NO MAN'S SKY: THE INSIDE STORY

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THE SCI-FI MASTERPIECE FINALLY GETS THE GAME IT DESERVES

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GUNNING FOR DOMINANCE OF THE LIVING ROOM



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REVIEWS

GRAN TURISMO 6 THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON TWO SAMURAI GUNN THE NOVELIST PEGGLE 2 > ELLEN RIPLEY PROMISED SHE WOULD BE HOME FOR HER DAUGHTER'S LITH BIRTHDAY.

> SHE NEVER MADE IT.

- > FIFTEEN YEARS LATER AMANDA RIPLEY GOES IN SEARCH OF THE USCSS NOSTROMO'S FLIGHT RECORDER.
- > SHE FINDS HERSELF ISOLATED 7 ALONE AND HUNTED AT THE EDGE OF SPACE.





FROM TOP Alistair Hope, creative lead, and Jon McKellan, UI artist

obody could say Creative Assembly hasn't got a lot to work with. For Alien: Isolation, Ridley Scott's 1979 film puts a world of themes and material on the table, with six terabytes of assets handed over by 20th Century Fox, reams of unused artwork from designer Ron Cobb's sketchbooks, music and audio fragments not heard in 35 years, and snaps of Sigourney Weaver's sneakers from every possible angle. But misplaced faith in the power of access and money is a lesson Sega learned at great expense in February 2013, and that's why the world's first look at this new Alien game is a hands-on.

"We were aware that Colonial Marines was being released and we were all aware of the commentary, but we were almost foolishly blinkered," creative lead Alistair Hope says. "We were making something so different that from a creative point of view it didn't really affect us. You could see some of the blog posts or whatever, but a lot of that was saving, 'Why aren't they making a game based on Alien? Why don't they make a survival-horror Alien game? This is the game I want.' That was massively frustrating for the team, because they were saying 'This is the game we're making!'

As different as Alien: Isolation is, there's a burden of proof this time around and it's a burden Creative Assembly's new team, built almost from scratch to create a survival-horror Alien game,

shares. The first experiments began three years ago, with a half-dozen developers prototyping the ideas that would become Isolation. Now that team has grown to fill an entire floor at Creative Assembly's Horsham headquarters, where 100 people labour over a very simple idea. "There had to be a more meaningful interaction than having the alien at the end of your barrel," Hope says. "There had to be an alternative to this bullet sponge that just soaks up Pulse Rifle rounds."

Alien is a gold mine. It's about isolation and desperation, about the hostility of technology, about class warfare and feminism, about sexual violence and murder, about suffering and survival, about the ruthlessness of corporations and an unstoppable monster. But more than anything, it's about 1979. Science fiction is always more about the time it was made than the time it depicts, and Alien's 2122 is a future of button-operated interfaces, CRT monitors, flick switches and blinking lights. It's this future that Alien: Isolation recreates: a beige and brown analogue world where technology is just another thing to fear, not the dark blue James Cameron shoot 'em up world where guns and a suit of mechanised armour will be your saviour.

"We don't see yellows, browns, pale blues these days," UI artist Jon McKellan says. "You don't often see sci-fi games with mustard walls,

ABOVE This space suit artwork has been adapted ABOVE RIGHT Operating on a network of behaviours

from original Alien designs. that's baffling in its complexity, the alien took years of work to hand animate in its various stances and postures





Z H O C K Z D U A F

Assassin's Creed IV players will instantly discount Isolation's PS4 touchpanel map, but the console gets two gimmicks that enhance the tension. "The first time I played the PS4 version and we had the [controller's] light flashing with the motion tracker. it was indescribable what that did to my experience," lead designer Gary Napper says. "It turns green when you take the motion tracker out, and each time something happens, it flashes. Sitting in a dark room and having it flash, with the ping coming from the controller as well... I didn't think it would have that much of an effect on me, but it was really, really cool."

"THERE HAD TO BE A MORE MEANINGFUL INTERACTION THAN HAVING THE ALIEN AT THE END OF YOUR BARREL"

but it's unique and feels good. It belongs there, but other films in the franchise never explored that. To us, it's something distinctly Alien and it had to be in the game."

Alien: Isolation's look is informed by one rule above all others: if it couldn't be built in 1979, it's not in the game. Props such as the game's hacking device and motion tracker were built the way they would have been built on the set of the movie, with virtual black paint and stencils and duct tape wrapped around handheld televisions or old war radios. "When you put that stuff in the game, the lo-fi style starts to become a gameplay element as well," McKellan says. "The motion tracker could've been a hi-res element in the bottom corner, but that would have represented a high-fidelity HUD inside some visor. Instead, we ended up with this bulky box that only does one thing, and even then you have to point it in the right direction. It gives it a tangible feel and makes it a gameplay element, rather than just a choice of style. This chunky box is your lifeline."

In Creative Assembly's demo, that motion tracker is Amanda Ripley's only tool. At the very fringe of humanity's expansion into the galaxy, the Seegson corporation's Sevastopol space station has taken delivery of a flight recorder recovered from the debris left when Amanda's mother destroyed the USCSS Nostromo and the ore refinery it was towing. When the younger Ripley arrives, she finds the station mostly empty, its human inhabitants – and the Seegson 'Working Joe' androids responsible for maintaining the station - scattered. She soon learns that every living thing aboard is being hunted by a single alien creature, and while those Joes and the humans will present their own problems, it's the ten-foot monster Creative Assembly has built that will be the focus of the horror.

"We have a lot of callouts to the original film," lead designer **Gary Napper** says. "Just like the movie, there are other threats present on the station we have to worry about. But the original premise was always Amanda Ripley, the flight



ABOVE Seegson's 'Working Joes' are mass-produced androids with only basic human features. In-game advertising touts their trustworthiness and reliability, but with their Westworld-like inhumanity, they can only be a threat to Ripley. Never trust a '70s sci-fi android

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"THE NETWORK OF BEHAVIOURS IS SO INSANELY COMPLICATED, THE THING IS ALMOST SENTIENT"

recorder from the Nostromo and the alien. We came up with all these great ideas for stories, big events and stuff, but each time we looked at it and came back to, 'But it's the alien I'm terrified of.' All this stuff is supportive, but this story is all about the alien."

And that's to say that, yes, *Alien: Isolation* has a fire button, so yes, there are guns in the game, but you won't be shooting often. Ammunition is limited to a handful of rounds at a time – *The Last Of Us* not *Call Of Duty*, says Hope – and while gunfire might be useful against the inevitably homicidal humans or those Working Joes, the alien shrugs off anything you throw at it. This is the biggest regular alien ever designed, standing ten feet tall, and it's intimidating enough to freeze your trigger finger in place. *Alien: Isolation's* creature is absolutely, instantly deadly. If it catches a glimpse of you, or hears a sound, it

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will investigate; if it sees you clearly, it will attack at full speed; if it catches you, you will die.

"The alien is systemic across the board," Napper says. "We can just drop the alien into an area and see how it behaves. It knows when it sees something and it knows when it just suspects something. It doesn't have to be the player – it could investigate other things on the station. Obviously, we bookend certain areas to give you an objective, but most of the time the alien is in the world and it's hunting you. You'll acquire some abilities you can use to defend yourself for a while, but then suddenly the alien stops attacking you. It stops doing what you thought it was going to do. You're looking at this alien and something's changed. It *learns.*"

"It's a living thing," lead artist **Jude Bond** says. "We review the game every day in a darkened room, and every day someone shrieks

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FROM TOP Gary Napper, lead designer, and Jude Bond, lead artist





and leaps out of their chair, because you don't know what's going to happen. Yes, it's a piece of AI and it has parameters we can tune, but the alien's network of behaviours is so insanely complicated, the thing is almost sentient. There's a difference between artificial intelligence, where we know what its parameters and behaviours are at a glance, and it being so sentient we have to dig into the code just to find out why and how it did what it did during our playtests.

We see the alien's decision-making tree as a mess of possibilities laid out on the designer's screen - a three-dimensional abstract explosion of decisions the creature can make on the fly. Your best option is always to hide; Ripley's few defensive options will be swiftly learned and prompt increasingly dangerous and unpredictable reactions, sending the xenomorph into the vents, up to the ceiling, or even lying in ambush. But the

very same intelligence that makes the alien so difficult for Creative Assembly to understand after those night-time playtests opens the door to exploitation by smart players.

"You might hide in a vent," Hope suggests, "but the alien can come in there with you. That's a massive moment in our game. You realise you're not safe anywhere. But when the alien is hunting you, he doesn't hear your position, he hears the noises from the vent. So he goes to the mouth of the vent to investigate."

There are no vents in Creative Assembly's demo, built as it is to prove a point. There is no crafting system, no weapons and no other characters either, all of which have been stripped out to demonstrate just how well Isolation's key system works. You are in space, you have a job to do, and you are being hunted.

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After finishing Viking, Alistair Hope and Jude Bond worked together with a small team to develop a survival-horror prototype designed to sell Sega on the notion of letting them play with the Alien brand it had recently acquired. "Not that we were really prepared to make it," Hope says. "We were in a position to make it, but we didn't have the team or the tools."

In six weeks, a "handful of guys" put together a proof of concept, which in its very earliest forms had a player-controlled xenomorph in place of the complex decisionmaking tree that would eventually dictate its behaviour. The decisions made by the alien player in those miniature games of hide and seek would later form the basis of the creature's Al.

"In a way, that was just us being fanboys, just having a chance to build some alien environments," Hope explains. "But that little tech demo went a bit viral within Sega, and suddenly it seemed like this pipe dream of making a game based on the original Alien [film] started to get some momentum."

The Internet will almost certainly ask an entirely legitimate question at this point: why let a strategy game studio make a survivalhorror game based on one of Hollywood's biggest properties? "Strategy game studio?" Jude Bond asks. "We used to make sports games, until we didn't." He's right: long before

Total War, Creative Assembly made Rugby World Cup 95 and ported FIFA to DOS. In recent years, the studio has dabbled with thirdperson action in Spartan: Total Warrior and Viking, but it's a new team behind Alien: Isolation, one home to developers from Bizarre Creations. Black Rock, Crytek, Ubisoft, Realtime Worlds and more. "We have had to hire for this project," Bond says. "We've had a lot of arief from production saying, 'Why is that seat not filled? Because people just weren't right for the job. We've been very picky."

"When we started, we were just a couple of guys crammed in with the Total War team," Hope says. "As they grew, we were getting pushed further into the corner. Now we've got our own floor and we're about 100 strong, and building the team has been a bittersweet tale, I suppose. There have been some British devs that have had to close, and we benefited from that. At least we could find work for some very talented people."



"EVERY DAY SOMEONE SHRIEKS AND LEAPS OUT OF THEIR CHAIR, BECAUSE YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN"

PLATFORMS

lsolation is planned for release in November across PS3, 360, PC, PS4 and Xbox One. "A little while back, we used to be able to put them side by side and play guess the platform, because they were almost identical," Hope says. "We've been able to squeeze every last bit of power out of those old machines, but as we've got later versions of the [new] hardware we've been able to take advantage of some of the enhancements. The core experience is identical, though. For many years, the PS3 and 360 builds were our only console builds, so it was important to us that they would be great. That's why it's all done in-house."



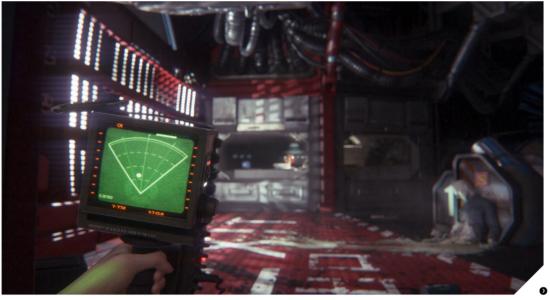


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ABOVE A bespoke engine has allowed Creative Assembly's team to replicate the movie with near-perfect accuracy. LEFT Computers, toys and other props all belong in an analogue world. Print media in 2137? We'll see





ABOVE This is the most detailed alien ever built for a videogame. Look closely at its head in the right light and the carapace's translucency is revealed. A humanoid skull lies beneath, just as Giger's designs suggest. LEFT The motion sensor is a more solid gadget than the movie's improvised devices. It's Ripley's best tool for survival, which only makes the moment when you have to survive without it more inevitable

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The Jerry Goldsmith flute theme from Alien plays as Ripley enters the station's Hazard Lab. With the power failing, she searches for a cutting torch to access the door's emergency release handle, then makes her way to a lower deck, moving from the softer, smoother habitation quarters into the harder-edged scientific space.

"There were four environmental archetypes we identified aboard the Nostromo to start with," Bond says. "There's Habitation, which is the canteen area with the padding; Science, which is the medical bay area; Engineering, the bowels of the ship; and Technical, which is the computing space. They were our four areas; we created a fifth and they've all got a life of their own. I think we've taken stock of the film so carefully that we genuinely understand how it was put together, prop by prop."

Those props litter the spaces humans occupy. There are tools and toys, family portraits, girly calendars complete with '70s perms, pens, printouts, notes, crockery and cutlery, and storage containers stuffed with things Ripley might use if only the crafting system were turned on. Every corridor and room is built like similar spaces from the movie – interstellar prefab, constructed by the lowest bidder – and all of it is based off those Pinewood sets and Ron Cobb's original pen-and-ink designs. "Cobb had a very distinctive visual style," McKellan says. "It was very architectural, with careful lines using felHip pens, with bold graphics against stark shapes. We decided to create all our concept art in the same style, using felt tips – or digital versions of them – so that we could think the way he would think and maybe arrive at similar decisions."

That same attention has been lavished on the alien, which we see in a rare close-up when it makes its appearance in the almost pitch-black Science area. Much of the work that's gone into the alien will be invisible to players in a game where success means never seeing it at all, instead keeping the creature at a distance using Ripley's bulky motion tracker. "That's your lifeline, your one piece of equipment," Napper says. "I think it's brilliant that when you see the alien's dot and the dot marking where you're supposed to go line up, you panic. The alien's always complicating simple jobs. When the fact that two dots on the screen line up terrified us, I realised we've managed to nail it."

This, then, is a scene from the movie brought to life – the alien obstructing Ellen Ripley's escape **O**

ABOVE Photographs, calendars and other memorabilia are handdrawn rather than being rendered or photographed. LEFT Habitation spaces mirror the Nostromo. Both were constructed in the same era in-universe, and were meant to last decades

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Hope says his team knows Alien better than anyone else on the planet. He says it as a joke to illustrate Creative Assembly's almost absurd attention to detail, but it's undoubtedly true. No matter how much you love Alien, no matter how many interviews you've read and how much art you've seen, Creative Assembly has seen more.

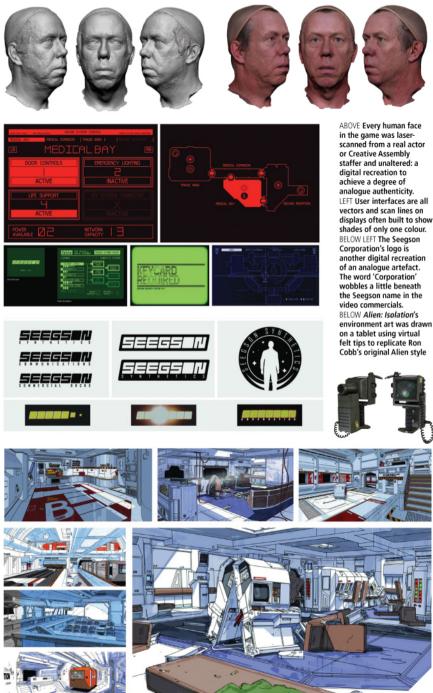
When development began, it was given the keys to an archive of material never seen outside of 20th Century Fox's vaults. While HR Giger's name is the one most associated with Alien's design work, it's Ron Cobb who defined the film's future. Cobb referred to himself as "a frustrated engineer" in an online interview, and it shows in the pen and paper designs for Alien's sets and iconography, duplicates of which are spread across UI artist Jon McKellan's desk.

"There was guite a lot of that didn't make it into the film for quality or budget reasons," McKellan says. "Lots are just variants of themes that did make it in, like these iconic Nostromo patches and the little pin badges they wear; there are lots of variants of those. We've got those sketches, and you can put them together to see what Cobb was thinking when he made them." That attention to

detail extends to the

work done behind the camera during the summer and autumn of '78 to Derek Vanlint's cinematography, and to the lighting and the colour grading of the film itself. Meticulous hardly covers it. "We are aware of when it was made," Bond says, "so we are conscious of what lights we should be using, what the colour temperature of those lights should be. There are no LED lights in our game. We've appropriated a lot of the production methodology of the original film, so this feels like the real place. Not the real place, but the reality Ivou seel onscreen."

"And there are things in the processing that were different back then." McKellan adds. "In Alien and other movies of the time, you're seeing red, green and blue making up the pattern of noise over a blue object, but in a modern effects-driven film like Transformers, it's all corrected. It's a pure blue. What's happening in Transformers is you have a grain on the film and they've colourised on top, but what's happening in Alien is that they filmed something blue and you've got the grain on top of everything. So, of course, we apply our noise grain [in] postprocessing after the colour."





ABOVE The creature has over 20 context-sensitive kill actions, depending on whether it digs Ripley from a locker, chases her down or attacks head-on. RIGHT Environmental storytelling is everywhere in *Isolation*. Every room has history and a purpose





"THE EASIER PATH WOULD HAVE BEEN AN ON-RAILS ROLLERCOASTER SCRIPTED EXPERIENCE WITH SCARES"

from the Nostromo – forcing Amanda Ripley to take a circuitous route to her destination. And so you crouch, moving in shadow as the alien hunts; hiding in lockers, holding your breath as it sniffs at the door; keeping the blip on your motion tracker as far away as possible. Every hunt is different to the previous encounter.

"That introduction is pretty obvious, but there are moments in the game where you just realise the alien is in the same space as you," McKellan says. "You hear a noise and you think, 'This is happening now.' You can't predict it. We capture video footage for internal stuff and we say we're going on safari, because we don't know what it's going to do next."

The working spaces are built as loops crossed with alternate pathways to give the massive alien room to hunt and players space to hide. Without realising it, you're holding your breath as setback follows setback. When you evade the alien and reach the airlock, it closes just before you enter and gravity temporarily fails.

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Once it's restored, you're forced back through the same space and once more into the path of the monster to reach the second airlock, which – in a game where technology is as dangerous as the xenomorph chasing you – won't open until it has properly cycled. Of course, this is a process it signals with a bellowing computer voice and flashing lights, drawing the attention of the creature right to Ripley's location.

Again, you retreat into the shadows, hiding as close to the airlock as you can bear. You peek out from behind cover as the creature inspects the cycling airlock, but peek just a moment too long, drawing its attention. It moves closer, pauses, turns away, then suddenly turns back and rushes at your hiding spot, that systemic AI rethinking its earlier decision with terrifying effect. Staying low, you react only on instinct, creeping to one side of some unidentifiable machinery as the alien's heavy footsteps land on the other. As the airlock's cycle finishes, you make a dash to the safety of the tiny chamber, closing the door behind you

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D E E P L Y U N S E T T L I N G

The team at Creative Assembly won't be drawn on the Aliens: Colonial Marines fiasco, but the subtext is there. so close to the surface it's almost just text. "I think one of the strengths [of our game] is that it's not like we retconned and rewrote parts of the history," Napper says. "This is a character that's pretty vital that we're able to explore without breaking continuity."

Placing Amanda Ripley, played by Remember Me's Kezia Burrows, at the centre of the game addressed a key part of the series mythology: a female protagonist. Even before there was an Amanda Ripley or any plot to speak of the very first build's 'crash test dummy' had a ponytail. Ellen Ripley's role in James Cameron's Aliens was dictated by her absence from Amanda's life and her failure to be there as a mother. That the final scene is mother vs mother is critical and what makes the conflict meaningful. The same holds true for Alien.

"The part of [Ellen] Ripley was created without gender, but it wasn't a blasé decision to cast a woman in role," Bond says. "There are echoes throughout the film of that: matriarchal themes, sexual imagery, the ship's computer is called Mother, Giger's art. When Ash tries to kill her, he's forcing a porno magazine down her throat, which isn't exactly subtle. They go on and on."

Alien screenwriter Dan O'Bannon once said, "I'm not going to go after the women in the audience; I'm going to attack the men. I'm going to put in every image I can think



of to make the men in the audience cross their legs. Homosexual oral rape, birth, the whole number."

In Creative Assembly's demo, your one close-up look at the monster briefly steals control from the player and sends Ripley scurrying under a desk to hide as the alien's 15ft tail slams between her legs and drags up her body. It's a moment designed to provoke a disgusted kind of horror - the same feeling of being violated Dan O'Bannon wanted from his script - but Ripley shakes it off, grabs her tools and gets back to work.

"To me, a strong female protagonist is part of the identity of the franchise," Bond says. "It wouldn't be Alien without that." Indeed, without a Ripley, the symbolism of both movies – and the game – would collapse and you'd be left with nothing but a colonial marine firing a Pulse Rifle into endless hordes of aliens.



TUNNEL VISION

Ripley's motion tracker is the entirety of the game's HUD. A bulky green-screened monitor with a handle, it displays her current waypoint around its outer edge, the exact location of movement ahead of her, and a rather more ambiguous indication of motion to her sides and rear. Using it shrouds environment with a convincing depth-offield effect, making it inefficient to leave the tracker on, and so using the device becomes a choice: whether to see more motion in abstract or to see less with your own eyes. A squeeze of the left trigger shifts your focus between the monitor and the world, and only by switching between the two can you get a clear picture of the danger that you're facing.

with the alien at your heels. It's a small victory when the only door out leads into space.

Creative Assembly – with a rugby game, Spartan: Total Warrior and a decade of Total War behind it – might be the studio least likely to make a successful Alien horror game, but it's on to something here. Isolation is a game of tension and release over and over again, with greater pressure following every brief moment of safety.

There's a passion at the studio that approaches compulsion, but the same seemed true of the previous Alien game Sega published. Here, though, the team members developing the game are as on show as their passion for it. They're the ones with the VHS copies of Alien stacked on desks, with discarded TVs burnt out by powerful magnets to capture just the right kind of CRT distortion, with a muted loop of the Alien Blu-ray running all day on a big screen, and with the London Philharmonic on speed dial. They're the ones whose own faces were laser-scanned onto the game's human NPCs, and the ones who spent years on forums just fighting the urge to click Reply. No TimeGate debacle seems likely.

"It's been frustrating and exciting, because players keep saying what Alien game they want, and they're describing a game that's very close to the game you're working on. You're constantly resisting hitting Reply to say, 'We're making it; it's incredible,'" Napper explains. "The easier path would have been an on-rails rollercoaster scripted experience with scares and blood everywhere; it would have been easy and predictable, and it probably would have sold. But today people came out of the demo having the same conversation you have after playing a great multiplayer game, but they were talking about our alien, and all of them had different experiences."

So, one more time, just which sneakers does Ripley wear? "There's a debate over whether they're Converse or PF Flyers," Hope says.

"We're not sure they're what everyone thinks they are," Bond says. "They have different laceups, they have additional..." Hope interrupts: "Was it Converse? I think we said it was Converse." An argument ensues, with the final word being only that Amanda Ripley wears the same style as her mother, that Alien's wardrobe department had modified whichever sneakers it used as a base, and that both the original costume designer and Creative Assembly's art team are working from a classic piece of design.

"A big part of Alien, for all the '70s aesthetics, they did choose timeless designs," Bond concludes. "They started with things that are classics that had already been around forever. T-shirts aren't going anywhere. Sneakers that were around since the '30s weren't going anywhere. It's funny, because you watch Alien, and it still looks great and current, save for the odd hairstyle. You look at Aliens and Alien 3 [and] they look dated. It's not because they were poorly made, it's because they were of the time and not timeless. Alien is timeless."

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ABOVE Building human spaces to proportions large enough for a ten-foot alien to navigate was a challenge solved by art design and the creature's hunched posture. The alien can take a corner at full sprint speed, making it more agile in the small spaces than any human



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