MG: *First Person, Texture-Mapped Games*

by Douglas Kiang

In the beginning, there was Infocom. The world was imaginary, and without form or color. Then some bright soul said, "Let there be graphics!" And there was Colony. And it was good. Damn good. I almost flunked Physics. And then there were Way Out and Ultima, the era of the first-person perspective game began, and my grades were never quite the same since. In the past year or so, Macintosh devotees have witnessed an explosion of first-person perspective games that rival the best games available on any platform. In the year to come we will see even more first person games, including ports of some of the hottest DOS games, as well.

What is a "first-person" game, anyway? A first-person game is, as we like to say, "the next best thing to being there." Games such as Pathways Into Darkness, Sensory Overload, Wolfenstein 3D, and Marathon all feature a first-person perspective, in which everything scrolls toward the screen as if you are really in a maze or hallway. As you turn your head, everything shifts (more or less smoothly) to show your new perspective. The result is an easily navigable environment that is very convincing and realistic. All of the above games use a process called "texture mapping" that actually places images of realistic looking textures such as moss-covered bricks or hospital tiling directly onto the walls, ceiling, and floor to further enhance the virtual environment.

We Don't Need no Steenkin' Ammo! The first of these games to really become popular was Bungie Corporation's Pathways Into Darkness. You are part of an American Special Forces team dropped into the ruins of an ancient Mayan pyramid to stop an evil alien's plans to take over the world. Along the way, something goes wrong, and you are left with only a knife and your wits to fend for yourself. You run into a host of unsavory alien creatures, some dead German soldiers who fill you in on the plot (you have to use this crystal, you see...) and a whole bunch of treasure, which you can recover only after slaying countless numbers of creatures while wearing a special cloak and/or drinking these different potions... Well, if this sounds involved, it is. Pathways Into Darkness is a complex game that requires more than just quick reflexes. You need to really think about the best way to solve each level, and you also need to conserve ammo by using your wits or your fists (or both) or by running away during sticky situations.

athways Into Darkness was a milestone in the first-person genre. The game is difficult, and downright nasty at times. You can only save the game at certain points, which makes it substantially harder, and it's easy to run out of ammo in the beginning of the game. Still, the graphics are stunning, and Bungie allows players to turn on or off various features to speed up game play. The way the plot develops as you play the game also keeps it interesting. Things are not always what they seem, are they? Overall, Pathways Into Darkness is a great game.

Arrggh! Medic! Sensory Overload, by Reality Bytes, is another fine example of the first-person perspective game. You start out in a hospital trying to chase down a group of terrorists who have turned the hospital into a war zone (shades of John Woo!)

Sensory Overload features a fully texture-mapped environment, and it moves much faster than Pathways, too. There's a lot of problem-solving involved—rather than being purely a shoot-em-up, you really need to think about the best strategies to use when taking out terrorists. Along the way, you will find better weapons that will help you when the action turns fast and furious (and believe me, it does in the later levels!)

Unlike any of the other games in this article, Sensory Overload offers the interesting innovation of being able to shield yourself from enemy fire by hiding behind some of the 3D objects in various rooms. You also need to interact with your environment by pressing buttons and flipping light switches. Although the full-screen version of the game may run sluggishly on slower machines due to the high quality of the textures, you can scale the window and change the resolution to fit your machine. Consequently, Sensory Overload is fast and flexible and even runs well on a IIci.

ather than going into detail explaining the interface to you, it probably makes more sense to play the demo (included with the IMG CD-ROM.) The textured walls, ceiling and floor speed by so quickly that you could even get claustrophobic! Pay attention to the clues you find along the way... like all good first-person games, Sensory Overload doesn't give itself away too quickly. You need to explore to find out more details about why you are there and what you need to do to solve the game. Overall, as a first product, Sensory Overload is a great first-person game. I look forward to seeing Reality Bytes' next work.

Daddy, Can I Play? MacPlay's Wolfenstein 3D was perhaps the most hotly awaited first-person perspective DOS port for the Mac. Who wouldn't jump at the chance to race down hallways at top speed, gunning down Nazis with a chain gun?

As the game begins, you find yourself at the bottom of a vast castle, armed only with a pistol and a clip of ammunition. The object of the game is to work your way to the silver door at the end of each level, collecting treasure and keys and shooting any guards who get in your way (no subtleties of plot here.)   Along the way you might find such fun weapons as a flamethrower, a rocket launcher, and a chain gun (read: handheld Gatling gun!) The graphics are twice as sharp on the Macintosh, and all the sounds have been re-recorded digitally using real German actors. Not a single detail was omitted for accuracy. Why, rumor has it the programmers actually drank real German beer while working on this one, too. But I digress...

he details in Wolfenstein 3D really do make it stand out. Scattered throughout the castle are golden chalices, boxes of treasure, portraits of Der Fuhrer, and enough Nazi flags and memorabilia to turn a military collector green with envy. While Wolfenstein 3D doesn't approach the photorealistic texture-mapping of games like Sensory Overload and Marathon, the smoothness of motion is equally effective at conveying realism—Wolfenstein 3D plays like a comic book brought to life. But the best feature of all is the price: Wolfenstein 3D is being marketed as shareware, which means that a 3-level version of the game is freely available. By registering the game for $14.95, you will gain an additional 27 levels for a total of 30 levels altogether. As of this writing you can also get 30 more levels (Third Encounter). What a bargain! And a great game, to boot.

They're Everywhere! Bungie, we mean. This game is so popular it spawned its own newsgroup on the Usenet. What can I say? If these types of games are your bag, Marathon is the hot game to get right now.

Bungie Corporation's Marathon is the successor to Pathways Into Darkness, though it is not a sequel. Bungie vastly improved the game engine, making it run faster and more smoothly with higher detail on all machines. Marathon is also PowerPC native, which means that PowerMac owners can crank up the detail level and breeze right along. Marathon also is the only one of these games to offer extensive network options—with five or six players on a network, the game is simply a blast to play. All these features make Marathon a great choice. I found Marathon easier to get into than Pathways Into Darkness—some sections of the latter are obscenely difficult—although Marathon's lack of a friendly save game option (you can only save the game at certain points) make some parts tedious.

n Marathon, you are sent into the colony ship Marathon to turn back an invasion of marauding aliens. Ammo is much more plentiful than it was in Pathways Into Darkness, but you still need to use your brain every bit as much as your trigger finger. Weapons you find along the way include a flame unit, the versatile MA-17 (I still think it should have been called the MA-17 for all the damage it causes,) the SPNKR Missile Launcher, and the strange but powerful Alien Weapon.

It would be fair to say that Marathon has launched a whole subculture, with all sorts of game editors available to modify the application (leap tall buildings in a single bound! create new weapons! arm the civilians!) This is encouraging because much of the enormous success of Doom for the PC was due to the vast number of .wad files and level editors available. Hopefully the same sort of phenomenon will occur with Marathon so that players can still enjoy it even after they've finished the game. Still, with the network option and over 40 individual levels, Mac gamers are not likely to tire of Marathon quickly.

More on the Horizon. So, the bottom line is that there are several first-person perspective games out for the Mac already, and more are on their way. id Software and Lion Entertainment announced they will be bringing the much-awaited Doom II to the Mac (see this month's sneak preview of DOOM II) We will also see more first person perspective games such as Descent & System Shock sometime in the future. This is encouraging news for Mac gamers; as more and more developers realize the gaming potential of the Mac, as well as the fact that Mac gamers are willing and eager to buy games such as these, they are just as eager to produce games we can all enjoy. Until then, lock and load, keep your powder dry, and take those motion sickness pills, because the action is only beginning!