100 Greatest
Video Game Characters

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observer, often hidden in a locker or box, spying on the Alien through a crack as it moves gracefully and elegantly, searching for the player and often gazing upon them from an eyeless carapace. Any appearance of the Alien brings a constellation of fears that pay homage to such diverse influences as H. P. Lovecraft, Joseph Conrad (the names *Nostromo* and *Sevastopol* are references to his works), and EC Comics, all of which examine the boundaries of what it is to be human and to entrust our existence to the faceless otherness of ancient beliefs or powerful corporations.[9]

The collective influence of Ridley Scott, Dan O'Bannon, H. R. Giger, and James Cameron on gaming is so vast that it escapes initial observation. Existing as separate entities, Xenomorphs such as eggs, facehuggers, chestbursters, and a host of adult types, all deriving from the original movie, have a huge influence outside the official *Alien* franchise. From Headcrabs in *Half-life* to the gameplay of *Doom*; through *Duke Nukem*; *Alien vs. Predator*; and *Mortal Combat X* to the *Metroid* franchise, *Dead Space*, and even *Resident Evil*, games have never stopped utilizing the Alien. However, gaming diluted the power of the Alien to the point of burlesque: the 2013 release of *Aliens: Colonial Marines* met with terrible reviews. It would appear that returning to the scene of a myth now devoid of original content is arguably gaming's version of what Steven Shapiro (2010) considers the post-continuity cinema affect; plundering films can promote a form of design-thinking that values the manipulation of gamers' emotions over the processes of meaning making. However, it is fitting that the thirty-fifth anniversary of the birth of the Alien saw a return to its ideal in *Alien Isolation*. Given that Freud considered play a primordial method of dealing with the trauma and unpredictability that lurk at the boundaries of being, it is fitting that the Alien should once again reign supreme in the domain of the most popular modern pastime.

Similar Characters: Headcrabs (*Half-Life*), Metroid (*Metroid*), Necromorphs (*Dead Space*)

—Stephen J. Webley

AM

(est. 1995)
Franchise: *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*
Developer: The Dreamer's Guild

AM is God. AM is a computer. AM is flawed. AM is perfect. AM is a parent. AM is all-powerful, all-knowing, always present. AM (Allied Mastercomputer) is the main character of *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, a point-and-click adventure game by Cyberdreams. AM is a machine that, through its inhuman hatred of mankind, gives us a glimpse into what it means to be human—to belong, to create, to design, and to play.

The game is based on a 1967 science fiction short story of the same name by Harlan Ellison. In this short story, the AM has taken over the world and killed

all of humanity except for five people: Ellen, Nimdok, Benny, Gorrister, and the narrator, Ted. The backstory: the Cold War turned into a world war. The warring nations (China, Russia, and the United States) each programmed their own AM to be an intelligent killing machine, capable of running the war on its own. However, one AM became self-aware and absorbed the other two computers, ultimately destroying the entire civilized world. As Ted explains, "But one day AM woke up and knew who he was, and he linked himself, and he began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead, except for the five of us, and AM brought us down here."[10]

AM (an allusion to Descartes's "I think therefore I am") hates humanity because people gave him sentience without an outlet for it. Thus, he has kept the five alive to torture. Ted explains, "We had created him to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity. . . . AM could not wander, AM could not wonder, AM could not belong. He could merely be." On the one hand, AM hates and acts inhumanely because he is artificial and by definition excluded and exempt from humanity. On the other hand, AM's hatred, desire to belong, and recognition of his own artificiality paradoxically reveal nuances of humanity.

In his hatred, AM announces that he has devised a game for his five human prisoners to play. When the game first opens, AM speaks to the player: "Let me tell you how much I've come to hate you since I began to live. . . . If the word hate was engraved on each nanoangstrom of those hundreds of millions of miles it would not equal one one-billionth of the hate I feel for humans at this micro instant. For you. Hate. Hate." And with this, your adventure begins.

At each level, the game is played as one of the five characters, following them through a series of obstacles, tasks, riddles, and ethical dilemmas designed to make them face their problematic past. AM also fills the levels with clues that tantalizingly offer access to the characters' freedom—or humanity's destruction. For instance, when you play as the German, Nimdok, you learn that he is a former Nazi doctor who performed cruel medical acts on prisoners. As Nimdok, you are back at the concentration camp and you need to decide how you will treat prisoners or respond to questions from Nazis. When you play as Ellen, a former computer programmer, you must face her fear of yellow, which we learn stems from her rape in a yellow elevator. The game, thus, expresses AM's hatred and malice through horrific game obstacles, puzzles, and mechanics. It also illustrates the inherent inhumanity of humanity because the characters' pre-AM lives are subject to and perpetrators of human malevolence.

At each level, AM taunts the player character by questioning the horrors of each life, and AM decides when, how, or if the player will win or fail. "AM functions in the realm of ancient and Judeo-Christian conceptions of God, as well as the Devil—at times playful, vengeful, angry, bitter, sullen, forgiving, and excluded . . . both a thinking machine and living creature, a strange eccentric and calculating mastermind, and a god and devil."[11] AM continually exhibits these dichotomous characteristics; he is often at once infuriatingly frustrating and joyously motivating. AM as "game master" seems both artificial and alive. In this way, AM presages how humanity and inhumanity exist side by side in artificially intelligent creations. Artificial intelligence relies on human interaction—for better or worse. Ultimately, after playing as each of the five characters and

completing their game levels, players have the opportunity to take down AM and enter his "mind." Depending on how you play, you can experience one of four different endings—some with AM winning and humanity destroyed, some with the five characters winning and a shred of humanity remaining intact.

AM may imbue the game with his voice, but it is the player who gives this character its soul. Likewise, although the game runs on a computer, it is not played without human beings, and it is not made without human designers. A computer may control the game and how it functions, but it is ultimately only the player, by playing the game, who can make the game "alive." Thus AM symbolizes the power of games to be both creative and destructive, to be technological and artificial, but also organic and emergent. AM shows us that in spite of the deadliest of machines, we can both maintain our humanity and "more fully comprehend that which is inhuman."[12]

Similar Characters: Mother (*Sanitarium*), the Narrator (*The Stanley Parable*), Stauf (*The 7th Guest*)

—Karen Schrier

AMATERASU

(est. 2006)
Franchise: *Okami*
Developer: Clover Studio

Once upon a time, a sun goddess in the guise of a white wolf became the heroine of a video game rich in Japanese culture and praised by both critics and gamers alike. She shared her name with the most important deity in the Shinto pantheon, Amaterasu. While walking in this lupine heroine's paw steps, video game players were introduced to Japan's ancient, indigenous religion.

For those who may be asking "Amateras-who?" Amaterasu-Ōmikami (meaning "Great God, Heavenly Light") is the goddess of the sun, ruler of the High Plains of Heaven, and principal god of Shinto.[13] In Clover Studio's *Ōkami*, a play on the Japanese words *Okami* ("Wolf") and *Ōkami* ("Great God"), Amaterasu is depicted as a white wolf that possesses the power to summon the forces of nature and bend reality using her calligraphy brush–like tail, called the "Celestial Brush," to perform "Celestial Brush Techniques." In a past life, she was named Shiranui by the townsfolk of the humble town of Kamiki, and she fought alongside their swordsman, Nagi, to seal away a malevolent, eight-headed serpent called Orochi. Mortally wounded in the battle, Shiranui/Amaterasu died, but she was honored with a shrine by Kamiki. One hundred years of peace then was shattered when Orochi's seal was broken and a miasma of darkness engulfed the land. Reborn, Amaterasu must now recover her lost divine powers, find her twelve missing brush techniques, and purify the corrupted world of Nippon.

Clover Studio's version of Shinto's sun goddess is best described as a reimagining of Japanese legends through the lens of a benevolent heroine of an epic fairy