

MG Interview: MacPlay's Bill Dugan

by Tuncer Deniz

Bill Dugan is an easy man to find. You can usually find him at MacPlay booths at shows like CES and Macworld enthusiastically telling on-lookers about MacPlay's hot new titles. Towering at nearly six feet and six inches, Dugan's height is not match for his overwhelming enthusiasm toward MacPlay and its products. A true Mac gamer, Bill Dugan is at the heart and soul of Macintosh game development at MacPlay.

IMG: Tell me a little bit about yourself, your background, etc.

Dugan: Let's see. I started working at Interplay Productions in 1986, right out of high school. I got the job by answering an ad that was on a local pirate BBS, so I got to work on an Apple II game called "Wasteland" as a map scripter and designer. We still get comments from Wasteland fans from way back, it's lots of fun. I did lots of scripting and debugging maps, and I got to design Downtown Las Vegas, with the howitzer you could use to blow up different parts of the town. Looking back it was a lot of fun, but I think I ended up making a dollar an hour that summer! It was a contract job, see.

IMG: Your official title at MacPlay is High Priest. What exactly does a High Priest do?

Dugan: I preach a lot! My most important hat at MacPlay is to just ensure that the quality of our games is the highest possible. I'm the guy who yells at the producers if their graphics suck or their About box is lame. I also produce a couple of games at any particular time, go to all the trade shows, go on MacTV when I can ... and actually play games occasionally.

IMG: MacPlay is a division of Interplay. When and why was MacPlay started?

Dugan: MacPlay and its first game -- "Out of this World" -- were launched at the January 1993 MacWorld in San Francisco. We created the MacPlay division to bring more focus to Interplay's Mac games. Despite the presence of myself and a few other Macheads around the office, Interplay released some Mac titles that were real marginal in quality, and it was because of the lack of focus. There were no key people to make sure it was a good Mac product; usually it was just some DOS producer porting Interplay games directly across, and that was the quality of the result we usually got. There were some exceptions when there were highly motivated Mac enthusiasts involved in the project, but we needed more focus.

I think MacPlay has been very successful in our focus on the Mac. We were the first big publisher to devote the resources we have to Mac gaming, and we've made some really good games.

IMG: What would you say is MacPlay's "hottest" product right now?

Dugan: Everybody's looking forward to Wolfenstein 3D and Flashback and Star Trek 25th Anniversary CD-ROM. At the moment, Castles: Siege & Conquest is actually the best selling game, which I'm very proud of. It's my favorite MacPlay game. Robert Barris from QuickSilver did a great job coding the thing; he seems to have just the right touch.

Plus generally I love that type of game -- strategy and simulation games.

IMG: I really loved Out of this World, which, as you mentioned, was MacPlay's first product. Is there any chance of a sequel?

Dugan: Thanks! Anyway, Flashback is shipping within 2 or 3 months. It was also published originally by Delphine Software, and many people view it as a sequel of sorts to OOTW, though the story and puzzles are very different. It also has a lot of rotoscoped animation with cinematic cut-away scenes. Flashback is a much bigger game and I think it'll be well-received on the Macintosh.

IMG: What's the deal with Alone in the Dark? Do you think it'll ship this century <grin>?

Dugan: You're a funny guy! Actually, yes. We'll be showing it at MacWorld. Alone in the Dark was a great game on the PC ... the Mac version has been slow because about 60% of the game was written in 286 assembly language, commented in French. It's been a struggle. But yes, the contract requires that we ship it this century.

IMG: A lot of people liked Star Trek: 25th Anniversary, but we heard a lot of complaints about the low-res graphics. I hear MacPlay is going to do something about the graphics in the enhanced CD-ROM version of Star Trek. Care to elaborate?

Dugan: Yeah, the graphics were pretty blocky, weren't they? I'd have to say that using 320x200 graphics in Trek 25th was the biggest mistake MacPlay has made so far. We lost a certain amount of credibility for a while. It was really unfortunate, because the game itself is really fun -- if you look at comp.sys.mac.games, there are lots of requests for hints. But people hate those blocky graphics -- I don't blame them. Never again.

For the CD-ROM version we're smoothing out all the graphics out on the fly. It looks a lot better -- but since it's on the fly, you'll need something faster than a IIci to play it at tolerable speed.

Oh yeah, you can upgrade by sending in your original disks plus \$25.00 to Customer Service and they'll send you the CD-ROM version.

IMG: What other features will the CD-ROM version of Star Trek have and when will it ship?

Dugan: Voices! We went into 3 studios in Hollywood and recorded all of the actors from the original TV series. It was really a kick to work with Shatner and Nimoy and DeForest Kelley. None of them had done a CD-ROM game before, but their professionalism was obvious -- on practically every single line, Shatner hit the right tone exactly, without any context and without needing retakes.

Anyway, the voices aren't just a novelty; they really enhance the feel of the game. Instead of just (1) reading text, (2) pressing Return, (3) reading text, (4) pressing Return ... over and over and over ... it's more like watching episodes of the TV series as the characters rag on each other and talk to people. It's great.

Also the game's about 10% bigger with a new ending, and we added ambient sound effects that play

continuously in the background for atmosphere.

IMG: I think MacPlay surprised a lot of people when they announced they would ship Wolfenstein 3D for the Mac. Can you tell us about its features, distribution method (commercial or shareware), and when you expect it to ship?

Dugan: We'll release a shareware version called Wolfenstein 3D: First Encounter. That'll ship shortly after MacWorld, you'll be able to download it from anywhere. Then you send us \$15.00 and we give you 27 more levels with more bosses and sound effects and music and weapons. Then there'll be another level pack for Christmas for another \$25.00 which gives you all the levels from the PC version, with all those mission disks that Id Software sold -- Operation Eisenfaust, "Die, Fuhrer, Die!", all those.

We're using the graphics that were made for the Jaguar version, which are 4 times sharper than the blocky PC graphics. They look hot. The sound effects are all new, too. We have a crack sound department and so we've got great-sounding chain guns and explosions. And Wolf3D is accelerated for Power Macintosh!

IMG: Is MacPlay working on any other cool titles you can tell us about?

Dugan: There are several Secret Projects being developed for 486 and PowerPC chips. Even Interplay's DOS programmers are interested in the PowerPC chip now, so even these DOS guys are tending to write code that's much more portable than in the past. They're aware that their games will be able to do very cool things on the PowerPC. We'll come out with many Power Macintosh games as time goes on.

IMG: Here's a question I love to ask people, do you think Mac users are snobs? Complainers?

Dugan: I have mixed feelings about it. I think that yes, Mac users, just like me, are whiners. Sometimes when talking to certain people you just want to shout "Get a life! I don't care if I didn't do a 16-gray version of Wolfenstein 3D!"

On the other hand, perhaps it's a good sign that we're whiners. It just means we've been spoiled by being exposed to many, many applications that had excellent user interfaces, and it rankles when we have to use programs that are demonstrably inferior. This is the flip side of DOS gamers, who rarely whine about things like user interfaces because they have had to use programs like WordPerfect for DOS for years, and ANYTHING is better than that.

IMG: What's your take on the Mac games market? What are your impressions of the Mac games market today?

Dugan: I think that overall, games on the Mac suck. It's pretty sad. If I see another "game" made up of canned QuickTime movies, I'm going to vomit into my CD-ROM drive. At MacPlay, we are really trying to do something about the sad situation.

People on the PC side tend to laugh at us Mac gamers because they think our games are lame, and it's difficult to rebut this. The best game in the world right now is "Doom," from Id Software, not yet available on the Mac. The best strategy/simulation game is still "Civilization" -- you can play it on the Mac, and I do, all the time, but it's a pretty butcherous port. Other fantastic PC games like "X-Wing" and "TIE Fighter" and "Dune II" aren't on the Mac yet, either.

And we Mac people respond by generating excessive enthusiasm for the few games that we do have. I mean, last year, in 1993, MacWorld gave a Hall of Fame award to a little game called "Diamonds". Now, compare Diamonds, a 1993 MacWorld Hall of Fame game, to Doom, the best PC game of 1993. No offense to the people who made Diamonds, but come on! What does this mean?

The obvious reason for the disparity is that a lot of talent in the big game companies just aim at the DOS market because, well, it's over 80% of the market. Hopefully the Power Macintosh will lure much more game development.

There is hope. The games industry is still small enough such that "little guys" can emerge from their garage with a great new trick and release a game that knocks everyone's socks off. This could happen on any platform; you never know. Overall, I think people who play Mac games pretty much want the same experience as DOS gamers have. Mac people probably have a higher pickiness factor, but the two groups aren't really that different.

IMG: How do you see MacPlay in the game market in the next few years?

Dugan: I think we've done a pretty good job so far of shipping some really good games and we'll continue to do so. In addition to continuing to internally develop games -- as we're doing with games like Wolfenstein 3D and Star Trek 25th Anniversary Enhanced CD-ROM -- we'll continue to be able to publish products created externally by dedicated development companies, like Astro Chase 3D by First Star.

And hopefully Power Macintosh games will figure more into the equation. I'd also like to see us do network games.

IMG: What do you think about copy protection? Should it be outlawed or is it a necessary thing?

Dugan: Tough question, I have mixed feelings. As a game player I'm irritated by copy protection, except I don't really mind the FAQ-type questions that Civilization and Castles: Siege & Conquest use. But as a games publisher, it totally irritates me that people are playing our games without paying up.

Ultimately, though, copy protection just frustrates the end-user and I don't want them hating us. At MacPlay, we're not going to do any wacky codewheels anymore. Manual-based copy protection is the maximum, and I think we're even moving away from that.

IMG: What types of games do you see foresee being developed for the PowerPC?

Dugan: The first few are going to be DOOM clones. Then we'll get nice polygon flight sims and things. Personally I'd like to see network-based games that rely on lots of local calculation for cool effects.

I think the biggest influence on games in the near future is going to be network games. The most fun games I know of are network games. In the farther future, parallel processing across multiple PowerPC chips will let us create extremely realistic environments. But I see the network as a bigger deal than the PowerPC. Interacting with other people gives any game a depth that you can't quite simulate.

IMG: I hear you're a DOOM freak. What's so great about this game?

Dugan: You get to kill your friends with powerful weapons and then have a beer with them. I used to reflect over the fact that the speed and realism of Doom really made the violence more real than anything else would have done -- more blood doesn't bring you there into the game. Doom is the one game that's given me fear. There's nothing like standing at a T-intersection with a shotgun, wounded down to 2% health, holding your breath and listening to the stereo sound from the speakers waiting for your friend to approach from one side and blow your head off.

Again, I think network play is the key.

IMG: Do you have any personal favorite games, Macintosh and/or PC?

Dugan: Actually the games I play lately are Civilization on the Mac, and I've also been mudding a lot. Yet again, network games are the key. I always play on a mud called Genesis in Sweden; you can get there

with "telnet hamal2.cs.chalmers.se 3011". It's great fun to run around with friends who are playing from all different countries, knocking off orcs and castle guards and solving quests and exploring new areas. And then there are the recent guild wars between the Rangers and Angmar's Army. Anyway, I recommend it highly. Despite the fact that it's all text, no graphics, and a command-line interface with commands like "get all from second corpse", it absorbs me utterly.

Railroad Tycoon was a great game on the PC. I hated the Mac conversion. At work on my Mac I've been playing Chuck Yeager's Air Combat recently; I like taking out an F-4 and trashing squadrons of B-17s and the like, laughing at their pathetic inability to shoot me down.

IMG: So, what do you do for fun?

Dugan: Don't make me laugh! Usually I'm mudding, occasionally while playing Civilization simultaneously. (There's a lot of lag telnetting to Sweden.) And on the weekends I go down to the Harp Inn in Newport Beach for a pint of Newcastle.