

y Greg Kramer

he "First Person Perspective Shoot-'em-Up" is by now a full-fledged genre all its own. With the success of the "Dooms" and the "Marathons," every game company is now trying to make the definitive FPPSEU (don't even try to pronounce it...I have, it hurts.) The latest entry to be ported to the Mac is Origin's "System Shock," a complex, cyberpunk, story-driven, point-and-shoot game with some old fashioned questing thrown in for some extra treats. System Shock is a respectable, visually stunning, and often engrossing entry into this overcrowded field, but it tries to wear too many hats for its own good.

#### [Let me tell ya a story 'bout a hacker named Jed](#)

Unlike many ultra-violent action games, in System Shock the plot line is central to completion of the game. You, the world's most notorious hacker, are apprehended by a large technology company. You are allowed to escape prosecution only if you make a deal with an unscrupulous company executive. You must hack into SHODAN, the artificial intelligence of the company's research space station called "Citadel." In addition to your freedom, you are offered a military-grade neural implant, the Christmas wish of any twenty-first century hacker. You succeed, though you don't quite know how, and submit to the implant surgery, a process which will take you out of commission for six months. During your "rest," SHODAN achieves sentience and decides to exterminate humanity. When you awake, the station is deserted, the inhabitants massacred, and every level is patrolled by armies of mutants, cyborgs and robots. It is your mission to foil SHODAN's plans and save the earth. Piece of

cake, right?

While the plot is garden-variety cyberpunk fodder which wouldn't make it at your local cinema (recall "Johnny Mnemonic"), it does provide an interesting foundation for a game. Most FPPSEU games keep your interest with the promise of tougher foes, bigger weapons, new levels, and constant adrenaline. System Shock has all these (with the adrenaline somewhat toned down) plus a well-paced intriguing mystery to solve. It is, as many have said, the thinking person's Doom.

#### [My puzzler hurts](#)

Contributing to this image is the presence of puzzles throughout the game. They appear in two forms: wire and grid puzzles. You can set the difficulty of these puzzles only at the outset of the game, and they do increase in difficulty as you progress through the station.

To put it bluntly, MYST they ain't. At first I thought they were a nice touch requiring you to rewire doors and jump circuits as a realistic story element. After a while, however, they just got annoying and broke up a rather briskly paced game. A little more variety would have made these pauses a bit less aggravating.

#### [don't want to know jack!](#)

Another element of System Shock which makes it stand out from the crowd is that the story takes place both in real space and in cyberspace. The game cannot be won without "jacking-in" to cyberspace terminals on each level. Once inside the computer, you are confronted with a new landscape, a metaphorical representation of the inside of the computer which you must navigate, collecting software for your defense, fending off computer defense

systems, and flipping switches which affect things in the real world (i.e., some doors are ONLY accessible from cyberspace.)

I found this the most frustrating element of the game. While the idea sounds great in the manual, the execution doesn't work. The controls are very difficult to navigate and battle is needlessly difficult. Even though I had mastered the basics of cyberspace "flying," I was unable to accomplish anything after the first few levels. The game offers little room for training, as the more time you spend in cyberspace, the less time it takes SHODAN to detect you and send a full bore attack against you. If you spend a lot of time on Level 1 practicing your technique, it will cost you later.

If you think it's worth it, my best advice is to find the terminal on Level 1 and practice all you like. Then start your game from scratch.

### [Look up, look down](#)

The most intriguing innovation of System Shock is that it is played in a full three dimensions. The creators of System Shock, Looking Glass Technologies, introduced this in the most recent "Ultima" installment (available only for PC as usual.) If you've ever been playing Marathon and wanted to be able to jump up on a ledge or crouch to crawl through a promising looking space, your salvation is in System Shock.

The world of System Shock exists all around you. You can be attacked from above and from below. This is a truly meaningful contribution to this genre, but it has a price. In full screen mode (the only way to play if you've got the RAM), even on the fastest systems, the texture mapping is slower than in other games. I have no doubt this will be remedied as other games develop the technology.

The other price tag on this new level of detail is the increase in control complexity. As for its controls, System Shock plays more like a flight simulator than an arcade game. This becomes more of a challenge than an annoyance once you've mastered the controls, although I strongly recommend learning keyboard controls right from the start rather than the very tricky mouse. In cyberspace, however, use the mouse and keyboard together.

### [The Bottom Line](#)

The question is, do we even need a "thinking person's Doom?" Is the whole appeal of the genre the sheer, unapologetic, non-stop carnage and combat, or is there room for a more complex game?

System Shock is an excellent technical achievement, and visually, a real step forward in the overpopulated first person genre. At worst, it is somewhat overly ambitious and tries to be too many things at once. This is not a grave sin and certainly should not dissuade the adventurous from giving it a whirl.

The beauty of the game is that each of my criticisms above can be remedied by merely changing the difficulty settings at the start of a game. Since you can set the difficulty of combat, puzzles, story line, and cyberspace independently of each other, you can make the game what you want. It can be anything from a full-bore, storyless action game, to a near total mind game. The only problem is that you must make that decision before you start the game or else start over.

Once properly set to your liking, System Shock is an engrossing, original and visually interesting game likely to appeal even to players tired of more traditional first person games.

### Pros

- Great graphics and 3D environment
- Interesting story line
- Highly customizable but only at start of game

### Cons

- Heavy hardware requirements, especially to run full screen
- Cyberspace very difficult at anything higher than "Easy"
- Puzzles don't add much to game

### Publisher Info

Origin Systems Inc.  
5918 W. Courtyard  
Austin, TX 78730

<http://www.ea.com/origin.html>