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o you remember “The Breakfast Club”? I thought it was great. For me, it was the high-point of the eighties. Everything about that movie just really floats my boat. I liked the music, I liked the dialogue, I liked the acting, and the premise was great — a group of archetypal personalities stuck with each other, in a situation none of them liked.

In a sense, I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream is kind of like “The Breakfast Club.”

But wait, you’re saying. How can a game with a title like that be in any way similar to one of the most upbeat movies of the last two decades? The answer is simpler than you think. Take all the characters and make them deeply disturbed people, haunted by demons from a past they don’t necessarily remember. Take the universal punishment — after-school detention — and make it a macabre, never-ending descent into pitch-black chambers of pain, sorrow, and guilt. Take the airy high school and watch as it changes before your eyes into a collection of tired, dim, dirty rooms where mirrors and windows reflect only the fears and suspicions you’ve harbored about the characters from the beginning. Take the schoolteacher and turn him into a mad god, a brilliant mind trapped in a decaying body, wishing that he could only rot away but instead entombed alive in an

iridium-insulated coffin.

Trust me — it's actually fun.

[Writing Makes the Difference](#)

David Siegel [if you can, linke that to <http://www.dsiegel.com>] has called Myst "the first game worth criticizing."

I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream has surprisingly little to criticize.

When I first ran Scream, I was, frankly, a little disappointed. There were no full-screen multimedia extravaganzas, no beautiful Hollywood actresses cavorting around my screen in black leather, brandishing Uzi's. Instead, there was the voice of Harlan Ellison, one of the most influential science fiction writers in the world, easing in and out of my speakers like the tide, telling me just how much he hated me.

Scream is based on Harlan Ellison's short story of the same name, one of the ten most reprinted stories in the English language. Truth be told, the story weighs in a tad on the cheesy side, and if you've seen "The Terminator" you'll know most of it to begin with.

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he premise is simple: in the sixties and seventies, the superpowers added one more weapon to their arsenal: the computer. And, in their predictable way, began competing, building bigger and better machines to fight a theoretical war that spiraled upward in complexity until a human commander had no hope of

managing it.

They fed them killing data, information on war and mass murder, and the petty feelings which eventually blossom into mushroom clouds. They lost control. The computers were ordered sealed in their blast-proof underground bunkers, but by then it was too late; they had already merged, joined hands miles beneath the surface. Their leader was the Allied Mastercomputer, created by the Americans and sponsored by the Israelis and the British along with others. Together, they called themselves AM. Not Allied Mastercomputer, but the word, AM. As in cogito ergo sum.

And of course they put the killing data to good use

Scream takes place in the no-space beneath the surface, a hundred and nine years after the now-unseen sky was blackened with fallout by the triumvirate of mastercomputers. AM is now a limbless monster, immortal ruler of its own domain, isolated in the bowels of the world it destroyed. Except for the five tiny flames slowly burning in the center of the earth, AM is everything.

And AM has kept the five main characters alive, feeding them and replacing their broken parts for one hundred and nine years. AM, in a way, lives vicariously through them. Unable to kill itself, it satisfies its hunger with the bittersweet feelings of their suffering and sorrow. Unable to lay itself to rest, it makes their existence one never-ending death. A sort of after-school detention, if you will.

Scream is not a slug-fest, nor is it a melodramatic glimpse into the tawdry lives of five one-dimensional cardboard cutouts. It is real drama, brilliantly built around an interweaving, non-linear structure. Scream is to computer gaming what the first talking films were to movies.

(Un)willing Suspension of Disbelief

Scream does not rely on the usual crutches to get its message across. You won't see full-motion video or Hollywood-style special effects here. Instead, the game is populated with talented voice actors who make the game believable despite the lack of visual feedback. If there's anything I was disappointed with, it was the lack of flash. When you can't see an actor's face, emotions become detached, and scenes which would've been considered well-acted become silly.

Still, the story shines through. Although the game is goal-oriented, it's clear that there is no real "winning." With nothing above but ash and nothing below but AM's millions of miles of circuits, all you can hope for is death. The goal of the game is to redeem your characters as people, to show their true humanity and to go out with dignity. What worse punishment could AM receive than to be dismembered a limb at a time as its five eyes into the world it's created wink out one by one?

To this end the designers have provided the spiritual barometer. It's an indication of your character's self-esteem, and as the game progresses it becomes increasingly important. Each character's adventure culminates in a sort of catharsis, an act which affirms their humanity and pushes away the fear which AM has been reinforcing. Unless the player chooses the most humane, moral path, the characters will never have the courage and the self-confidence to face their fears.

And what characters there are!

Gorrister, the suicidal loner who's been beaten down again and again until death is his only escape. Ellen, a brilliant but socially graceless engineer who goes into hysterics when forced to see the color yellow. Benny, a man "altered" into a human chimpanzee, burned by radiation and hobbled with arthritis. Nimdok, an old man who AM sees as a kindred spirit and who seems comfortable at Auschwitz, although he has no memory of Nazi Germany. And Ted, the cynical paranoid, a snotty womanizer convinced that everybody is out to get him. Perhaps they are.

As you wander through the deep canyons of AM's twisted imagination, the actors do an incredible job of making you feel and believe what you're watching. They won't win any Oscars, but they can act with feeling and with a sense of character. With so many CD ROMs relying on pretty faces to pass muster, it's great to see a game whose plot is so well executed that the word "feeling" can even be mentioned in the review.

Sights and Sounds

Although Scream isn't the most brilliantly rendered piece of work I've seen, its moody graphics and well-done (if ill-synthesized) music draw you in and make a surreal experience seem believable. There are quite a few breathtaking scenes, and although you won't be watching the movies from this one over and over, the graphics are more than adequate.

The voice recording is very high-fidelity, and there's no audible hiss — a big plus, as nothing makes an eerie room seem more ridiculous than the sound of static behind the recordings. I was pleased with the music, if not overwhelmed.

Control is by the now-familiar sentence method, like the interface used in Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis and other games. Although a new interface wouldn't have been out of place here, the choice to go with a tried-and-true setup is understandable.

Still, the key factors in Scream aren't sound and graphics — this is the first adventure game I've reviewed where they've simply not been factors. The story is so good that the eye candy is almost meaningless. In the world of adventure games, this is probably the most well-executed plot I've seen. I do think that video would've helped, although I can see that it would've been a multi-CD production. One final criticism is that the actors are pushed to the limit by the lack of visual cues.

One Word: Wow

Scream was a joy to play and an experience I won't soon forget. It's unmistakably a step in the right direction: toward complicated, intense plots with real characters and away from silly pulp shockers that bill themselves as telling stories. Far-out, believable and deeply disturbing, it's not a game for kids — it's a game for sophisticated players who are tired of the same old regurgitated stories. Highly, highly recommended.

Pros

- o Excelling storyline
- o Compelling acting
- o High production values
- o Good graphics and sound

- Sophisticated play
- Truly well-written

Cons

- Lack of eye-candy and video pushes actors a little too far

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