eview: Pathways Into Darkness

Reviewed by Jon A. Blum

Type: Arcade/Adventure
Publisher: Bungie Software (312/493-2849)
Retail Price: $69.99
Mail Order: $39.00
Requires: 2MB free RAM, 8 bit video, System 6.05> and 4 MB free hard disk space.
Protection: Manual based look-up.

arning: The Surgeon IMG has determined that prolonged exposure to Pathways Into Darkness (and generic issues) causes heart palpitations, nervous twitches, sweaty palms, labored breathing, and faintness. Do not operate your Mac for business purposes in the background while running this software. Users with heart conditions, chronic breathing disorders, weak nerves, or faintness at the sight of blood are strongly urged to avoid this software. 'Nuf said — Buy a copy!

Mac gaming has taken another leap in technological wizardry with the introduction of Pathways Into Darkness by Bungie Software. Pathways is a continuous motion, fast-action arcade/adventure game featuring beautiful texture-mapped 3D graphics and animation, "Active Panning" stereo sound (simulated surround sound), a 30-level labyrinth, challenging puzzles and adversaries, and one hell of an ordnance!

Mission: Impossible? As part of an eight-man assault team, your job is to carry a small, low-yield nuclear device to a room deep in the bowels of an ancient pyramid that harbors a slumbering alien's body. The para-drop you were part of was botched, and you were separated from the assault team that went into the pyramid ahead of you. Armed with only a knife and a flashlight, you'll have roughly four days before the alien awakens. You must find the alien at the bottom of the labyrinth, set the nuclear device, and get out before your four days are up. To achieve this goal, you must make your way through the twisting corridors of the maze, killing everything you see and grabbing as much booty as you can lay your greedy little hands on. The more treasure you find, the higher your score will be. Along the way you must find and converse with long-dead humans, solve the game's puzzles, and avoid the onslaught of a thousand or so really nasty creatures who want you for dinner.

Fancy Wallpaper. The most striking feature of Pathways is the spatial environment you sense as you maneuver throughout the twisting corridors. The sensation bears the closest resemblance to virtual reality I've seen on a 2D desktop monitor. The walls are texture-mapped, with stone images applied to the surfaces of the 3D polygons that make up the walls. The overall feeling of movement in 3D space is uncanny. To further enhance the mood, colors shift from dark to light as the player moves forward; hence the name "Pathways Into Darkness." This is something akin to driving down a fog-drenched road in the middle of the night; you never know what impending danger may be waiting around the next turn, or

right in front of you! The implementation of the texture-mapping and depth-queuing is astonishing, and performance remains rock-solid throughout. To increase performance on some of the slower platforms, there is an option to lower the resolution, thereby increasing the frame-rate.

A-maze-ing. On your quest to find the bottom level of the labyrinth, you'll encounter many well thought-out puzzle elements and objects that must be put together correctly to achieve your final goal. Some of these include the search for weapons, keys, magic crystals that act as weapons or other useful devices, and treasure. Interaction with long-dead characters is possible once you discover the means. The labyrinth itself is very complex and extensive. Fortunately, there's an auto-mapping feature to help lost souls; every small area you explore augments construction of the map for the level you're on. By the time you explore an entire level, you have a complete map that can be used again and again for that particular level.

Movement is accomplished by using the arrow-keys. Players can move forward, backwards,   left and right with a full 360° of freedom. Compound keys are also supported meaning it's possible to rotate, move backwards, and fire all at the same time. There are also modifier keys that allow sideways movement. What is particularly important to stress here is the 360° freedom of movement. Unlike other games that allow only 90° increments, Pathways players are treated to a virtual environment. The only thing missing is the data-glove and 3D head-gear!

I'm almost tempted to say that Pathways is too   hard, but then again — I did solve it. It's possible to spend 20 hours or more getting to a certain point, only to find you've made an irreversible mistake (such as missing an item or not having enough potions) and need to start over at a much higher level. Frustration levels can reach apogee very easily if you don't save the game often, and under different filenames.

e don't need no stinkin' badges! Since you start the game with only an empty .45 automatic and a knife, your first order of business will be to find something a bit more lethal. Some of the weapons at your disposal include pistols, machine guns of varying capabilities, grenade launchers with multiple loads (such as fragmentation & high-explosive), magic crystals, and potions. Crystals have various powers, such as causing earthquakes, generating electric fields, speaking to the dead, and even wiping out entire rooms full of creatures. The weapon you wield shows up in the World View   window as if you were holding it in your hands. Of course, there's an appropriate sound and animation accompanying the firing of each weapon. Ever want to blow the hell out of a watermelon? Now's your chance to see what it would

look like! The bloody mess it leaves when you fire a projectile grenade into a "nightmare" at point blank ain't pretty, but as Butthead would say: "That's cool! . . . heh heh, heh heh, heh heh."

Happy Halloween. Of course with all that ordnance you'll need something to shoot at. No problem. The labyrinth is tough enough to figure out even with auto-mapping; throw in a few (thousand) monsters and it's damn close to impossible. Some of the party guests include the Headless — short, orange/green nasty with a giant tongue that spits green goo; the Zombie — an undead bone-thrower; the nightmare — a floating watermelon with seal flippers and a moustache; and the Banshee — a seemingly indestructible ghost-like being with an alluring voice. And to make things even more interesting, all of Pathways' creatures have different attributes for attack, defense, and speed. You'll do well to give some thought to weapon selection. Of course, there are many more surprises around the bends in Pathways. . . .

Down around the corner.... The Pathways interface makes use of view, inventory, status and message windows. All are resizeable and follow Mac interface guidelines beautifully. The main World View   window can be enlarged or reduced to accommodate any size monitor, or to increase performance. The other windows can be resized lengthwise.

Proper resource management, such as not wasting ammo, is essential to a successful mission. To aid in keeping track of your possessions, Pathways provides an intuitive Inventory   window. Every item the player acquires is contained in a scrolling list. Any object that can hold another object (such as a box or sack) has a pop-arrow just like the Small Folder View in System 7. Clicking on the arrow opens the object to reveal its contents. Open a weapon such as a pistol and you see a clip, complete with the rounds remaining. Placing objects within other objects is as simple as clicking and dragging. Objects from the list can be viewed by double-clicking them, which invokes a dialog box with a simple explanation of the object and a picture of it. The object descriptions fall short of telling you what to do with them, but rather they give a general description.

Other tools include a Message   window, which gives instant feedback as to what you've done, and a Player   window showing weapon proficiencies, score, and health status. The entire game interface is intuitive, attractive, and responsive.

Sounds Good! Pathways is the first game I've ever seen that takes advantage of Apple Sound Manager 3.0's ability to generate more than two simultaneous channels of sound (the Apple extension ships with the game). The result is rich, 3-channel stereo output (on stereo-capable machines with System 6.0.7 or greater). Volume and balance are carefully controlled to provide an almost 3D audio quality that Bungie has dubbed "Active Panning." For instance, if a creature throws a weapon that barely misses you, the projectile whooshes past and you hear it go from front-to-back on the left or right side. The effect is very much like surround sound. A pair of external speakers or a stereo headphone is mandatory if you want to appreciate the subtleties of the stereo sounds.

The Turning Point. You didn't really think I'd give away the ending, did you? Without the drive of your own curiosity to urge you on, you may just find Pathways too challenging, and wimp out. Which brings me to one of my two complaints about the game; Pathways may just be too hard to complete for a lot of people. There should have been provisions made for making the game easier to play. Perhaps reducing the numbers and strength of the opposition, or increasing the player/character's own strength and endurance attributes. Eventually, there will be cheats available for Pathways that could add some of these features.

On the other hand, in making the game very hard to play, Bungie has heightened the exhilaration of discovering new levels and objects, and avoided the inevitable "I solved it too fast" feedback associated with many other games, such as CD-ROM titles. Other than this complexity, which is a toss-up issue, I found the copy protection to be fairly painless, but annoying none the less. You'll have to look up sequences of monsters on pages throughout the manual three times. If you move the files from one location on a disk to another, you'll have to do it all over again. Those two issues aside, I found Pathways flawless. Many games boast that they actually get your heart pounding faster, only to fall short of expectations and marketing hype. Pathways delivers. The attention to detail and quality is astonishing. Pathways Into Darkness is one of the best Macintosh games I've ever played!

Pros
• 256 color, real-time texture mapping
• 360° freedom of movement
• High-quality, "Active Panning" stereo sound
• Large number of levels
• Beautiful animation
• Challenging

Cons
• No provisions for reducing difficulty level
• Perhaps too violent for small children or the violence-sensitive
• Copy protected