y Jeff Eaton

Remember back in the old days of Mac gaming, when Tetris was the rage and Falcon was the hottest (and the only!) flight sim around? With the PowerPC chip, innovative new games, and ports of popular PC titles it's clear we've come a long way since those early days. The Mac has begun to regain lost ground in the world of entertainment. IMG's new "Company Spotlight" column will take a look at the folks making that revolution happen. Companies who've been with Mac gamers since day one, and newcomers who are helping to expand the selection of hot Mac titles.

The obvious place to start is Bungie software, publisher of Marathon and Marathon 2. Few other games have brought so much attention to the Mac as a gaming platform in recent years or hampered corporate productivity so severely!

Bungie: 1990 AD

Bungie Software began as the brainchild of University of Chicago student Alexander Seropian. In late 1990, he launched the company by uploading a freeware table tennis game to the AOL file libraries. Though it's not likely to be remembered, Bungie buffs can still find it on AOL by searching for "GNOP 1.0."

Alex shipped Bungie's first commercial game almost a year later - Operation Desert Storm. A top-down arcade game, it put the player in control of a US tank fighting Iraqi forces. (True fans can download Operation Desert Storm from Bungie's web page at <http://www.bungie.com> for a burst of Bungie nostalgia...) While it wasn't a commercial success, Bungie says the game "taught [Alex] valuable lessons in the business and...set the stage for greater things to come."

Enter Jason Jones, the archetypal computer hacker/programmer. In high school, he began tinkering with Apple II's. Soon, he was writing his own games. When his family purchased a Mac 128, Jason's life with Macintosh began, and gaming history would never be the same.

The two crossed paths in a University of Chicago artificial intelligence class. Alex saw potential in porting Minotaur, an old Apple II game that Jason had written as a diversion. The two joined forces, and after some polishing and packaging, Minotaur became Bungie's first

commercial success. They broke even!

Jason and his friends had been tweaking and refining the game for almost two years. When it hit the streets, its gameplay was polished to a sheen. Minotaur dropped the player into an icon-based dungeon full of traps, monsters, weapons, spells, and - most importantly - other human opponents. Rather than adding network play as an afterthought, it emphasized network and modem games to the exclusion of single-person play. Though its interface was an almost direct port of Jason's old Apple II version, Minotaur developed a strong following and turned Bungie into a respectable Mac gaming company.

The First-Person Revolution
In 1992, with Minotaur shipping and enjoying limited success, a new rage had hit the PC world - 3D first-person arcade games. Wolfenstein 3D, by id Software, was drawing rave reviews with its fast-paced, ultra-violent action. Alex and Jason, with the help of artist Colin Brent, began work on Pathways Into Darkness. The game would use the same real-time 3D graphics that made Wolf3D a success and harness them in a role-playing adventure game with an intricate, evolving plot.

"We had some interesting and unique but extremely difficult to understand plots," said Jason Jones in a 1993 interview with IMG. One involved a cliche Indiana-Jones style adventure while another cast the player as a reluctant immortal unearthing the secrets of a mysterious spring. When the game was finally completed, the plot had settled into the one we all know as Pathways -- take one alien god asleep in an ancient pyramid, add monsters, mix one commando with a tactical nuke, and shake well.

Happily for Bungie, Pathways' release in late 1993 was a major success. "By the time it came out," said Alex in an interview with University of Chicago Magazine, "Mac users were dying for a game like [Pathways]." It leapfrogged Wolf3D with more realistic graphic effects and a wide variety of weapons, giving Mac users bragging rights for the first time in years. They did more than break even with the game -- its profits allowed the company to move out of Alex's apartment and into a real office!

Along with the new office came Doug Zartman, Bungie's "PR Dude." At the time, Jason had been programming *and* giving tech support to users online. With the mushrooming sales of Pathways, someone else needed to carry that load while Jason concentrated on Bungie's next project... Marathon.

The Big One: Marathon Is Born
Immediately after the release of Pathways, Jason & Company began work on their next 3D game. Code-named Marathon, it was to be a souped-up version of Pathways, with all the cool features they couldn't include in the first game. At the January 1994 MacWorld, the engine was debuted, causing considerable excitement among gamers. It soon became apparent, however, that this project would be more 'Pathways II.' "Jason and his friends decided to make it much cooler." says Doug Zartman, recalling the days after he joined Bungie. The graphics engine was re-written no fewer than three times, and the artists and level designers worked for months on end to polish the game.

By the time it was completed, Marathon had abandoned Pathways' RPG style for a more action-oriented, sci-fi setting, and a plot that wove together conquering aliens, battling computer AI's, and 23rd century political intrigue. Interest in the game reached a fever pitch, and online Bungiephiles waited for any snippet of information about Marathon.

Network play, one of Marathon's greatest strengths, stole the show in many sneak peeks of the game. "We probably spent two months testing network play," says Doug. Jason jokingly

confesses that the game would have been done a month earlier if they hadn't had so much fun "testing" it!

Marathon's debut, as most know, was a resounding success. When it finally shipped, a year after the MacWorld debut, tens of thousands of gamers were waiting with bated breath (and pre-orders, as well...). Phones rang off the hook at Bungie's Chicago headquarters, and there were shortages of the program until they could ramp up production. "For basically a month after it shipped, there was no way I could keep up... Pretty quickly, we had to switch to a different phone system," says Doug, who manned the phones during the hectic time following the release. "In terms of demand, it was much bigger than we had anticipated."

Even PC game magazines sat up and took notice. DOOM, the reigning king of PC action games, was put to shame by Marathon's fluid high-res graphics and PowerMac native speed. If Pathways turned Bungie into a success, Marathon made it an icon. Marathon 2, released late last year, built on the success of the original and added features that many players had requested. A controversial Windows port of Marathon 2 is underway now. Expected to hit the streets this summer, it will be Bungie's first non-Mac product. Cries of "Bungie has betrayed us!" echoed through Cyberspace at the news, but the company has pledged to remain faithful to its roots while expanding into the PC market.

Above and Beyond

What lies ahead for Bungie? Marathon Infinity, the third in the series, is under construction. Building on the plot lines of Marathon 1 and 2, it will bring a measure of closure to the game's sci-fi story. New graphics, maps, aliens, and weapons will be included as well as a handful of engine enhancements. Non-linear level design, a feature that Pathways offered but the original Marathon abandoned, is being considered. If implemented, it would allow players to complete one level, go on to another, and re-visit the first one again later. Can't kill that Juggernaut? Wait 'til later when you've found the missile launcher!

Marathon Infinity will also include all of the level-creation and scenario-design tools that Bungie used in creating the game. Many have speculated that this is Bungie's way of closing the series and "handing it over to the players." Doug Zartman agrees. "We don't want to do Marathon 4... we don't want to be pigeonholed."

Bungie is also seeking to license the Marathon 2 engine to other companies interested in producing 3D action games. Though they were unable to give details at press time, Bungie says that several have expressed an interest in the engine. They'll also continue in the tradition they've started: creating innovative games for Mac players. "Networking is a big part of what we enjoy about games. With networking becoming easier and more services becoming available [to connect gamers], we're definitely going to emphasize that."

To check out the Bungie web page, click on the button below: