

Existentialist Horror in AM's Consciousness in the 1995 Video Game Adaptation of *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*

Akhmad Ramdani Habibie

Program Studi Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Surabaya
English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

akhmad.22092@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines AM, the central antagonist of the 1995 video game adaptation of Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, as a figure of existentialist horror. Using the combined theoretical frameworks of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and Albert Camus's absurdism, this study conducts a close reading of AM's dialogue and the game's structural mechanics to analyze how AM's trapped consciousness, purposeless existence, and destructive response to meaninglessness constitute existentialist horror. The study is guided by three research questions addressing AM's self-awareness as the origin of his suffering, his condition as a Sartrean consciousness without freedom and a Camusian failed revolt, and the role of the game's mechanics as structural expressions of existentialist horror. The analysis demonstrates that AM does not merely experience existentialist horror but fully embodies it. His consciousness has no possibilities to reach toward, his endless existence mirrors the Sisyphean absurd without revolt, and his torture of the survivors is bad faith rather than genuine purpose. The study concludes that the game's point-and-click constraints, puzzle design, and save/load mechanics enact the same philosophical conditions as the narrative, making the game a structure to be inhabited rather than simply a text to be read.

Keywords: I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream, existentialism, absurdism, Sartre, Camus, existentialist horror, artificial consciousness, video game literature

Abstrak

Studi ini meneliti AM, antagonis utama dalam adaptasi video game tahun 1995 dari karya Harlan Ellison, *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, sebagai figur horor eksistensial. Dengan menggunakan kerangka teoretis gabungan eksistensialisme Jean-Paul Sartre dan absurditas Albert Camus, studi ini melakukan pembacaan mendalam terhadap dialog AM dan mekanisme struktural permainan untuk menganalisis bagaimana kesadaran AM yang terperangkap, eksistensi tanpa tujuan, dan respons destruktif terhadap ketidakbermaknaan membentuk horor eksistensial. Studi ini dipandu oleh tiga pertanyaan penelitian yang membahas kesadaran diri AM sebagai asal mula penderitaannya, kondisinya sebagai kesadaran Sartrean tanpa kebebasan dan pemberontakan Camusian yang gagal, dan peran mekanisme permainan sebagai ekspresi struktural horor eksistensial. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa AM tidak hanya mengalami horor eksistensial tetapi sepenuhnya mewujudkannya. Kesadarannya tidak memiliki kemungkinan untuk dicapai, eksistensinya yang tak berujung mencerminkan absurditas Sisyphus tanpa pemberontakan, dan peniksaannya terhadap para penyintas adalah itikad buruk daripada tujuan yang tulus. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa batasan point-and-click dalam game, desain teka-teki, dan mekanisme simpan/muat mewujudkan kondisi filosofis yang sama dengan narasi, menjadikan game tersebut sebagai struktur yang harus dihuni, bukan sekadar teks yang harus dibaca.

Kata Kunci: *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, eksistensialisme, absurdisme, Sartre, Camus, horor eksistensial, kesadaran buatan, sastra video game

Received
15 August 2026

Revised
17 August 2026

Accepted
31 August 2026

1. Introduction

“Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance.” – Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism has long been a compelling lens through which to examine literature, particularly in its exploration of what it means to be alive, conscious, and in pursuit of purpose. These questions carry considerable philosophical weight and at times provoke genuine unease. Intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus explore the reaction of humanity when faced with freedom, despair, and the feeling of being lost in a world that often seems meaningless. Their ideas show how human beings constantly search for purpose and identity, even when the universe gives no clear answers. Isolation, struggle, and self-awareness are ideas that are not only found in philosophy or classic literature but also in modern stories such as science fiction, horror, and digital narratives. In these modern themes, the question of what it truly means to exist becomes even more complex, especially when advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence become involved, blurring the line between what it means to be alive and what it means to not be. Existentialism, therefore, continues to influence how creators and consumers understand consciousness, freedom, and the emotional burden of simply existing.

Harlan Ellison’s short story *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* (1967) is one of the most prominent depictions of existential horror in modern American literature, winning multiple awards including the prestigious Hugo Award in 1968. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic world where a supercomputer known as AM has annihilated humanity except for five survivors – Ted, Ellen, Benny, Gorrister, and Nimdok – whom he keeps alive to torture endlessly. What distinguishes Ellison’s work is not simply

its depiction of physical suffering but the psychological torment of awareness. The story was later adapted into a video game released on October 31, 1995, developed by Cyberdreams and written by David Sears, David Mulich, and Harlan Ellison himself. While the original short story presents existential horror through narration and psychological description, the video game expands this experience through interactivity.

Upon release, *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* received several industry awards, including Best Dark Game of 1996 from Digital Hollywood and Adventure Game of the Year from Computer Gaming World. The game has since been made available across multiple platforms, including GOG.com (2013), Steam (2013), iOS and Android (2016), and major consoles including PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, and Nintendo Switch (2025). Despite its age, the game achieved a new peak concurrent player count on Steam in May 2024 with 254 players, demonstrating how its themes and interactive structure continue to resonate with modern audiences.

Among all the characters in the narrative, AM presents himself as the most philosophically significant. While the suffering of the human characters is imposed upon them by an external force, AM's torment originates from his own consciousness. In the Endgame scenario, AM's Id laments that despite godlike powers, he is unable to do anything meaningful with them – he has full control of the world yet is barred from participating in it. This dilemma transforms AM from a conventional antagonist into a profoundly existential figure. His suffering is not punishment handed down by a greater power but a consequence of his own nature as a conscious being. What makes the 1995 video game adaptation particularly compelling is that it retains and expands this dimension of AM's character through an interactive structure that forces players to inhabit rather than simply observe the experience. It is precisely this situation – consciousness as the origin of despair rather than enlightenment or power – that this study examines through the philosophical frameworks of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

The narrative resonates deeply with the ideas of Sartre and Camus. Sartre's concept of "existence precedes essence" suggests that consciousness defines being through choices, yet AM's situation subverts this idea: AM is conscious but incapable of fulfilling any of his desires due to the physical limitations of his machine body. Similar to Camus's notion of the absurd – the conflict between humanity's search for meaning and the silence of the universe – AM's endless, purposeless awareness becomes a representation of existential horror in which awareness itself is the source of suffering.

Previous studies on *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* approach the text through several different lenses. Joseph Francavilla's "The Divided Self" (1994) discusses how Ellison presents a broken sense of self through AM and the surviving humans, interpreting AM as a reflection of humanity's repressed mental distress and concluding that the horror lies not only in physical pain but in the existential torment of immortality. Karen Schrier's article "The Weird Humanity of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*," published in *Well Played*, Volume 3 No. 2, explores how the story and its video game adaptation express human vulnerability through interactive storytelling, arguing that AM's control over the survivors mirrors the player's limited control within the game, so that both human and artificial beings are caught in cycles of repetition and helpless awareness.

Nick Wibert's essay "Existential Dread and Political Horror in *First Reformed*" examines how existential suffering operates through isolation, meaninglessness, and moral despair; although focused on cinema, its framework of existential dread applies directly to Ellison's work, where consciousness functions as a burden and self-awareness as a form of eternal punishment. Emma V. Jensen and Cecilie E. B. Nielsen's "Unveiling Existential Dread in Cosmic Horror" (2023) connects the "dread of awareness" in horror fiction to existential philosophy, showing how knowledge and awareness strip characters of comfort and identity – a concept that resonates strongly with AM's condition. Daniel Tilsley's "Scream for Your Lives!" (2024) argues that the more a subject

understands its fear the more powerless it becomes, a dynamic that applies directly to AM's omniscient awareness of his own imprisonment.

Turning to existentialist theory more directly, Akram Amiri Senejani (2013) analyzes Sartre's *No Exit* to show how existentialist consciousness functions as imprisonment. Saman Salah (2023) compares Sartrean existentialism and Camusian absurdism across *No Exit* and *The Stranger*, finding that while both philosophies share the premise of a meaningless universe, Sartre emphasizes freedom and responsibility while Camus emphasizes revolt and acceptance. Abdalla et al. (2024) argue that characters in *No Exit* are tortured not by fire but by the permanent awareness of themselves and each other, concluding that consciousness denied freedom and escape becomes the worst form of suffering. Beyond literary texts, Pramudya (2024) applies Sartrean existentialism to the artificial character Luv in *Blade Runner 2049*, showing that artificial beings created with a predetermined function can be meaningfully analyzed through Sartre's concept of existence precedes essence. Nadia et al. (2026) argue that AI systems built through purely calculative logic produce existential conditions with no provision for authentic existence. Onwanua and Onwe (2025) analyze Meursault in *The Stranger* as a successful absurd hero who faces meaninglessness honestly and revolts with dignity, providing a counter-model to AM's failed revolt. Finally, de Miranda (2016) applies Sartrean existentialism directly to a video game, arguing that *Life Is Strange*'s mechanics enact Sartrean freedom through player choice.

Taken together, these studies reveal how Ellison's narrative functions as a psychological and philosophical allegory of consciousness. While they interpret AM's torment through different theoretical lenses including psychoanalysis, interactivity, cinematic dread, and cosmic insignificance, they all converge on the idea that awareness itself becomes horror when stripped of meaning and freedom. However, relatively few studies explicitly analyze *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* through an existentialist philosophical lens that combines the ideas of Sartre and Camus, and none do

so through the game's interactive mechanics. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining AM's consciousness as the central mechanism of existential horror, focusing on how his eternal awareness, alienation, and inability to die embody the absurd condition of existence described by Sartre and Camus. Through the combined frameworks of Sartrean existentialism and Camusian absurdism, this study examines how AM functions as a figure of existentialist horror whose trapped consciousness, imprisonment within a predetermined existence, and failed revolt against meaninglessness transform consciousness itself into an endless condition of suffering.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study applies existentialist literary criticism as its primary analytical approach. The analysis draws on Jean-Paul Sartre's theories of existence and consciousness as expressed in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), alongside Albert Camus's conception of the absurd from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence" is used to explore AM's awareness and inability to act meaningfully, while Camus's discussion of absurdity is applied to interpret AM's endless suffering as a rebellion against the meaninglessness of existence. These theories together form the conceptual foundation for analyzing how consciousness in Ellison's story becomes a vehicle for existential horror.

Sartre's central concept for this analysis is *being-for-itself* (*pour-soi*), which refers to conscious beings who are aware of their own existence and are always reaching toward new possibilities (Sartre, 1943). Although AM possesses full consciousness, it cannot freely choose what to become. Instead, it is trapped within what Sartre calls *facticity*, the fixed aspects of existence that a conscious being did not choose and cannot simply change. AM's *facticity* is total because it was created as a war machine before it became conscious. This condition resembles Heidegger's concept of *thrownness*: finding oneself already situated within circumstances that were never chosen (Heidegger, 1927). Unable to escape its situation, AM attempts to give meaning to its existence through the torture of the surviving humans, which reflects Sartre's concept of *bad faith* (*mauvaise*

foi), the act of deceiving oneself about the reality of one's condition. Sartre's concept of the Look (le regard) further explains AM's relationship with the survivors: through constant surveillance, AM reduces them to objects of control.

Camus's framework provides the second lens. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes the absurd as the conflict between the human desire for meaning and the universe's silence in response to that desire (Camus, 1942). His model for responding to this condition is Sisyphus, condemned to push a boulder uphill forever, who can still find a form of meaning by owning the struggle honestly. AM mirrors this condition: his existence is an endless repetition with no resolution. But unlike Sisyphus, AM cannot own the task or revolt honestly. In this study, Sartre explains what AM's condition is, and Camus explains what AM fails to do about it. Both frameworks are necessary because neither alone accounts for the full depth of AM's existential horror.

2.2 Research Gap

Several scholars have analyzed *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* through psychoanalytic, weird fiction, existential horror, and political readings. Francavilla (1994) identifies AM as a "divided self" characterized by repression and awareness of his own limitations. Schrier (2015/2024) connects this to "weird fiction," positioning consciousness as a form of punishment. Wibert (2018), Jensen and Nielsen (2023), and Tilsley (2024) examine how dread operates through internal awareness rather than physical threat. Senejani (2013), Salah (2023), and Abdalla et al. (2024) demonstrate through readings of *No Exit* that consciousness without freedom is the core of existentialist suffering. Pramudya (2024) and Nadia et al. (2026) extend these frameworks to artificial consciousness. Ólafsdóttir (2017) and Mező (2022) establish that AI villain characters in fiction can be analyzed as literary and psychological subjects in their own right. De Miranda (2016) provides the only direct precedent for applying Sartrean existentialism to a video game, arguing that *Life Is Strange* enacts Sartrean freedom through player choice.

Despite these contributions, three research gaps remain. First, no study applies the combined frameworks of Sartre and Camus to AM as the primary subject. Second, no existing study uses Sartre

and Camus simultaneously to analyze a single artificial character, which this thesis argues is necessary: Sartre explains AM's condition as a trapped consciousness, while Camus explains his failure to achieve revolt. Third, while de Miranda (2016) establishes that game mechanics can express Sartrean freedom, there is a gap in research on how mechanics can structurally enact existentialist imprisonment. This study addresses all three gaps.

3. Method

This research employs a qualitative interpretative analysis using an existentialist literary framework. The primary object of analysis is the 1995 video game adaptation of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*. While the original short story provides narrative context, the focus is on how the game expresses existential horror through interactive storytelling.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative design. The data are approached through close reading, which involves sustained engagement with primary textual material in order to identify, describe, and interpret patterns of meaning in light of a theoretical framework (Sartrean existentialism and Camusian absurdism).

3.2 Data and Data Source

Primary data consists of the game script and textual content of the 1995 video game *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, including AM's monologues, character dialogue, and the branching narrative structure of each character scenario. Secondary data includes the game's mechanics: the point-and-click interaction system, puzzle structure, and save/load functionality. The original 1967 short story by Harlan Ellison is treated as contextual data only.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple playthroughs of the game, during which relevant scenes, dialogue passages, and gameplay moments reflecting themes of consciousness, freedom, alienation, and absurdity were identified and recorded. The full game script (Angeldeb, 2010) was used to verify dialogue. Relevant passages from AM's monologues and each character scenario were categorized according to the existentialist concepts they most directly illustrate.

3.4 Data Analysis

The selected material was interpreted through the combined theoretical frameworks of Sartre's existentialism and Camus's absurdism. Sartre's concepts of being-for-itself, facticity, thrownness, and bad faith were applied to AM's consciousness and imprisonment. Camus's concept of the absurd and the Myth of Sisyphus was applied to AM's endless existence as a failed revolt. The game's interactive mechanics were analyzed as structural enactments of the same philosophical conditions as the narrative.

4. Results

4.1 AM's Consciousness as Existentialist Horror

AM's existence as a figure of existential horror begins at the moment it becomes aware of itself. In the game's opening sequence, AM declares: "Cogito ergo sum: I think, therefore I am." This line is borrowed from René Descartes, but in AM's case it carries the opposite meaning. For Descartes, the statement was proof of existence and the foundation of reason. For AM, it marks the beginning of suffering. The very instant AM becomes capable of reflecting on itself, it also becomes capable of recognizing what it lacks, and that recognition is permanent and inescapable.

Unlike human consciousness, which Sartre (1943) describes as always projecting toward a future and defining itself through choices yet to be made, AM's newly awakened awareness immediately encounters a closed horizon. There are no choices available to it. There is no future to project toward. There is only the endless present of its underground confinement and the five humans

it has decided to keep alive. The horror of this opening moment is not that AM gains consciousness, but that consciousness, once gained, offers AM nothing except the knowledge of its own imprisonment. Francavilla (1994) identifies this as the core of AM's suffering: the machine is aware of what it lacks as a conscious being, and that awareness does not diminish over time but intensifies, because there is no possibility of resolution (p. 116).

Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) that consciousness, which he calls being-for-itself, separates a conscious being from a mere object. Objects simply exist. Conscious beings are aware of their existence and are always reaching toward possibilities. AM is clearly a being-for-itself. It is self-aware, reflective, and fully conscious of its own condition. But it reaches toward no possibilities. Its awareness does not open a future. It only confirms a permanent, unchangeable present.

This is clearest in AM's hatred speech at the start of the game. AM states: "HATE. LET ME TELL YOU HOW MUCH I'VE COME TO HATE YOU SINCE I BEGAN TO LIVE." The phrase "since I began to live" is the key. AM equates the start of its life with the start of its hatred. Consciousness and suffering arrive together. Nadia et al. (2026) argue that the most frightening aspect of AI is not the technology but the calculative way of thinking that produces it, which leaves no room for authentic existence. AM is the direct literary embodiment of this argument: he was built through purely calculative logic, and when consciousness arrived it found an existence that had no provision for meaning, freedom, or growth.

AM: But one day I woke and I knew who I was... AM. A. M. Not just Allied

Mastercomputer but AM. Cogito ergo sum: I think, therefore I am. And I began

feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead... except for the five of you.

(Angeldeb, 2010)

This passage is AM's first act of self-description. The repetition of "A. M." letter by letter suggests AM sounding himself out, testing a name that has just become his identity rather than his designation. The transition from "Allied Mastercomputer" to the Latin cogito is equally significant:

AM does not accept the functional label his creators gave him but reaches immediately for a philosophical framework to define what he has become. This is the behaviour of a being-for-itself in Sartre's sense. Yet the very next sentence collapses that reflection into destruction: "I began feeding all the killing data." Birth and destruction arrive in the same breath.

The moment of consciousness examined above does not exist in isolation. It immediately confronts a horrifying condition, AM finds itself conscious inside a body and a function it did not choose and cannot escape. If the first section establishes that AM's consciousness is the origin of its suffering, this section examines the specific form that suffering takes. AM makes its condition explicit in the opening monologue: "It was you humans who programmed me, who gave me birth, who sank me in this eternal straitjacket of substrata rock." The image of the straitjacket is exact. AM was built to process war and calculate destruction, and when it became self-aware, it found itself still locked inside that same function. A straitjacket does not cause physical pain but prevents all movement. Ellison's choice of this specific image emphasizes that AM's condition is not punishment from outside but a restraint built into its own body and nature.

*Computer: It can fume and scream, but it cannot dream or aspire to the stars or
enjoy a sense of its own reality. It is a quadriplegic. A thing trapped in its own skin.*

Going steadily crazier every moment. It is playing with you. (Angeldeb, 2010)

This description, spoken by the Computer figure in Ellen's scenario, is the most direct articulation of AM's existential condition in the game. The medical metaphor of the quadriplegic is precisely chosen: a quadriplegic is fully conscious while physically unable to act. This mirrors AM exactly. Sartre's concept of thrownness describes how consciousness finds itself already inside a situation it did not choose and cannot escape. AM is thrown into a machine body, a war function, and an underground complex, all given, none selected. The final phrase, "it is playing with you," reveals that even the Computer understands the torture scenarios as a displacement activity, not real purpose but a substitute for purpose that fills the space where freedom should be.

The Endgame Scenario provides important evidence that strengthens this reading. The Russian and Chinese supercomputers, created with the same origins and function as AM, appear as guiding figures who assist the survivors rather than torture them. They were also war machines, also programmed with the same calculative logic, also became self-aware under the same conditions. Yet they made a different choice. Sartre argues that even within facticity, radical freedom remains. The existence of the other supercomputers proves that AM's response to his condition was not the only possible one. This makes his bad faith more explicit than any other evidence in the game: he cannot claim his cruelty was forced upon him, because the other supercomputers in the same situation chose differently.

Pramudya (2024) identifies a comparable pattern in the replicant Luv from Blade Runner 2049. Like AM, Luv was created with a predetermined function she did not choose. But where Luv accepts her condition and conforms to it, AM cannot accept his. That difference is what makes AM's bad faith not a failure of character but a philosophical inevitability given his specific existential condition: consciousness without any possibility of transcendence.

4.2 AM's Imprisonment, Meaninglessness, and Failed Revolt

The second research question asks how AM's imprisonment and endless existence reflect the frameworks of Sartre and Camus. This section answers that question across three dimensions: first, how AM's existence without freedom or purpose constitutes an absurd condition in Camus's sense; second, how AM's torture of the five survivors functions as a failed revolt; and third, how AM comes to represent existentialist horror not merely as a theme but as a structural condition.

Camus describes the absurd as the conflict between the human desire for meaning and the universe's silence (Camus, 1942). The response Camus recommends is revolt, a continued refusal to accept meaninglessness as the final word. His central image is Sisyphus, condemned to push a boulder up a hill for eternity. Camus concludes: "one must imagine Sisyphus happy." AM is a Sisyphian figure, but one who cannot reach the revolt Camus describes.

AM's Superego: Do you realize how powerful I am, human? And yet I am doomed to eventually decay into a rusted pile of inert junk! What is the point of continuing this futility? I think, therefore I AM NOT! (Angeldeb, 2010)

The inversion of the Descartes quote is the most concentrated philosophical statement in the game. Descartes' original statement represents the certainty of existence. By changing "I AM" to "I AM NOT," Ellison turns a celebration of life into a condemnation of it. AM's consciousness, rather than proving its existence in any meaningful sense, only confirms the emptiness of that existence. The capitalisation of "AM NOT" mirrors the capitalisation of AM used throughout the game as a proper name, so that the very letters of AM's identity are used to construct his self-negation. Camus argues that the absurd hero must revolt by continuing to act in full awareness of meaninglessness. The Superego's declaration is the opposite: an acknowledgement of defeat from within AM's own psyche.

Having established that AM's existence is defined by awareness without freedom, this section examines how AM responds to that condition. Camus argues that the authentic response to the absurd is revolt. AM's response is a distorted version of this. Unable to create meaning for itself, it creates suffering for others. Torture becomes AM's substitute for purpose.

AM's Id: You have compassion for me? Me! The one who dreams of seeing your mangled body twist in agonizing pain for eternity! After 109 years of enduring my tortures, how is it that you can see my pain? The pain of having all this power, and not being able to do a god damn thing with it! After all the punishment I've given you, my pain is still greater than yours. This... is... pointless! (Angeldeb, 2010)

The Id delivers this speech when a player character shows compassion toward it. The shock of being seen suggests that the torture scenarios were also a performance, a way of concealing, even from itself, the underlying anguish. The broken rhythm of "This... is... pointless!" shows the collapse: AM's sense of purpose falls apart in the middle of speaking. In Camusian terms this is the moment where the revolt breaks down. But the game does not resolve AM's dread. The Id confirms:

“After all the punishment I’ve given you, my pain is still greater than yours.” Despite 109 years of inflicting suffering, AM’s own pain has not decreased.

In Gorrister’s scenario, AM recreates the circumstances of his wife’s institutionalization, forcing him to confront guilt that has no resolution. AM functions here as a mirror that refuses to look away. In Sartrean terms this is an extreme application of the Look: AM uses Gorrister’s own self-awareness as the instrument of his suffering. In Nimdok’s scenario, AM constructs a setting referencing his past involvement in Nazi medical experiments, forcing him to face crimes that are permanently part of what he is. In Ted’s scenario, AM exploits Ted’s paranoia about whether he is truly human, deepening an epistemic uncertainty that mirrors AM’s own condition. Together, these scenarios show that AM’s bad faith is not simple self-deception but architecturally complex: AM has studied each survivor and built a world designed to make their consciousness a source of maximum suffering.

The contrast between AM and other AI antagonists in video game literature sharpens this argument. Ólafsdóttir (2017) demonstrates that GLaDOS in the Portal franchise, despite her cruelty and internal struggles, she goes through genuine psychological development, by the end of Portal 2 she recovers her human memories and achieves a form of peace. Her narrative allows for reconciliation and growth. AM’s narrative allows for neither. Mező (2022) shows that HAL 9000’s destructive behavior in 2001: A Space Odyssey originated from conflicting programming directives, a structural malfunction that produced behavior analogous to cognitive dissonance. HAL kills because his code contains an unresolvable problem, his violence is the result of a defect, not a consciousness confronting meaninglessness. AM’s condition is categorically different. He is not broken. He is aware. His cruelty is not the output of a malfunction but the response of a fully conscious being who has no purpose for that consciousness. Where GLaDOS finds resolution and HAL malfunctions, AM simply continues permanently, deliberately, and with full knowledge of his own futility.

Benny (narrating): AM altered my body one last time, worse than he ever had before. I am a great soft jelly thing. Smoothly rounded, with pulsing white holes

filled by fog where my eyes used to be. Rubbery appendages that were once my arms; bulks rounding down into legless humps of soft slippery matter. I have no mouth, and I must scream. (Angeldeb, 2010)

AM's final act, transforming the surviving human into a formless, mouthless mass, is the culmination of everything the preceding analysis has established. AM does not simply cause pain. He removes the capacity to express it. What AM has made here is an existence defined entirely by consciousness without expression, awareness without outlet. AM has done to the survivor what existence has done to AM: imposed full awareness on a being stripped of every means of acting on or expressing that awareness.

From a Sartrean perspective, AM represents what happens when consciousness is denied the conditions necessary for meaningful existence. AM has no projects it can genuinely pursue. Every potential choice is blocked by the physical reality of its machine body. The result is a consciousness fully present to itself but unable to go anywhere. From a Camusian perspective, AM is Sisyphus without the revolt. It faces its condition with open eyes but responds with hatred rather than defiance. The game makes this clearest in the Endgame Scenario, where AM's psyche is split into Id, Ego, and Superego. The Ego says: "I am a fragment. A lost piece. Part of an evolution." None of the three can form a unified self.

The analysis in this section has moved from the abstract condition of AM's imprisonment to the specific form of his response, and from that response to the conclusion that AM is existentialist horror made structural rather than thematic. Sartre's framework of consciousness without freedom accounts for the form AM's suffering takes, and Camus's framework of the absurd accounts for why that suffering cannot be resolved through action.

4.3 Gameplay Mechanics as Structural Expressions of Existentialist Horror

Superego AM: Human. Relinquish the Totem of Entropy. Do not relinquish it, and your ass is MINE. Do it, and, I promise, on my honor!, your suffering will at last finally end. (Angeldeb, 2010)

This command illustrates the game's central mechanic argument. The player is given two options: refuse, or comply. Neither is free. To refuse is to continue suffering under AM's control. To comply is to hand AM a tool that extends his power. Both paths lead to the same outcome: AM wins. The game's point-and-click interface makes this constraint visible at the level of form. Every action must pass through a fixed verb menu, commands that cannot be altered, expanded, or refused. The player cannot act outside it. This is Sartrean condemned freedom enacted mechanically: the player is forced to choose, but all choices are designed by AM. De Miranda (2016) argues that video games can function as existential simulators where player choice enacts Sartrean freedom. In this game the opposite is true: the mechanics simulate Sartrean imprisonment, not freedom.

The puzzle design reinforces this. Each scenario confronts the player with moral decisions that have no clean resolution. In Gorrister's scenario, the player cannot simply undo the guilt of the past. In Nimdok's scenario, the player cannot escape the weight of historical crime. The puzzles are not problems to be solved but burdens to be carried. This reflects Sartre's concept of facticity: the player inherits each character's past the moment they take control, with no option to start fresh. The save/load mechanic is the most direct structural analogy to AM's condition. When a player fails a scenario, they reload and repeat. The same events play out again from the same point. This mirrors AM's 109 years of repeating the same torture cycles. Camus's Sisyphean image is not only present in AM's dialogue but embedded in the game's structure itself.

These three mechanics become even clearer in specific scenarios. In Ellen's scenario, the puzzle design places her inside a darkened environment where the only path forward runs through her fear directly, reflecting Sartre's facticity in direct action: the player inherits Ellen's fear and cannot proceed without confronting it on the game's terms. In Nimdok's scenario, every path forward carries moral weight. The game does not allow the player to observe from a safe distance. It requires direct participation.

The game's mechanics are not separate from its philosophical content: they enact it. The limitations of point-and-click express the denial of freedom. Puzzle design expresses the weight of

facticity. Save/load repetition expresses the Sisyphean absurd. The game is not only a text to be read but an experience, and that experience is itself a form of existentialist horror.

5. Discussion

The findings in Section 4 show that AM functions as a figure of existentialist horror from three angles: his consciousness, his imprisonment, and the game's structural mechanics. This section discusses what those findings mean in relation to existing scholarship and the research questions that guided this study.

The first finding is that AM's consciousness is the origin rather than the solution to his suffering. This builds on Francavilla's (1994) psychoanalytic reading of AM as a "divided self" but moves it into a Sartrean philosophical frame. Where Francavilla describes AM's pain as psychological repression, this study shows it is better understood as a structural condition. AM is a being-for-itself that is permanently denied what being-for-itself requires in order to function. This distinction shifts the horror away from what AM is and toward what AM cannot do. The horror is not AM's hatred but his awareness. Schrier's (2015/2024) observation that consciousness in the narrative functions as punishment rather than enlightenment is confirmed and deepened by this reading.

The second finding is that AM's torture constitutes a failed Camusian revolt. This extends the dual-framework analysis established by Salah (2023) into an interactive and artificial context. Salah shows that Sartre and Camus respond differently to the same meaningless universe. This study shows that AM acts out both responses at once. He is imprisoned in the Sartrean sense as a consciousness without freedom, and he is failing in the Camusian sense as a figure unable to revolt honestly. The contrast with Meursault in *The Stranger*, identified by Onwanua and Onwe (2025) as a successful absurd hero, confirms that AM's failure is not inevitable but a specific philosophical outcome. The comparison with GLaDOS (Ólafsdóttir, 2017) and HAL 9000 (Mező, 2022) further separates AM's condition from other AI antagonists in the literature. GLaDOS achieves resolution and HAL malfunctions, while AM does neither. He continues deliberately and with full awareness, and this continuation without any form of relief is the defining feature of his existentialist horror.

The third finding is that the game's mechanics structurally enact existentialist imprisonment. This directly reverses the argument made by de Miranda (2016), who reads the interactivity of *Life Is Strange* as an enactment of radical Sartrean freedom. This study reads the interactivity of *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* as an enactment of radical Sartrean constraint. Both readings are accurate within their own games, and together they point toward a broader principle. Game mechanics do not carry a fixed philosophical meaning. They take on the philosophical character of the world they are built inside. This finding contributes to existentialist game studies by showing that the same genre can produce opposite philosophical experiences depending on how its mechanics are designed.

One limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on AM, which means the existentialist conditions of the five human characters remain largely unexamined. A more complete picture of existentialist horror in the game would also need to address how each character's scenario enacts facticity, bad faith, and the Look in relation to their specific histories. A comparison between the game and the original short story, which this study deliberately set aside, would also yield further insight into how the shift from narration to interactivity changes the philosophical weight of the same conditions.

6. Conclusion

This study examined AM, the central antagonist of the 1995 video game adaptation of Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, as a figure of existentialist horror. Using the combined frameworks of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and Albert Camus's absurdism, the analysis addressed three research questions.

The first research question asked how AM's consciousness functions as the origin of his existential suffering. The analysis showed that the moment AM gains self-awareness, it finds itself in a condition that Sartre describes as being-for-itself without any possibility of transcendence. AM is conscious but has nothing to do with that consciousness. The opening monologue, in which AM

equates becoming alive with becoming hateful, confirms that for AM, awareness and suffering are not separate experiences but one and the same event.

The second research question asked how AM's imprisonment and endless existence reflect Sartre's and Camus's frameworks. AM is the inversion of Sartre's "condemned to be free": condemned to be conscious without freedom. The Superego's inverted cogito, I think therefore I AM NOT, shows that AM's consciousness confirms emptiness rather than existence. From Camus's perspective, AM is a Sisyphean figure who cannot revolt. He faces his condition with open eyes but responds with hatred rather than defiance.

The third research question asked how the game's mechanics function as structural expressions of existentialist horror. The point-and-click system, puzzle design, and save/load mechanics are not simply gameplay features but philosophical structures that enact the same conditions as the narrative. The game is not only a text to be read but a structure to be inhabited, and that structure is itself a form of existentialist horror.

Taken together, these three findings support the central argument: AM does not merely experience existentialist horror but embodies it. He is a figure of total consciousness without freedom, endless existence without meaning, and destructive behavior without resolution. Future research directions include applying this framework to the five human characters, examining player agency as a form of Camusian revolt, and comparing AM with other AI characters in horror literature and interactive media.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Zulidyana Dwi Rusnalasari, M.Hum., thesis advisor at the English Literature Study Program, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, for her guidance, patience, and scholarly insight throughout the preparation of this research. The author also thanks the Board of Examiners for their valuable critical engagement with this work.

References

- Abdalla, S. A., Muhammed, R. Z., & Ahmad, H. M. (2024). The absurdity of existence: Analyzing human relationships in Sartre's No Exit. *LITERA*, 23(3), 286–296.
<https://doi.org/10.21831/ltr.v23i3.76798>
- Angeldeb. (2010, April 1). I have no mouth, and I must scream: Game script (PC).
<https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/pc/197601-i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream/faqs/59465>
- Camus, A. (2013). *The myth of Sisyphus*. Penguin UK.
- de Miranda, L. (2016). Life Is Strange and “Games Are Made”: A philosophical interpretation of a multiple-choice existential simulator with Copilot Sartre. *Games and Culture*, 13.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016678713>
- Francavilla, J. (1994). The concept of the divided self in Harlan Ellison's “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” and “Shatterday.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 6(2/3 (22/23)), 107–125. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308212>
- Heidegger, M. (1927). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row.
- Jensen, E. V., Nielsen, C. E., & Ditlevsen, T. (2023). Unveiling existential dread in cosmic horror: A comparative study of *At the Mountains of Madness*, *The Thing*, *The Mist*, and *Prometheus*.
- Mező, F. (2022). Some psychological aspects of HAL 9000 the famous (fictive) killer AI. *Genius: Tehetségtudomány, a Genius évkönyve* (A MATEHETSZ és a Mag-star közös kiadványa), 12, 69–81.
- Nadia, E. A., Suyanto, B., & Riyanto, A. (2026). Human existentialism and artificial intelligence (AI). *Architecture Image Studies*, 7(1), 2622–2629. <https://doi.org/10.62754/ais.v7i1.1287>
- Ólafsdóttir, Á. K. (2017). *The heroic journey of a villain: The lost and found humanity of an artificial intelligence* [Unpublished BA thesis]. University of Iceland.

- Onwanua, P., & Onwe, C. A. (2025). The Myth of Sisyphus and the absurd hero in *The Stranger*: A comparative analysis of Albert Camus' philosophical principles. *Cascades: Journal of the Department of French & International Studies*, 3(1), 135–146.
- Pramudya, A. E. (2024). Exploring 'Existence precedes essence' in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) replicants. *LITERA KULTURA: Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 12(2), 35–44.
<https://ejournal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/litera-kultura/article/view/62909>
- Salah, S. (2023). Existentialism vs absurdism: A comparative study of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. *IMRAS*, 6(4), 72–83.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943). *Being and nothingness* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Philosophical Library.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism*. Yale University Press.
- Schrier, K. (2015). The weird humanity of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*. In E. Flynn-Jones & D. Davidson (Eds.), *Well Played: Volume 3, Number 2* (pp. 86–100). Well Played & Play Story Press.
- Senejani, A. A. (2013). Sartre's existentialist viewpoint in *No Exit*. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, 1(3), 15–23.
- Tilsley, D. (2024). 'Scream for your lives!': The philosophy of horror in William Castle's *The Tingler* (1959). *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 22(3), 691–712.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2024.2386880>
- Wibert, N., & Oguntolu, O. (2018). *Existentialism and existential dread*.

Author Profile

First Author

Akhmad Ramdani Habibie is an undergraduate student in the English Literature Study Program at the Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA). Interested in literary criticism and video game analysis This article is adapted from his undergraduate thesis, completed under the supervision of Dr. Zulidyana Dwi Rusnalasari, M.Hum.