designers to create more realistic, interesting, and organic levels.

*Marathon* was also one of the first computer games to use active-panning stereo sound. If an alarm sounds to the player's left, you hear the ringing from your left speaker; as you turn around, the ringing transitions smoothly from the left speaker to the right speaker. This adds a surprising amount of depth to the player's experience, since it helps one pin-point the location of aliens, as well as opening and closing doors. In one level, a switch is located in plain sight in the middle of a room, but it isn't immediately clear what the switch does. If you listen carefully after flipping the switch, however, you can hear a door sliding open down the hall to your right.

Having of all these treats comes at a price: slower performance. Only the fastest computers in 1994 could handle the highest graphics quality setting and the active-panning stereo sound. Fortunately, players can adjust the settings, such as reducing the graphics detail to make the game run smoother. Today, of course, computers have no trouble running the *Marathon* engine in its full glory.

## **Solid Game Play**

While *Marathon* sported a slick sound and graphics engine, the ingredient that helped it to stand out from the pack in 1994 was its story. In fact, one of Jason Jones's main goals was to create a first-person shooter with a solid, captivating science fiction story behind it, rather than the usual Satanic-themed Doom-style games in which the objective was to slay demons and advance to the next level.

No matter how one completes the levels in *Marathon*, the story unfolds in the same linear fashion. However, the story is constructed in such a way that the player feels that she is helping to shape it and make the key events possible. Each level in the game represents a specific location – such as the hangar area of the UESC *Marathon* space station, or an alien battleship – and is creatively architected and textured by the designers to bring it to life. Games such as *Doom* traditionally have made heavy use of red, brown, and gray textures depicting bones and skulls (sometimes called “gothic” textures), but the story in *Marathon* takes the player to several different environments, leading to the use of brighter, more colorful and varied textures.

The addictive element of *Marathon* has not so much to do with blowing aliens to bits, but more on the variety of level objectives. In the earlier levels, players simply need to navigate themselves towards a terminal somewhere in the level that will teleport them to the next one. Later on, players are required to complete more interesting and complex tasks. In one level, players must secure an area by destroying circuits to seal the doors. In another, players must protect civilians from being attacked by hostile aliens, keeping the amount of civilian bloodshed at a minimum. Still other levels require players to solve puzzles, such as flipping switches in a particular sequence to raise platforms to just the right height; doing so creates a stairway that leads to the next level. Fortunately, these puzzles are not placed superficially into the game, but are integrated smoothly into the story.

Even after players have successfully completed the game, there are a number of reasons to go back and play it again. Curious players will find secret areas on many of the levels (even the simpler ones) that reward them with special items or more powerful weapons. Furthermore, many levels have interesting short cuts that allow observant players to complete the level quicker and more easily. If finding secret passageways and short cuts isn’t enough, players can even tweak the game to their liking with the *Marathon* Physics Editor, which comes bundled with the game. This software tool enables players easily to adjust various properties of the game play by creating so-called “physics models.” Players can adjust the amount of damage a weapon does, lower the gravity, or make aliens bigger. Modifying the in-game graphics and sounds is also possible. Today, one can still find dozens of web pages that archive hundreds, if not thousands of custom-built *Marathon* physics models, shapes, and sound files. One of these packages, for example, transforms an entire alien race to appear as Storm Troopers from *Star Wars*. Others make the aliens sound like the Simpsons when they speak. Clearly, the possibilities are endless here.

### **Lasting Influence**

*Marathon* was the game that put Bungie Software on the map as a serious game developer for the Macintosh. It won the Macworld World Class Award and the MacUser Editor’s Choice, among several other awards. Though the game sold extremely well, it never had the potential to become a worldwide smash hit in the way *Doom* had, because its distribution was limited to the Apple Macin-

tosh platform, which to this day accounts for only a small fraction of the total market. With the sequel *Marathon 2*, Bungie made its first attempt at a Windows version, but it was a largely experimental project. It wasn't until games like *Myth: The Fallen Lords* and *Myth II: Soulblighter* that Bungie became recognized as a superb game development studio by the Windows community as well.

After *Marathon* was released, it became apparent that great first-person shooter titles should not only have a state-of-the-art game engine, but also a compelling story line. This game raised players' expectations about the single-player experience in such titles. No longer were they satisfied by games simply requiring them to slay monsters, find the Red Key to unlock the Red Door, and exit the level. Future action titles such as Epic's *Unreal* and Valve's *Half-Life* became successes not just because of their technical merits, but because of their highly developed story and creative objectives.

It was undoubtedly Bungie's combination of technical wizardry and immersive storytelling that caught Microsoft's eye in 2000, ultimately leading to Microsoft's acquisition of the game development studio. Microsoft is currently preparing to launch its first gaming console, the Xbox, and although they've attracted a long list of popular game developers to their platform, they still need *the* killer game to drive initial sales of the Xbox, much as Super Mario 64 successfully drove sales of the Nintendo 64. Bungie generated a huge buzz among the crowds at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in 2000 by showing a demo of their highly- anticipated science fiction action title, *Halo*, whose characters bear a striking resemblance to the officers in *Marathon*. It seems that after developing real-time strategy successes such as *Myth* and *Myth II*, Bungie is finally returning to the genre that put them in the spotlight. There is no doubt that Bungie fans across the world are eagerly awaiting the Xbox's release so that they can rejuvenate their memories of *Marathon*.