

# Review of *Lifeline*

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## 1 Introduction

*Lifeline* is a science fiction & horror game by Konami for Sony Playstation 2.<sup>1</sup> It's claim to fame is that, instead of controlling the character directly with the game pad, you tell her what to do when you speak commands into a microphone.

## 2 Summary

This game is a flop, or nearly that bad. I do not recommend it.

The problem is the voice recognition, though not for the reason you'd expect. See Section 5 for details of what's wrong. It's a pity because there's a horror

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<sup>1</sup>The game might be available for other platforms. I don't know.

story in the game that's decent or better, but it's behind the voice command system so you can't experience it & enjoy it.

### 3 Other Reviews

Another review is <http://www.gamerankings.com/itemrankings/launchreview.asp?reviewid=333985>. I'm mentioning it because it says this:

The graphics, scenario, and other aspects are decent, and I applaud *Lifeline* for its courageous depiction of a physically and mentally handicapped heroine.

That's from the last paragraph on the second page of that review. Cracks me up every time I read it.

### 4 The Game's Premise

The premise of the game is that a space station orbiting the Earth was attacked. You (or the character you control directly) is trapped in the space station's control room where you can operate speakers, cameras, & electronic locks that are scattered around the station. You talk to a woman who is trying to escape the space station. The two of you form a team in which she is the hands & you are the brains.

The premise sounds corny, & it is. If someone were going to make other voice controlled games, I hope they find a better premise. At least this silly premise doesn't ruin the game.

See Appendix A if you are interested in a similar game I played more than ten years ago.

### 5 Voice Recognition

*I hope the game's creators read this.*

In theory, the program can understand complex commands such as "Check the red vending machine in the corner", but I had success with commands that complex only a few times. Most of the time, I used simple commands such as "Check coffee cup" or even "the lounge" (which tells the girl to go to the lounge area of the room).

I said that the voice recognition system ruins the game, so you might be thinking that recognition errors are the problem. Not so. If you speak a command using words that the voice recognition system was expecting in context, you get a decently high rate of recognition accuracy. It seems to be about 80 percent accurate for me.

That's if you speak words that the system expects in the situation the girl is in. The problem is that you don't know the words it expects. You have to

guess, & that can take a long, long, long, long, long time. Here is an actual example of a painful fifteen minutes I spent in *Lifeline*:

1. The girl is standing at a table with three objects on it, & I can see a movie screen in the background.
2. One object on the table is obviously a coffee cup, so I said “check coffee cup”. The girl checks it & says it’s not special.
3. Another object looks like a projector facing the movie screen, so I say “check projector”. The girl checks it & runs the movie, which is projected on the movie screen.<sup>2</sup>
4. I couldn’t identify the remaining object on the table. To me, it would most accurately be described as a “green blob”. The game’s instructions specifically said you could refer to objects by color, so I said “check green”. Green sounds like screen, so the girl checked the movie screen.
5. “Check book”. There’s no book here. “Check report”. There’s no report. “Check menu”. Girl looks under the table. *?!?!* “Check letter”. No letter. “Check plans”. No plans.
6. I figured the voice recognizer keyed on one or two syllables, so I iterated through nonsense words that might feature the important syllables: Check bae. Check be. Check bi. Check bo. Check bu. Check kae. Check kee. Check ki. Check ko. Check ku. ...Check zae. Check zee. Check zi. Check zo. Check zu. None of those worked, & I had long since stopped having fun.
7. I needed some multisyllable nonsense words for the recognizer to key on, so I tried countries, starting with the western northern hemisphere: Check Canada. Check United States. Check Mexico. Check Columbia. Check Brazil. Check Argentina. Check Chile. Check England. Check Scotland. ...
8. “Check Greece”, & the girl said “It’s a questionnaire”.

Do you see how painful this can be? After fifteen minutes, “Greece” became “questionnaire”. What the hell did the recognizer think I said? Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Simply searching a room can take an hour by speaking commands when it would have taken less than a minute with a plain old direct control, like in *Resident Evil*.

The problem with the game is not the accuracy of the voice recognizer. The problem is that you don’t know the words it understands. Inside a room, you get a crude map of the areas within the room. You need a similar list of names when you look at the items inside the areas. The searchable items are already

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<sup>2</sup>A movie projector in the very early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which we live in reality would be an anachronism. A movie projector on a space station is almost ludicrous.

highlighted on the display, so it wouldn't hurt to label the damned things before you search them. The initial labels, before you search the items, wouldn't need to be the actual, final, complete names for the items. You would just need some words so you could refer to the items without going through the multi-minute, un-fun pain of guessing the magic word to get the girl to name the item so you can tell her to search it for real again.

I do not plan to finish playing this game, & this guess-the-name problem is why.

If it weren't for the name-guessing problem, a voice-controlled game would be okay. I wouldn't want most games to work this way, but it'd be a nice change once in a while. It's almost hands-free gaming. You need to use the game pad, but in a casual way that is suitable for one hand, so your other hand is free to lift your beer (whether alcoholic or root). In particular, I liked the voice control during combat.

Like I said, it's not the recognition accuracy that's the problem; it's that you don't know what words are applicable in context. Maybe other types of voice-controlled games are possible, ones that wouldn't require me to guess names. It'd also be nice if someone could think of a less silly premise for why I'm speaking commands to a character, why she can't think for herself.

## 6 Story, Game Play, Graphics, Sound

Ignoring the voice recognition gimmick for the moment, *Lifeline* has the classic horror feel that I like. It's the same feel as *Resident Evil 1*, with graphics that incorporate the teapots, marble tiles, & other classic icons from the early days of computer graphics. I also like the sounds the game designers chose for the girl's feet walking on different surfaces. (It sounds silly & trivial, but I like these sound effects.)

The story appears to be a decent horror one, though it's a pity that I'll never see it through because I can't deal with the problems of the voice control system. If the voice command system worked, its hands-off aspect might have allowed the player to enjoy the story even more than he would have when controlling the character directly with the game pad.

There was a really neat detail at an early point in the game, when the girl first enters a long hallway. The camera gives you a shot down the hallway, & the floor is curved. It looked cool, even dramatic, & it's what I would expect to see on a space station with that classic "spinning wheel" design.

## A This Game's Predecessor?

In 1993, I went to the "New Media" convention in Las Angeles, California. There I saw a demo of a game for Microsloth Winders whose premise was almost identical to that of *Lifeline*.

In that old game, the player controlled a character who was trapped in the control room at the top of a giant, automated, high-rise building in a science fiction world. At the bottom of the building was a female character. The player's character could operate cameras, locks, & robotic machinery in the building. He had to do those things to help the girl fight her way up the building to rescue him.

There was no voice control as in *Lifeline*, but it was still indirect control, & the hokey explanation for why the player only had indirect control was identical: Your character is trapped in a control room from which he can operate some machinery & give suggestions to the other character.

If I remember correctly, some people at the show disliked the game because some players would intentionally err when they operated the machinery or advised the female character so that she would die a horrible death. One woman told me that it was possible to put the female character in sexually suggestive or compromising situations. I didn't play the game through, so I don't know for myself, but the game didn't seem to have enough complexity or subtlety for that to be true.

I don't remember the name of that game. I'm not sure it was ever released.

## B Other File Formats

This document is available in multi-file HTML format at `./3`.

This document is available in DVI format at `roll.dvi4`.

This document is available in PostScript format at `roll.ps5`.

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<sup>3</sup><http://lisp-p.org/roll/>

<sup>4</sup><http://lisp-p.org/roll/roll.dvi>

<sup>5</sup><http://lisp-p.org/roll/roll.ps>