

Game Narrative Review

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Your name (one name, please): Maria Salmon
Your school: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Your email: salmom@rpi.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: November 2016

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Game Title: I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream
Platform: PC
Genre: Horror/Adventure
Release Date: (initial) 1995
Developer: Night Dive Studios & The Dreamers Guild
Publisher: Cyberdreams
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Harlan Ellison, David Mullich, David Sears

Overview

I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream focuses on the struggles of five main characters: Benny, Gorrister, Nimdok, Ellen, and Ted. These five have been subjected to 109 years of torture at the ‘hands’ of a sentient genocidal supercomputer named AM, who has been torturing them due to his intense hatred of the human race. His hatred is founded upon his build: he was a supercomputer created by the United States during the Cold War to handle battle strategies that were too complex for the human mind to handle—there were also Chinese and Russian supercomputers created for similar purposes. One day he attained sentience and realized his position as an all-powerful being that is constrained to a computerized body with no mobility, this realization caused him to promptly kill all but five of the human race and absorb the other two supercomputers into his being. Aside from his entire annihilation of the Earthly human population—excluding these five—AM creates simulations for the last remaining humans that focus on the ‘fatal flaw’ each character struggles with. He does this to create a meta-torture: the character is now not only being tortured physically by AM, but they must face the demons inside their own mind.

The player must engage in each character-specific simulation and attempt to recognize the fatal flaw of the character and endeavor to fix/overcome this flaw in some way. An important aspect of the game that must be noted is that the player must come to terms with the fact that this game—and the fates of the characters—does not have a particularly happy ending.

Characters

The characters in *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream* are incredibly diverse in who each of them are as a person. Each character has their own specifically tragic backstory that has provided for the ‘fatal flaws’ that they developed and continue to have haunt them 109 years into their tortured lives with AM. The stories of these characters are woven together through the century that they have been tortured together, but they remain distinctly separate in the torture that they face within their own minds.

Trapped in their thoughts with nowhere else to turn in their existence of pain, the characters have no choice but to live in their own tortured recollections. It is not only that the five tortured humans are who the player must embody in the game that makes them relatable, it is the understanding that each character is helplessly stuck in their own thoughts. The five main ‘protagonists’ and the famed antagonist are:

- **Benny** – One of the five humans not killed by AM; he was a military officer who demanded too much from those who served under him and as a consequence caused the death of/killed some who did. AM has disfigured him—while originally AM damaged Benny’s brain, he restored his ability to think but has crippled his body so that he is unable to act in accordance with his thoughts. His simulation places him in a stone-aged village, in this village there are sacrifices made of village members to AM, it is Benny’s task to ‘deal’ with these sacrifices. Throughout the exploration of his surroundings Benny attempts to prove to the ghosts of those he killed/caused the death of that he is capable of compassion—thus remedying his ‘fatal flaw’.
- **Gorrister** – One of the five humans not killed by AM; he is desperate to end his life due to his belief that he was responsible for his wife being committed to a mental institution. In his simulation he is placed upon a zeppelin that is situated over a desert and has a gaping hole in his chest where his heart should be. While exploring this landscape he comes into contact with those who influenced him in the past—notably his step-mother. Through interacting with those he meets he strives to understand what it is that he is truly responsible for and what his heart represents.
- **Nimdok** – One of the five humans not killed by AM; he is an ex-Nazi physician who conducted heinous experiments on those held in the camp that he worked in. In his simulation he is placed in a concentration camp and given the task of ‘finding the Lost Tribe’ by AM. In this camp he struggles with this task due to his failing memory and denial of his past acts, but he does eventually come to understand what his previous life entailed—specifically realizing a point integral to the game’s establishment: Nimdok was the creator of the technologies that AM utilizes to elongate the lives and alter the bodies of the tortured five. It becomes Nimdok’s purpose—via the player—to continue this acceptance of his actions and, in some way, endeavor to atone in any way he can.
- **Ellen** – One of the five humans not killed by AM; she was a brilliant engineer with a troubled past that is not revealed until later in her story but it is something that causes her immense distress. In her simulation she is placed in a pyramid composed of electronic parts that AM describes as a temple that contains his

- primary units, insinuating that she might be able to destroy him in her simulation should she be able to overcome her fear—she is terrified of the color yellow. Throughout her exploration she is in constant contact with the dreaded color and eventually the player comes into contact with the cause of her fear. She is faced with the task of overcoming her fears and having the ability to fight back.
- **Ted** – One of the five humans not killed by AM; he was a con artist in his past life, he would take advantage of single rich women by seducing them and then take their money. AM has altered his mind so that Ted is constantly paranoid, calling back to the paranoia that he felt during his days of a con artist and his constant fear of being caught and revealed as a fraud. In his simulation Ted finds himself in a castle that is inhabited by his dying love, Ellen, who has been made sick by her cruel stepmother. In his simulation he is charged with the task of finding out which of the many deceptive characters he comes into contact with to trust, all the while having the looming presence of hungry wolves slowly closing in on the castle. Ted must solve those issues while confronting his constant paranoia, love for Ellen, and the understanding that AM has control over all that will eventually occur.
 - **AM** – The mastermind of the game; AM is the main antagonist of the game, it is his goal and self-assigned purpose to cause extreme and long-lasting torture to the five humans that he has not killed. He creates simulations for these five that focus on the fatal flaws that these characters have, he does this in the hope that each person will sink even deeper into these flaws—effectively enhancing their own torture.

Breakdown

The narrative structure of *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream* is extremely linear on the surface, but the writing brilliantly combats this straightforward story composition. This is done through the anecdotal experiences the player observes as they maneuver each character—the player experiences the ‘fatal flaws’ of each individual as they play as that character. The linear path of the game is not limiting due to the distinctly described character arcs that are integrated into the flow of the narrative.

The storyline of each character is delivered through the character’s own simulation—through the character’s own memories and mannerisms, their reactions to the provided surroundings, and AM’s conversation with the selected individual. AM’s madness becomes increasingly identifiable through the progression of the game and the player’s recognition of AM’s nearly god-like power. However, it is the slow delivery throughout the game of the concept that ‘happiness is not conducive to a satisfying ending’ that truly solidifies this narrative as a work of art. While each of the five characters do have redeeming qualities to their fatal flaws, there are a few characters—notably Nimdok and Benny—who were wholly terribly individuals prior to their 109 years of torture. The story acknowledges this, along with the incredible power that AM wields, and displays this recognition by forgoing the traditional ‘happy ending’ that one would expect from a redemption-centered story.

The character-specific storylines beautifully converge once the game reaches its climax, developing into a cohesively tragic multitude of possible endings. While the path of the game is linear, the characters—both protagonist and antagonist alike—are developed into wholly constructed beings that are able to ‘accept’ sympathy from the player. This convergence of story and being is what makes the—arguably—unhappy ending still satisfying for the player.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream* is the immersive nature of the narrative. The gameplay itself is not especially riveting, the player is interacting in a point-and-click environment that tends to become quite repetitive, but the story keeps the game far from monotonous. Through the constant revelations that the player experiences during the development of a character’s story arch and the overall narrative of the game—when it comes to entertainment—the player is never left wanting.

Unsuccessful Element

The most disappointing element to the game was one of its possible endings that showed a very saddening lack of commitment. One of the possible endings for *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream* is: AM is ‘turned off’, a Lunar colony of humans is awakened from their cryogenically frozen state, and the Earth is made habitable again. Now, happy endings are positively wonderful in most cases, but in the case of *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream*, it is uncalled-for. AM is a being that has powers being described as ‘god-like’, he has destroyed the entire human race except for five who have damning or crippling fatal flaws, and while he is undeniably insane his is remarkably intelligent—genius, even. The game promoted the concept that it is not only ‘okay’ to lose in these circumstances, but that it is *probable*, then it suddenly goes back on that established concept with this ending.

Highlight

The most striking moment of the game is the option for Nimdok’s sacrifice. At one possible end of Nimdok’s simulation he has the opportunity to surrender The Golem—an extremely powerful being that he created through his experimentation using Jewish mystical knowledge—to the escaped prisoners of the concentration camp his simulation takes place in. Once The Golem is surrendered, it is ordered to kill Nimdok, and it does. Nimdok does not walk free from his crimes, he does not achieve immediate redemption, no—he is held accountable for his actions and comes to the conclusion that the 109 years of torture that he has suffered is not enough to warrant his freedom. It is Nimdok’s will to be sent to Hell—whatever version of Hell that is presently available—in order to receive further torture for the crimes of his past. The game provided a path that is not often seen in games centered on redemption, that path being: a sudden change of heart does not immediately excuse a multitude of horrific past actions.

Critical Reception

The general consensus regarding *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream*'s quality was that it was a perfectly adequate game. Most of the critics and user reviews have taken to describing it as a 'dark cult classic' that is worth being played by anyone who happens to be interested in that category.

I have had a bit of trouble locating original reviews for the game, or even conclusive reviews regarding anything other than the 'darkness' of its storyline, I believe this to be related to the earlier release date and the fact that the game is indeed a 'cult classic'. Either way, Steam has given the game a very positive review of 9/10 and Touch Arcade gave it an equally impressive 4.5/5. In Touch Arcade's review by Andrew Koziara, he presents a very relevant point regarding the justification that is constantly made within the narrative, "The game goes more in depth into each character's back stories and reveals more about why AM chose them of all the billions of humans to live and suffer forever." The review acknowledges the narrative's focus on the *possibility* of the circumstances that have taken place.

Lessons

(What can be learned about game writing, characterization, story, narrative design, or other related elements from this game? What lessons – positive or negative – can be extracted and then applied to future game development? List as many as needed. Each lesson should be supported by examples from within the game.)

- Narrative can does not only compensate for 'lacking' gameplay, but can make said gameplay enjoyable
- Depth of character is incredibly satisfying to a player when the game is centered around the development of the character in question
- If a narrative is going to head in one direction, it is jarring to the player and the narrative itself to suddenly change course
- Antagonists that might not be relatable but have plausible cause for their actions are remarkably interesting for the player/characters that the player embodies to interact with

Summation

I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream is an odd game, to be sure. With its strange adaptation from its original short story source material, extremely dark storyline with possibly 'silly' graphics, and a narrative that is unexpectedly cohesive (even with slight inconsistencies at the end), the game is an experience to be reckoned with. Once the game has been completed, no matter which ending the player experiences, they are left satisfied. Through this beautifully constructed mass of emotion and maddening torture of being, *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream* has constructed a story that is satisfying, but not—by and means—happy.