

I was sick and tired of playing Marathon 2: Durandal. I had been at it for hours already; this was my sixth time trudging out of the lava to my shield recharger after missing a tricky jump. I was frustrated, I was tired, my eyes hurt, I was developing carpal tunnel syndrome, and even the joy of wanton carnage was beginning to fade. I can recall the moment precisely when I realized that I had played my fill. I recall so clearly because that realization was followed almost immediately by another: I could not stop.

I could not stop because Durandal was in trouble. His ship was under attack, he was outnumbered and outgunned. I couldn't just leave off in the bowels of Lh'owon, I needed to climb back into teleportation range. I wasn't quite sure what a single marine was going to be able to do against the combined might of Battle Group Seven, but that was beside the point. Durandal was in trouble, and he needed my help.

Let me be clear: what I felt then was more than a desire to "advance the plot" as though I were struggling through some perverse book which required me to beat a level of Doom before every page. Instead, Marathon had achieved what many books and movies never quite do: genuine concern for its characters. A suspension of disbelief had been achieved, and after all of Durandal's terminal messages, all the errands I'd run for him, all the philosophical musings and megalomania, I was really worried about the sarcastic bastard.

More than that, though, I had the power to do something about it. That suspension of disbelief not only allowed the universe and the characters to become real, it made them real around me. The story had a hole in it shaped just for me--I was not merely the audience, but the guy with the gun. I needed to make it back to the surface not just to find out what was going to happen, but to change it.

The story was predetermined all along, of course, but that was irrelevant because it didn't feel that way. Years from now, when the Marathon series is taught in English class, it will not merely be for its complex characters or engaging plot. It will be because Marathon is more than the sum of its story page. That evening I was an active participant in Marathon's story, something no book or movie has ever been able to give me, or will ever be able to give me. This is something which is, alas, lacking in most games today--games which have the special effects of an action movie, and the depth to match. Marathon was the first game to truly bring me into its universe, and I have never forgotten the experience.

I was compelled to continue playing that aggravating level because Durandal was not depending on an unnamed security officer, he was depending on me. I will always remember that moment, for it was the moment when a game of skill transcended itself and became art.

That time, I made the jump.