A burst of fiery justice can see the alien off – but for how long?

FLAME THROWER

Alien: Isolation

Could this finally be the Alien game that doesn't disappoint?

Set fifteen years after the original film, *Alien: Isolation* sees you playing as Amanda Ripley, daughter of Ellen, an engineer for megacorporation Weyland-Yutani. She's on a journey to the space station Sevastopol when she learns that the flight recorder for her mother's lost ship, the Nostromo, is being held there. But it's clear from the moment she gets to the abandoned space-city that something is horribly wrong.

Sevastopol is a labyrinthine warren of corridors, vents and tunnels – it's being decommissioned and is in a severe state of disrepair. Most of the game is spent in the claustrophobic confines of its twisting metal bowels.

But while we've explored environments like this before in games like *System Shock* and *Dead Space*, it's the art design that sets *Isolation* apart. Resisting the urge to create a slick, contemporary

VITAL STATISTICS

- **Price** £40
- **Developer** The Creative Assembly
- **Publisher** SEGA
- **Web** www.alienisolation.com
- **Multiplayer** None
- **DRM** Steam
- **Recommended spec** 3GHz CPU, 2GB DirectX 11 GPU, 8GB RAM

vision of the future, The Creative Assembly have instead looked to the production design of the film for inspiration. They've built their world as Ridley Scott and his team would have in 1979, using only technology from the period.

The chunky keyboards, phone receivers, distorted CRT monitors, and blinking coloured lights should look dated, but it has quite the opposite effect. This is a tactile, practical, and convincing science-fiction world, with machines and environments that are functional and utilitarian, rather than overtly futuristic. You almost feel like you can reach out and touch it.

Creature discomforts

But a sci-fi corridor isn't much without something horrifying to chase you down it. So it's a good thing that *Isolation* is the first game to make HR Giger's alien every bit as formidable and intimidating as it

is in the films. In *Alien*, Ripley asks Ash how they can kill the creature that burst from Kane's chest aboard the Nostromo, and he replies, gravely: "You can't." This, unlike the dumb drones you blasted your way through in *Colonial Marines*, is also true of Sevastopol's alien. It's a merciless, unstoppable force.

You can shoot it, but it'll just get angry and pounce at you. You can burn it, but that'll only scare it away for a few seconds. *Isolation*'s magic lies in the fact that you have to outsmart its single alien rather than kill it. This turns what could have easily been yet another FPS with xenomorphs into a thrilling, drawn-out game of cat-and-mouse with the scariest cat imaginable. It's a deft blend of stealth and survival horror that, thanks to dynamic AI and clever, systemic design, is much more than the sum of its parts.
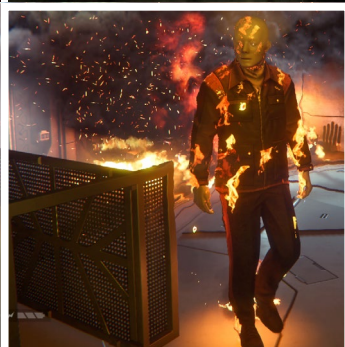
You'll know when the alien is near. As you creep through the station,
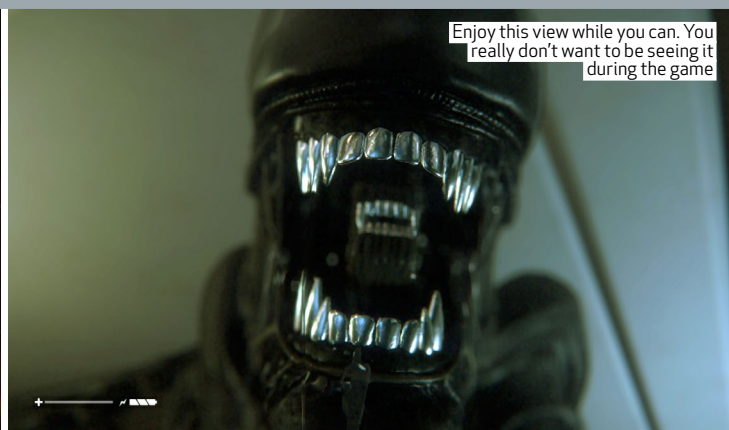
Enjoy this view while you can. You really don't want to be seeing it during the game

It might tell you where danger lurks, but its beeps will give you away

The characterisation is great, but the voice acting is a little lifeless

you hear it above and below you, behind the walls, under the floor. You're relatively safe when it's hidden away like this, but you never know what vent, crack or hole in the ceiling it'll suddenly emerge from. It arrives with a beastly hiss – a sound that becomes your cue to hide or run. Then you hear the pounding of its footsteps as it wanders the corridors, hunting for its prey.

The alien is an almost constant threat, but there are other dangers on Sevastopol. Malfunctioning androids called Working Joes wander the station, brutally killing any humans they come across. Their rubbery, emotionless faces and glowing eyes are genuinely unnerving. Get too close and they'll grab you, draining your health until you manage to break free. You can kill them, but they take a lot of resources to bring down, making stealth the best option. They're a lot slower than the alien, but every bit as deadly.

Keep it down

Then there are other survivors. You'll run into them less often, and they're a lot easier to kill, but they usually work in groups. They won't shoot on sight, and will give you a few seconds to back away if you wander into their territory, but it doesn't take much to send them into a frenzy of gunfire. Luckily, if they shoot at you, the noise will attract the alien and it'll kill them all. This is often the best way to get past human enemies: provoke them, then wait for the bloodbath.

Whichever enemy you're up against, sneaking is always the key to survival. You'll pick up a shotgun, a revolver and a few other weapons as you progress through the station, but they're more of a curse than a blessing. For one, they're only really effective against humans. It takes a dozen headshots with the revolver to drop a Working Joe, and the alien is essentially bulletproof.

Any noise, from sprinting to knocking a chair over, will give your position away, so you'll spend much of the game creeping methodically between objectives. This might sound dull on paper, but the presence of the alien makes almost every moment exhilaratingly tense. After getting through one long, difficult section, my palms were sweating and I had to go for a lie down. This is not a game you want to play just before bed.

The audio design is just as accomplished, using many familiar effects from the film, like the metal scrape of vent covers opening and the electronic chatter of the computers. But it's also a vital part of the stealth, and I advise playing with a good pair of headphones or surround sound – you can track the movement of the alien by sound alone, gauging its distance and position by its footsteps.

As Ripley Junior is an engineer it's a good excuse to add a crafting system to the game. Raw materials litter your surroundings and can be taped together to create useful items. As well as the noisemakers and Molotovs, you can make smoke bombs, EMP mines for disabling synthetics, and blinding flashbangs. The effects of these are all temporary, but if you stun an android with a mine, you can whack it over the head with your wrench for an easy kill. Flares can be tossed to lure the alien, and if you toast it with your flamethrower it'll scream and run away – but not for long.

Combining items and weapons in interesting ways, and playing with the enemy AI, gives the game a lot of unexpected depth and kept it interesting for the entirety of the 25 hours it took me to finish it. Yeah, that's right: twenty-five hours. This is a long game, but it never outstays its welcome. This is down to the pacing, which is pretty much perfect.

But now for the weak link. The story is disappointing, retelling a familiar yarn we've already heard countless times in the *Alien* universe. The good thing about this is that it lets you relive classic *Alien* moments and experience them from a more visceral perspective. The bad is that it feels derivative, never taking the chance to make its own mark on the mythology.

They've done an excellent job with the PC version. On ultra settings at 1080p, the game runs at a solid 60 frames on my fairly decent 2GB GPU at work, and loiters somewhere around 30-40 on the relatively ancient 1GB card in my home PC. The geometry of the levels is pretty simple when you look at it closely – especially with all that lo-fi retro tech – but it's the beautiful volumetric lighting and smoke, detailed levels filled with clutter, and bold visual design that give it its fidelity.

It's ridiculous that it took the developers of a historical RTS so long to finally create an authentic *Alien* game, but The Creative Assembly have managed it. They've succeeded where countless others have failed by treating Giger's monster with the reverence it deserves: as something to be feared and respected, not faced head-on with a pulse rifle. *Isolation* is a taut and electrifying horror game that perfectly captures the essence of the legendary film. I just wish they'd been a little braver with the story. ■ **Andy Kelly**

PCFormat Verdict

This is the game the *Alien* series has always deserved. A deep, fun stealth game set in an evocatively realised sci-fi world.

★★★★½