eview: Sensory Overload

by Ross Scott Rubin

Type: Action/Adventure
Publisher: Reality Bytes, Inc. (617/621-1555)
Retail Price: $59.95
Street Price: $40.00
Requires: 20 MHz 68030 or better or Power Macintosh. 2.5 MB RAM (2.8 MB for music), hard disk with 8 MB free, 13" color monitor (640 X 480) with 256 colors
Protection: None

D Software's Wolfenstein 3-D started a sensation when it popularized the first-person, texture-mapped shoot-'em-up. Its sequel — Doom — and the Mac's first of the genre — Pathways Into Darkness — raised the phenomenon to a frenzy that   Mac game companies are obliging to feed. Reality Bytes' Sensory Overload marks the beginning of the second generation of these carnage showcases.

In Sensory Overload, you wake up in a research hospital to discover a room littered with dead orderlies. Acting quickly, you race outside to hear the last words of one of the hapless victims of some biochemical terrorists. From there, it's off to pick up your first weapon and find out the evil plan behind the radical group that has invaded the facility and a good chunk of Earth beneath it.

It's In There. Sensory Overload has just about everything you'd expect in a modern first-person blast-a-thon short of network play. Raycasted hallways reveal themselves as you approach them. Gunfire lights up the room and baddies even cast shadows before you see the blood spurt out of them. You can have a light or a moderate "bounce" in your step as you walk. There are stairways and ramps, and rooms of different height, although you can't "jump" from one floor to a higher level. Floors and ceilings can be texture-mapped. You can look or dodge left or right, and can "strafe" fire, that is, continue to shoot as you're bailing out.

nlike its predecessors, Sensory Overload's rooms also contain real 3-D objects. You can also duck behind crates, barrels, couches and the like, protecting yourself and firing at the right opportunity.   Unfortunately, too few of Sensory Overload's rooms are spacious enough to allow for intricate maneuvering. We'd also like to eventually see the ability to shoot from around objects as in a Hollywood shoot-out.

There is some interactivity in your work. You can, for example, click light switches and elevator buttons. We'd love to see Reality Bytes do more with this in the future, perhaps allowing you to push or throw room objects at enemies, blow up a barrel of chemicals by shooting it, or at least have a ricochet sound when a bullet hits a metallic lamp instead of the wall. Heck, while we're dreaming, how about sliding or barrelling across the floor in the best James Bond tradition?

As it stands, the scenery isn't always your friend. Bizarre mazes inhabit the lower levels. Here, damage from above takes the form of ceiling-mounted lasers and damage from below comes from electrically charged areas of the floor.

You battle the terrorists as a two-fisted warrior, starting out with a .45 in your left hand and Mr. Knuckles in the right. As the game progresses, you collect objects to throw with your right hand, including grenades and flares useful for gradually illuminating some of the pitch-black areas. Sensory Overload goes beyond mere lead-pumping. Several objects critical to your success lie beyond the fresh corpses. Body armor, ammo, and medical kits postpone your demise, while walkie-talkies and motion detectors clue you in to enemy whereabouts and plans. As critical to your eventual success are a series of colored passes required to open key doors and advance levels.

Sound Thinking. Sensory Overload employs Sound Manager 3.0 to create panning sound effects. When a terrorist yells "Freeze!" and "Hey!" you'll be able to figure out their direction and react — if it's not too late. The sounds you make upon discovering and picking up new items are a little hokey, but make for some comic relief to the screams of "Die! Die!" by Schwarzenegger types encountered later in the game.

Sound effects are a mixed bag. While the .45 sounds sharp, the Uzi sounds muffled, and grenades are both visually and audibly disappointing. Some of Reality Bytes' texture choices are uninspiring as well, particularly the unsavory green that dominates the first three levels. Patient players, though, can look forward to more diversity in room textures, sizes, and shapes when they literally dig beneath the surface.

Reality Bytes merits praise for the considerable effort that has gone into making Sensory Overload scalable. You can make the window smaller for lower-powered machines, view the game in any of three resolutions, and turn off the music and bounce in your step. The result of this economizing is acceptable speeds on machines as modest as a IIsi, and smooth full-screen action on a midrange Power Macintosh. Turning on all options, though, will cause a little jerkiness even on a 6100/60.

The developers have put most of the game's settings a keystroke away. Hitting the T key brings up the auto-mapping feature, which unfortunately retains the same dimensions as your current first-person perspective. Other keys toggle ceiling and floor mapping, change the resolution and switch to full-screen mode. A status area below the action keeps records what you've found and displays walkie-talkie messages. These happen so infrequently, though, that we wish Reality Bytes had simply digitized the sound.

A Slight Underbyte. With its pounding music and dark hallways, Sensory Overload can be downright scary, although the motion detector often reduces the surprise attack element. Reality Bytes has created a very satisfying arcade experience if you've got the hardware to make the most of it. Unfortunately, this otherwise well-crafted game is a little slow out of the gate. Connoisseurs of the first-person bloodfest may find it slightly less than compelling. While Sensory Overload is worth buying now, we suspect that advances in horsepower combined with the development of Reality Bytes' plot and graphics will lead to a follow-up that blows away more than just digitized enemies.

Pros
• Impressively complete for a first offering
• Handles full screen on PowerMacs
• Very scalable
• Complementary music and good use of sound

Cons
• Some visual effects need work
• Upper levels of research facility are boring.
• No network play