

CLOSE COMBAT: FIRST TO FIGHT
DEVELOPER DIARY #1
by Peter Tamte, Destineer president

MAKING A GAME WITH THE MARINE CORPS

Our relationship with the Marines began with one of the most motivating sentences I've heard in more than 12 years in the games industry. A key Marine Lt. Colonel began our relationship by reminding us that the reason the Marine Corps wanted to make First to Fight was -- to save lives. This really struck home.

Shortly before this reminder from the LtCol, Destineer and Atomic Games partnered to begin development of two training simulations for the Marine Corps that will also be made available commercially. One of these is the real-time strategy game "Close Combat: Red Phoenix." And, the other is the first-person shooter "Close Combat: First to Fight."

Atomic and Destineer partnered to make these games for a number of reasons. Atomic had revolutionized military games in 1996 with the Close Combat series (one of the very first real-time strategy games, winner of many "Strategy Game of the Year" awards, and a best-seller with over 1.2 million units sold), and they had already developed one major training simulation being used by the Marine Corps. Destineer, for its part, had its own 3D engine, in which we had invested a couple million dollars and two years of development time, along with a very capable development team.

So, when we started working with the Marine Corps on our first-person shooter game, First to Fight, we knew we were in for an extraordinary experience. Now, after working closely with them for over 16 months so far, we are simply awestruck by who these people are.

We've had the help of more than 40 active-duty Marines. Most of these guys recently returned from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of them were just re-deployed to Iraq (mostly to Fallujah). A few of them just finished their second full tour of duty in Iraq (they got to come home for only one month between tours).

These men have spent days and days with our development team demonstrating fire team tactics and then testing our implementations over and over again. They've listened to dozens of sound samples to tell us exactly what it sounds like when you get shot at from someone directly in front of you vs. from an angle. They've provided thousands of pages of doctrine to us, and they've taken us inside their shoot-houses during take-down exercises.

But, the most important thing they've demonstrated to us is how the Marine Corps has transformed them into smart, tough, elite warriors. And, they've done this without saying a word.

Representing who a Marine is -- this is central to understanding the Marine experience. So, therefore, it must be central to First to Fight. But, it's definitely the hardest thing to put into a game.

MAKING IT REAL

We knew from the beginning that Close Combat: First to Fight would be all about authenticity. But, what is authenticity? Accurate weapons models? Accurate uniforms?

We wanted our authenticity to be a whole lot deeper than this. We wanted to provide the kind of authenticity that could only be built into a game because of the involvement of these Marines who were getting shot at in Iraq just weeks before. And, we wanted to represent these guys' true Marine character in the game.

So, we arrived at three core principles that would govern our authenticity:

1. Ready-Team-Fire-Assist. These are the battle-proven tactics that Marines use in urban environments. They govern how a Marine fire team moves, the fire-sectors they cover, who is responsible for what, and more. Ready-Team-Fire-Assist gives the fire team 360-degree security when crossing intersections, moving up staircases, taking down rooms, etc. It's one of the things that make a Marine fire team truly lethal.
2. Marine Air Ground Task Force. The Marines impressed upon us that they're never alone in combat. They're part of an integrated force of both air and ground assets. So, just like in live combat, players in First to Fight can call for fire from Cobra gunships and mortar, and they can call for support from M1 Abrams tanks, Armored Assault Vehicles, and other Marines.
3. The Human Will. It's always driven me crazy that you can't use many of the most basic military tactics in most military games. Marines believe that the driving force behind all actions in war is the human will. The whole point of war is to impose your will on your enemy. It's about taking actions to force your enemy to react. It's about affecting his will to fight you. So, in First to Fight, just like in the earlier Close Combat games, every friendly and enemy character is governed by morale and discipline. This means that players can cause enemies to flee through flanking. It means you can use sophisticated techniques like Combined Arms Effect, and a lot more. No military game can call itself authentic unless it considers the most simple, driving force of all actions in war -- the human will.

In the coming weeks, we'll dive more deeply into the development techniques behind this authenticity, what we're doing to make authenticity fun, and how our interactions with the Marines have affected how the game plays.

CLOSE COMBAT: FIRST TO FIGHT DEVELOPER DIARY #2

by Peter Tamte, Destineer president

In our first developer diary, we discussed how we began our relationship with the Marine Corps, how US Marines just back from combat in Iraq are helping us shape the game, and the three core principles governing the game's authenticity.

As we discussed in the first developer diary, we want First to Fight's authenticity to be a whole lot deeper than just accurate weapons models and uniforms. We want to provide the kind of authenticity that can only be provided because of the involvement of Marines who were very recently in the thick of urban combat.

HOW THE MARINE VERSION AND COMMERCIAL VERSION DIFFER

The Marine Corps plans to use First to Fight to train Marines. It will be deployed in barracks, simulation centers, ships, and Marine Corps installations around the world.

The commercial version that will be made available for sale to consumers, and the Marine Corps version used for training Marines, are almost identical. The only substantial difference is that the Marine Corps has requested specific features for narrowly-defined training needs that we didn't think had commercial appeal. Other than this, the two versions are pretty much the same.

Which begs the question -- Aren't the Marines worried about the effect this could have on their security? We can be certain that some of our nation's enemies will play the game (by stealing it on the Internet, probably).

While it is true that anybody who plays First to Fight will learn a lot about Marine fire team tactics, this isn't a substitute for the months and months of physical, classroom, and field training these men experience as they are transformed into Marines. Even a dentist in the Marine Corps is required to qualify every year with a rifle with no scope at a range of 5 football fields -- or he gets booted. Every Marine must pass a rigorous physical fitness test twice per year. As importantly, Marines operate under a set of values and with a firm discipline that is hard to imagine.

I think the most valuable thing our nation's enemies will learn from First to Fight is that the Marine Corps is made up of smart, tough, elite warriors who are backed by the most amazing firepower in the history of time. As proven at Iwo Jima (where 24 Marines earned a Medal of Honor), Hue City, and even now in Fallujah, there is literally no price a Marine won't pay to accomplish his mission. I hope First to Fight will help our enemies see that the fastest route to their perverted view of heaven is to place themselves in the path of a Marine fire team.

MAKING AUTHENTICITY FUN

First off, we believe authenticity IS fun. An incredible thing about videogames is that they allow us to get a taste of someone else's really dangerous life from the safety of our own living room.

In the first developer diary, we explained the features that define our authenticity:

1. Ready-Team-Fire-Assist. These are the formations, movement and tactics Marines use in urban environments to give the fire team 360-degree security and allow them to target opponents effectively.
2. Marine Air Ground Task Force. Players in First to Fight can call for fire from Cobra gunships and mortar, and they can call for support from tanks, AAVs, and a Marine sniper team.
3. The Human Will. The actions of every friendly and enemy character in First to Fight are governed by a psychology model. This allows players to employ real military tactics like flanking and combined arms.

But, we can't escape talking about authenticity without talking about difficulty.

First to Fight will offer players multiple difficulty levels, of course. But, we're creating a special game mode for players who want true authenticity. For these people, we're offering "simulation" mode, which is the only mode every Marine who has visited our office tells us he will play (of course).

In simulation mode, we're stripping away the niceties of gameplay balancing, health packs, and the rest. In simulation mode, first aid won't make you tougher, it will just keep you from dying (like in real life). If you get shot in the leg, you will move slower. We're also narrowing accuracy tolerances and many other variables to make the game more real. Our hope is that simulation mode in First to Fight will truly be the closest you can get on a computer or Xbox to being a Marine fire team leader in modern urban combat.

Hopefully, all of this authenticity will make you play First to Fight differently than the way you play other shooters. The Marine Corps refers to First to Fight as a "Tactical Decision-making Simulation." Its purpose is to help Marines make better decisions.

Imagine playing a multiplayer game in simulation mode in First to Fight in which your teammate has been shot. He's lying on the ground exposed to enemy fire. If you don't get him first aid soon, he will die. Do you risk it? If so, how do you arrange your fire team to provide the best cover? These are the kinds of decisions Marine fire team leaders who've been working with us on First to Fight have had to make in Iraq. And, they're the kinds of decisions we hope will make playing First to Fight really interesting -- and authentic.