



to make, and people were saying 'Well, I'd try to get under the desk or make sure it couldn't see me.' Well, cool, but then what would you do?" While it sounds like Hope is trying to discern **games™**'s survival tactics, he is, in fact, musing on what is perhaps the toughest question the studio has had to answer during the production of *Alien: Isolation* – the studio's survival horror take on Ridley Scott's original creation. How do you





● Creative Assembly is keen to emphasise the hazards of the environment as well as the Alien itself. The space station Sevastopol will be populated by several dangers.

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” make the Alien scary again? After all, this is a franchise that has been run through the wringer on more than one occasion, suffering an unrelenting ignominy at the hands of misguided creative minds over the decades.

“Everyone has this perception of what Ridley Scott’s Alien really is and that’s quite different from what came later,” Hope continues. “It’s a thing that dominates the space. Just physically it’s huge. We’ve got a nine-foot Alien that is possibly the biggest in videogames. We wanted something that looked down on the player, was intimidating and demanded respect. Not something that could be easily mowed down or was running around.”

That meant going back to the original design document for the Xenomorph, a graceful and hugely imposing entity, seemingly a composite of leather, bone and industrial tubing – Creative Assembly has even gone so far as to reinstate the original translucent surface to the creature’s elongated, cylindrical head, complete with barely-visible skull beneath. And while the studio has tried effortlessly to evoke the agility and predatory instincts that made the original creation such a horrific presence, fans of the original 1979 film will also remember that it was, underneath it all, just a very tall man in a very uncomfortable suit.

Liberties, therefore, needed to be taken. “Like a lot of the game the first thing we did was a phase of deconstruction, taking everything apart. That was no less the case for the Alien,” explains Hope. “I think people’s perception of that creature is a bit of a mishmash – a bit from *Alien* and a bit from *Aliens* where you see them a little more. Our first step was to create a completely authentic, 1-for-1 direct version of the original Alien. Of course, that is a rubber suit made for a man. That’s fine for the film where you don’t see him full frame that often, but a game is very emergent so we’re going to see him a whole number of infinite ways. We needed something that would match peoples’ perception. So our Alien

● The studio hasn’t revealed too much about the crew accompanying Amanda Ripley on her mission. Chances are at least one of them is a conniving android.



has been adapted for the game, so we’ve made some small changes to enable it to manoeuvre around quickly and believably so it doesn’t look like just a bloke in a rubber suit.” But what’s important is not so much what it looks like when it’s on the screen, but the fear that it instils in the player when it’s not.

We’re wandering through the derelict Sevastopol – the eerie space station where Amanda Ripley (Ellen’s daughter) is sent to recover the *Nostramo*’s black box – and it shares a few design choices with Alien’s central ship. This is the Seventies vision of a lived-in future, one where dirt glazes its imperial white sofas and slick operating systems have been replaced by fuzzy CRT monitors relaying messages from Earth in lines of basic green text. There’s also one of those drinking bird things.

But it also has a tangible sense of function, its walls spewing vast tubes of wire that trail through its corridors and into its various stations. Perfect hiding places, it would seem, for an extra-terrestrial. As wires dangle limply and chubby coils spring from ceiling vents, the discomforting visual similarities between the Alien and its environment fortify a permeating sense of dread that creates a stranglehold on the player. You get the feeling that it really could be *anywhere*.

The minutiae of aesthetic design plays a key role in this, not only in evoking details of the original film but also in constructing areas to navigate. Cabinets to crouch behind, creaking lockers to hide in and even a few tables for Creative Assembly employees to cower beneath. Our demonstration proves to be one of *Isolation*’s smaller areas (somewhere at the halfway point) but its effectiveness is undeniable. The tension has been so expertly conveyed to the player through setting alone that when the Alien eventually emerges from a ceiling vent – slowly stretching its limbs before surveying the environment – the immediate panicky instinct to retreat is overwhelming.

“One of the things we found out early on was that people were scared when they could see the Alien because it meant that they were in immediate danger,” explains Hope. “But then we found



## A NEW RIPLEY

### THE STORY OF ALIEN: ISOLATION

● SET 15 YEARS after the events of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, the story is told from the perspective of Amanda Ripley – Ellen Ripley's daughter (mentioned briefly in James Cameron's *Aliens: Director's Cut*) – who volunteers for a mission to recover the flight recorder jettisoned from the lost spacecraft, *Nostromo*. Interestingly, when asked whether the title will be regarded as canon, creative lead Ali Hope states that the studio didn't approach it with that in mind. "It's our reimagining," he says. "We're inspired by the first film and whatever happened next doesn't really matter in a way. When we started out, I really wanted to make a story that was closely tied to that first film, so we could take advantage of [the fiction]. Fans decide this stuff in a way. We don't really talk about it in terms of canon."



● The Xenomorph itself is a mix of the design featured in the original *Alien*, as well as adopting some of the more agile traits associated with its incarnation in *Aliens*. It's one scary star-beast.

that people's feedback was that they were really scared when they couldn't see the Alien – when you don't know where it is and have no idea where it's going to appear from next. That was fascinating. When it does navigate through the world you can quite often hear it but you don't know where it'll appear."

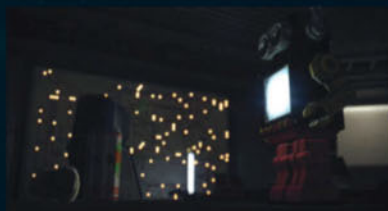
The game is divided into a series of these exhilarating encounters. For us, our experience involved completing a series of objectives, while silently circumnavigating the creature's gaze. Your motion tracker is your most obvious ally and there's also a flashlight (the use of which can easily alert the Alien) but fundamental to survival is the use of the peek function – a quick glance around cover offers a slight

advantage over the interstellar intruder. "It's an information war," Hope delightfully exclaims. "He doesn't know where you are or you don't know where he is. I think that's why the peek function really important. It means you can take a risk and see if you can get the upper hand, looking at which way he's moving. The motion tracker tells you so much but it doesn't tell you everything."

It's not a fool-proof strategy, as we found out. Peering out of cover for too long can alert the beast, which unleashes a blood-curdling roar before racing towards your person. Running away is futile, as is trying to attack. "One of the things we were trying to do was make sure there was some sort of cost or risk associated with every action the player has," says Hope. "The motion tracker, when you bring it up, blurs the background – you can change focus, though. And likewise, unlike some stealth games when you raise your head up or around, you *are* exposing yourself. It's making these A/B choices: do I stay here or do I go? I can't stay here forever! Watching people play is absolutely fascinating."

And while **games™** survives the encounter (barely), the sense of triumph is soon undercut by Hope's revelation that our run-in with the Xenomorph was a diluted example of the final stage. "We're being really unfair dropping you into that space without prior knowledge. In that section, we actually restricted some of the paths available to the Alien because it would've been possibly too easy for it to move around," he reveals. "So we left it so the Alien could walk around the same space you walk around and crawl into the ceiling. If the Alien can't find you it usually looks for a ceiling vent and disappears and appears somewhere else. It can use wall and floor vents to navigate the world – as the player can. Today we tried to give you a very narrow slice of gameplay to reduce the number of things the player has to worry about."

More impressive, the studio insists that the Alien has its own thoughts and processes that adapt to the player's movements on-the-fly – it won't be fooled by repeated strategies. Camouflaging into the scenery, it prowls around with a noticeable intelligence, investigating obvious escape routes and hiding places. After the iconic creation has been reduced to something of a kamikaze pilot over the years, blindly hurtling towards the end of a gun barrel in



● The studio has gone to great lengths to recreate the worn-in detail of the original film.



● The motion tracker is your best friend and you can change your point of focus while holding it.









● While we know Amanda Ripley survives the ordeal to live to a ripe old age, we're not so sure about her comrades.



obstacles, and the Alien is the apex of that – the main threat, always something on the player's mind. The station itself is a dangerous place, physically dangerous, and something the player has to figure out how to navigate through. That's quite an engaging problem."

We're given a couple of examples, one being a pattern-matching hacking puzzle presented wonderfully in analogue fashion, but it's more intriguing to hear how you'll interact with other survivors. "There's also a small population of inhabitants on the station and they're in the same position as you are and they react to events in various ways – sometimes positively and sometimes negatively," reveals Hope. "We actually found that there's a really nice combination of things to keep the player occupied."

We ask whether it's a case of the human population being as much to be feared as the Alien itself? "It's more of a case of everything being really risky and how you want to progress has certain risks," replies Hope. "Taking a certain course of action may cause the Alien to appear, so you have to weigh up your choices. Today we're not talking about the wider game, instead showing you what it's like being in a confined space

● The lighting has a huge impact on evoking the mood of the original film and amplifying the tense situation.



● We heard noticeable plucks of Jerry Goldsmith's original score as we explored the environment. It's still surprisingly effective.

with an Alien and a motion tracker. Certainly, at first, I felt we had to get that right and then pour everything else on top of that. But it's weighing up the risks constantly. What have I got at my disposal? What's the situation I'm in? Is it changing? It's a constant checklist of benefits and risks."

And if it sounds like the studio is confident about the risks it's taking – akin to more of an indie studio's risk-taking than a major studio – then that's because it is. Even now, after spending three years in development, Hope delights in the game's capacity to surprise and catch him off-guard. "In a way, we're the experts," he states. "We're the masters and we created this game from nothing. We know everything that's going on behind the scenes. We generated the spaces ourselves. We've authored everything you've seen on the screen. But we get caught out. We die. We jump. And we play the game everyday. It's a very difficult game to demo because I die a lot.

"It's part of the experience in a way that I still get caught out," he concludes. "I've played it possibly more than most people on the team but, honestly, it feels like I should be playing it with a heart rate monitor."



**NAME:** Giygas

**FIRST SPOTTED:** 1989 (EarthBound)



**TRAITS:** With aspirations to trap all humanity in infinite darkness, Giygas psychologically tortures its opponents before unleashing a barrage of telekinetic attacks.

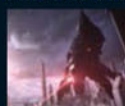
However, as the power of love sends it reeling, it's possible for Huey Lewis to save the world.

**CONCLUSION:** A horrific barrage of imagery and apocalyptic powers.

**FEAR FACTOR:** High.

**NAME:** The Reapers

**FIRST SPOTTED:** 2007 (Mass Effect)



**TRAITS:** A highly-advanced race of machines that return every 50,000 to harvest all intelligent life in the galaxy. Their extremely powerful weaponry is matched

by their ability to assimilate other races. They are designed for one thing: exterminating life.

**CONCLUSION:** Horrific and devastating, chance of survival is slim.

**FEAR FACTOR:** Very high.

**NAME:** Elvis

**FIRST SPOTTED:** 2000 (Perfect Dark)



**TRAITS:** Obsessed with Earth's inhabitants and culture, Elvis is a skilled marksman and serves as a bodyguard to the Maian ambassador. No malicious

inclination towards humanity, his greatest offence is his jocundity in the face of cold mortality.

**CONCLUSION:** Mostly harmless, watch out for his terrible jokes.

**FEAR FACTOR:** Low.