











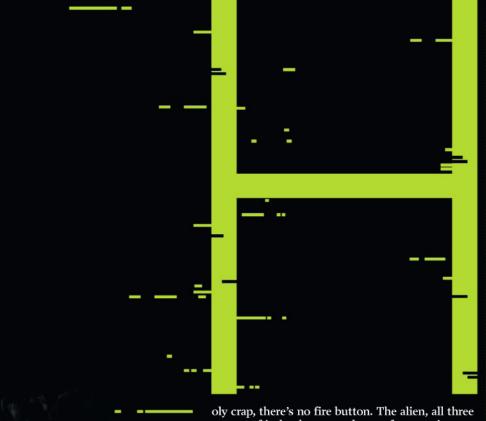
SOLATION

Behind the screams of PS4's scariest game



_After Colonial Marines, Sega needs an Alien resurrection of its own. How about a first-person horror game on PS4, from a studio famed for RTS excellence? Phil Iwaniuk investigates the unlikeliest of comebacks





oly crap, there's no fire button. The alien, all three metres of it, lurches towards me after reacting to my footsteps, narrowing my options with every sickening thud of its tread. Using every bit of FPS training I have, I mash all the shoulder buttons on the DualShock 4, hoping for an ironsight. A super-soaker. *Something*. But those skills won't save me here — I was never supposed to kill the alien, just survive. I got reckless, and now without any means of defence I'm going to get dead. I can't stop grinning with delight.

Alien: Isolation, a first-person horror from PC strategy specialists Creative Assembly, is the Alien game you've always wanted to play. And I don't say that lightly — Gearbox's bombastic Colonial Marines show floor presentations, empty promises and "we're

all really big fans of the movie" platitudes are still ringing in my ears as well as yours. So it's natural to be cautious — cynical, even — about the

IP, but if you're looking for a firm indication that Creative Assembly's vision is something to believe in, consider this: they let me go hands-on with it straight away during the reveal at its Sussex HQ, before anyone uttered the word 'authenticity' or showed us any 'target footage'. Also, I don't know if I mentioned this earlier, but there's no fire button.

RIPLEY REDUX

This isn't a shooter any more than its source material - the original 1979 movie, Alien - is an action flick. No, it's a firstperson survival horror game — an unbearably tense round of cat and mouse between yourself and a nine-and-a-half foot xenomorph in an abandoned space station. An adventure that "takes you back to the roots of the original series, to Ridley Scott's haunted house in space", creative lead Alistair Hope tells us.

You play as Amanda Ripley, a Weyland-Yutani engineer with some lingering mummy issues since Ellen and the rest of the Nostromo crew disappeared without

IT'S A TENSE GAME OF CAT AND MOUSE WITH A NINE-AND-A-HALF FOOT XENOMORPH.



trace 15 years ago. Isolation's narrative arc begins with a chance of some closure for poor Amanda when the Nostromo's flight recorder is found at the decrepit Sevastopol space station. Company execs Samuels and

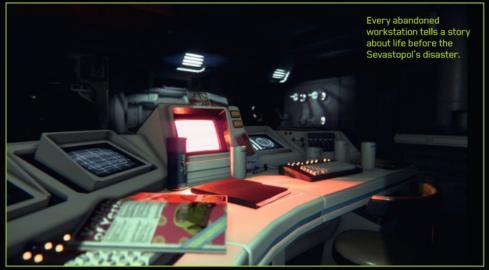




New objects are built using the broken-down visual language of the original movie's sets.

Taylor inform her of its existence, and recruit her for the recovery mission. The three trek across space, secure the black box without incident, and return in time for freeze-dried, dehydrated space supper.

Except, of course, they don't. This is a videogame, silly. Something dreadful happens that separates Amanda from the others, leaving her alone (hey, I just got the title!) on a mysteriously abandoned space station with your friend and mine, the alien. It's a situation she's "underpowered and unprepared" for, as Hope puts it. No handy pulse rifles lying around, then - just a motion tracker, a flashlight and a melee attack that looks too weak-wristed to finish off a kitten in one go. The underpowered and



FANS OF THE MOVIE WILL BE INSTANTLY FAMILIAR WITH THE AUTHENTIC VISUALS.

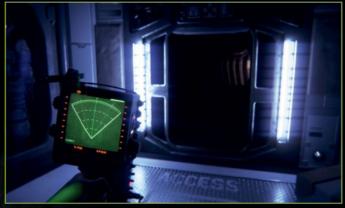
unprepared vibe certainly resonates as I'm dropped into a level set midway through the game — along with the sense, even before I pick up the controller, that just maybe someone finally understands how to make a good game within the much-loved Alien universe.

That feeling is cemented during the torturous-butexhilarating 15 minutes that follow. Things start serenely — I'm alone in a corridor as a line of lights flash on one-byone, showing off some awfully pretty specular

awfully pretty specular lighting and particle effects as dust dances around in the beams. Samuels breaks the silence, radioing in to urge me further into the unknown. Begrudgingly, I teeter forwards into what feels like Ridley Scott's 1979 movie set. Fans of the movie will feel instantly familiar within the first few impeccably matched corridors: those odd padded walls, a colour palette of creams, greys and gold, and dozens of extraneous flashing lights and CRT monitors. Each element has been expanded into a new setting without feeling tacked-on or copy-and-pasted.

Creative Assembly's art team has indulged in some

method acting to achieve this: the original movie's concept artist Ron Cobb sketched his concepts in felt tip pen, so they followed suit and thought like Cobb. They even deciphered all the Nostromo's



That line on the outside shows the location of your latest objective.



peculiar signage and turned it into a system that you'll begin to understand as you play the game. It's been a process of dissecting the Nostromo into its components parts, helped in no small part by the 3TB of previously unreleased material Fox gave the team, and using those parts to build a visual language with a wider vocabulary capable of endowing the much larger Sevastopol space station with the same atmosphere and validity of its inspiration. The

but the results speak for themselves. Most striking is that the game captures a uniquely retro view of the future, and visually that sets it very much apart from the crowd. "Games based in this franchise have always steered towards the Jim Cameron aesthetic," says Hope. "For us, we saw this incredible opportunity to dive right back into the '70s view of the future." Beyond the obvious Colonial Marines comparison, let's face it: most of the futuristic locales we

MOST STRIKING IS THE WAY IT CAPTURES A RETROTAKE ON THE FUTURE.

Nostromo's med bay informs the look of the Sevastopol's larger hospital, for example.

RETRO CHIC

One dreads to think how many burned dinners and what-timedo-you-call-this moments resulted from late nights at CA poring over blueprints for chairs and door handles, visit in videogames are built using the 'everything's smooth, shiny and there are touchpads and screens on every object, for some reason' blueprint.

One particular room catches my eye as I inch along in trepidation. It's a dining area with a circular table, plenty of chairs, and those ubiquitous CRT screens.

ALIEN EV-OLUTION-

The changing face of HR Giger's xenomorph through the console generations



Alien 3

(SNES, 1993)
Ah, sweet 16-bit horror.
Taking their inspiration
directly from David Fincher's
scuttling dog-aliens, the
xenos in this Contra-like
shooter arrived in hordes
with little regard for
suspense and boasted
cutting-edge detail for the
day. They exploded real nice
when you shot them too,
jettisoning limbs everywhere.



Alien Trilogy

(PS1, 1996)

The creature's first foray into the era of PlayStation came in sprite form. They usually appeared from nowhere, writhed around in your pulse rifle rife for a few seconds, then crumpled in a heap of molecular acid and indistinguishable black lumps. We're still very much at the cannon fodder stage in Alien Trilogy.



Alien Resurrection

(PS1, 2000)

At the time, these fully 3D beasts were cause to pop the lights back on. Their animations have grown much more convincing by the twilight of PS1, and their acid blood now causes surfaces to billow corrosive smoke. They're also more likely to lurk in the shadows instead of launching a full-frontal attack.



Alien vs Predator

(PS3, 2010)

A decade on, the James Cameron, biomechanical quadruped becomes the accepted alien design in games. Rebellion's horde are grounded with a convincing physics engine and twitch dramatically under fire, but they're prone to some odd animation glitches and their fear factor wears thin after you shoot the first 1.000.



Aliens: Colonial Marines

(PS3, 2013)

Gearbox's xenomorphs aren't the worst thing about the ill-fated Colonial Marines – except when they doggedly walk against a wall or enter that bizarre tip-toe animation. But they veer off from the movie designs in some strange, canonflouting directions, and they're pretty dumb, too.



On the table, there's the detritus from a long since consumed breakfast: Tupperware half-full of cereal, dirty coffee cups and bowls, and, on one side, crayons and some paper with what looks like a child's sketches on it. Sounds mundane, but stay with me here, because this humble table's serving a lot of functions. As I draw nearer to investigate the sketches, a toy robot jumps to life with a red flash, asking "shall we play a game?" with a sickeningly wrong inflection. Horror device: check. But the table's also telling a story. It's reminding you that you don't know where everyone's gone, and introducing the idea that maybe there were kids on here before whatever it was that happened. Finally, it's reminding you of the chest-burster scene in Alien, which featured very similar mise en scène. Show me an Alien game that put so much love and attention into a dining table before, I dares ya.

DARK SHADOWS

I've been exploring for five minutes, yet seen no sign of the alien. I've *really* examined sections of pipe and bins with my flashlight though, just to be sure. Alistair Hope calls this the "low frequency, high impact" effect — "the alien doesn't have to be on screen for you to feel its presence." He's right — I haven't even heard a blip on the motion tracker yet so I should feel safe, but try telling that to the muscles in my shoulders. I do get a chance to take in





This gently bobbing table toy will frighten the life out of you. More than him.

the game's incredibly impressive graphics engine during the calm, which looks markedly more advanced than the first wave of PS4 games (Isolation's due for a late 2014 release, after all) and features wonderful depth-of-field when you bring up the motion tracker and some deep, inky real-time shadows. It's so handsome in fact that I...

unscripted. "When we drop an alien into a level, we don't know what it's going to do", says senior designer Gary Napper. "We just see how it behaves." Right now that behaviour can best be categorised as 'conducive to me performing a bodily function that won't get me invited back to Creative Assembly anytime soon'.

MM IT MIGHT BE THE SCARIEST MOMENT I'VE ENDURED SINCE THE FIRST DEAD SPACE.

Oh shit, there's the alien. It appears from nowhere, and I have to react to the threat instantly by ducking under a table. I can see its skeletal tail draping down from the surface above me, making a horribly solid scraping noise, then the thing disappears into the shadows. It's possibly the scariest moment I've endured since the first Dead Space, and but for that brief introductory cutscene, it's completely

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"The alien isn't running prescribed paths", Hope elaborates. "If you run, and make a lot of noise, it will find you. You have your own flashlight, which is really useful in the dark, but it's also a beacon that shows you where you are." The design team shows me an impossibly complicated flow chart detailing the alien's behaviour to underline this point. When you're undetected, it prowls around the place with









At this range, the tracker's simply telling you how screwed you are. So: totally.

the characteristic Nosferatu walk that Bolaji Badejo, the man in the rubber suit back in '79, imbued the beast with. It reacts to any visual and aural stimuli you give off and enters a new behaviour accordingly, investigating and finally getting its murder on when it discovers you.

SMART MOVE

The really clever part is that the alien learns from you. Throughout the game you'll pick up salvage parts, which can be crafted into makeshift weapons to deter, rather than kill, your phallic pursuer. The devs won't go into details, but they're adamant every object in the game could have been built on set in 1979, so don't expect SMART guns. Whatever you manage to cobble together, your adversary won't be fooled by it twice: it adapts its behaviour according to yours. Just knowing that creates a deeper sense of horror than any jump scare ever could.

There are no such implements to hand during my playthrough, which means having to use my motion tracker almost constantly. By distancing myself from the radar dot, I keep the alien off the screen for the next five minutes - there's that low frequency, high impact dynamic at work again. It might be saving my horrible device to travel around with.

"The motion tracker in [the movie] Alien is almost just there to show you how close you are to death," Hope points out. "It's not particularly useful - it's actually supporting the horror more than the idea of escaping." That's almost true of Isolation those beeps won't

hanging out incredibly near it. There's no other option than to move towards both, hoping it'll slink off somewhere and give my shot nerves a freakin' break. Initially the plan seems like it'll work - I make my way into the console room and locate the clunky old/new computer screen that controls the door. Then it flashes

I'M HOPING THE ALIEN WILL SLINK OFF AND GIVE MY SHOT NERVES A BIT OF A BREAK. 💵

save you if the xenomorph corners you, but there's also an objective marker outside the display which is incredibly handy. Until it lines up with the alien's dot. When that happens, you're firmly back in 'supporting the horror' territory.

I know this, because it's just happened to me. I need to manually override a locked door (of course I do). I don't know where the console is that does this, but I

past a doorway, sending my motion tracker into an apoplectic fit. It's really near.

Panicking, I run out of the room and dive into a locker. Of course,



You hardly ever see the stealthy xenomorph on-screen - do and you're already dead.

it heard my footsteps and so follows the sound and, for the first time, is completely visible on-screen. That's enough for me to completely lose confidence in the whole locker plan and dart back out into the open. Operating on instinct, I run for it with the alien closing in rapidly behind. There's a loud thud, then my legs are taken out from under me. Everything goes silent — I'm pretty sure I'm dying. What actually happened is that I activated an airlock back on the console, and just before the alien reached me the whole area lost pressure, sending us both tumbling through the air. By the time pressure's restored, the xeno's gone again. This whole sequence was unscripted and player-directed, and it couldn't have been paced better by Ridley himself.

RUBBER UP

Hope mentions something interesting about the original movie: "After 30 years, it's still in the Top 50 on IMDB. Danny Boyle calls [it] one of the holy trinity of serious sci-fi, and it's a guy in a rubber suit. We're so used to seeing CG now, It's amazing we can see that rubber suit and still get an emotional reaction from it." It's crucial that there's a man in a

suit in those scenes of course, because we'd see through digital artifice in a second (and do, in later movies), and that realisation takes the monster's presence right

out of the scene. With that in mind, I wonder what such an obviously forward-thinking studio as Creative Assembly sees as the videogame equivalent of that CG buzzkill in movies? Gary Napper and art lead Jude Bond have the answers.

"XP systems and level up points on screen," answers Napper. "I love playing games where I'm shooting stuff and I see numbers bouncing off heads. But we've made a game that's all about the atmosphere and tension and horror, and you can't really apply that [to it]." Bond feels much the same:



The visual fidelity here is staggeringly beautiful, in a 'think I might vom' way.

"If the fourth wall's broken, you're not going to be scared."

By the way — you are going to be scared when Isolation hits PS4 (and PS3) later in 2014. This you dared dream up, which means it also has terrible timing - this is about the worst time a genuinely promising game within this franchise could emerge. But it'd be a crime if Isolation suffered for Colonial Marines' shortcomings. They literally exist in different genres, they're being developed by different studios - and only one will make you grin at the freshness and craftsmanship of the haunted house ride you just went through.

ISOLATION PUTS THINGS IN PLACE THAT'LL PRODUCE TERRIFYING SITUATIONS.

is the most effective survival horror since Visceral's Dead Space, and it works by putting systems in place that produce terrifying situations organically rather than scripting jump-scares. It plays like the very best fanpitched Alien project

-THINGS-TO DO ON THE SEVASTOPOL BEFORE YOU DIE

Making the best of a bad situation with some opportunist sight-seeing



Learn a Lnew language

With no other humans aboard, you need a hobby to keep yourself entertained. Why not painstakingly teach yourself Japanese using the station's multi-lingual signs? Or how about the gentler pursuit of figuring out what all the icons from the movie actually mean – CA did, and they've applied it to the environment logically.



2 Brush up on your ICT skills

There's no standing in line to use the latest state-of-theart computer systems here, guy. No, that baffling array of beige switches, levers and keys is all yours to mess about with. Who knows, you might even restore a rather handy primary power system here and there while you tinker away at your '70s sci-fi workstation.



3 Try a bit of alien spotting

This one's kind of like I Spy, except the answer's always 'a three-meter perfectly evolved killing machine', and it's almost always wrong. It's like the Sevastopol's architects are deliberately trolling you by adding superfluous alien-shaped wires and pipes wherever there's a spare square inch. Very funny, you guys.



Start a junk collection

Wouldn't it be a shame to be disassembled by a massive, otherworldly terror without understanding the thrill of a well-maintained stamp collection? The bounty of scraps, containers, gels and tools aboard the Sevastopol means you can happily start combing different bits and bobs – you might end up creating a life-saving tool.



Pretend you're in the movie

It really does feel like walking onto the set of the original flick. Everything's scaled 1:1 and objects are built to the original prop blueprints, plus the film's score follows you round as you explore the dangerous corridors of the Sevastopol. Now's the time to recite 'The food ain't that bad, baby' in the dining area, away from prying ears.

EALIEN LIEN



Jude Bond knows Alien like Bernard Matthews knows turkeys. Fact.

Senior designer Gary Napper and art lead Jude Bond on bringing the bitch back■

vents, if you make a lot

down. So vou have some

players who will sprint

scavenging in the world

and trying to defend

themselves, yet other

players will take that

careful slow approach, gripping the motion

tracker for dear life and

just getting through it.

That's been reflected

today in the styles of

couple of guys managed

the playthroughs. A

through the level,

collecting things,

of noise it does come

he bone-rattling, nerve-shattering hands-on wasn't all that left a lasting impression from our exclusive trip to see Alien: Isolation for the first time at developer Creative Assembly. Equally impactful was the passion and confidence of its developer, which is trying to achieve something unprecedented within this storied franchise. We caught up with two of their key men to talk eye sockets, bucking trends and jumping the shark.

OPM: What I just played was intense and very scary – but how do you apply that formula to make it work over the span of a full game?

Gary Napper: That's everybody's first question. How can we maintain that tension for the length of the campaign? And it's just down to the game design,

balancing, the flow of the story and the mechanics, when you introduce things to the player. Obviously, we work in peaks and troughs with

THE LOOK OF A MAN IN A RUBBER SUIT ISN'T GOING TO STAND UP IN OUR GAME.

our approach to the action. How often you're against the alien, and how often we show it. A lot of it is down to how the player feels like they want to play. **Jude Bond:** The player is one of the things that's really unpredictable, and you can't always tell what they're going to do. So we've got an alien that can act in a nice way and support that. So when the alien is prowling around in the ceiling just under the

to do it with just one or two kills, only died a couple of times. Most people died between eight to 12 times, and there's other people who spent the entire hour playing it and died 30 times or something. They took off their headphones and said. 'That's the most intense alien I've ever seen.' They're not getting frustrated about it either, which I'm so happy about.

OPM: In the first movie, you only see the alien's

body in full when it's being flushed out of the airlock at the end. What were your points of reference when you were animating it?

JB: We had to start largely from scratch. The absolute first point of reference was the original '79 alien, but we all know that's a man in a rubber suit, and that's not going to stand up in our game. One of the first things we did was make the guy 9-10ft tall. From that we were like, 'well, a 9-10ft tall bloke isn't going to be able to walk around this space that's designed for 6ft humans in a very convincing way.' We ended up iterating on the actual physiology in the alien, so it kind of could work in that space. We built an alien that physically can't work, and that informs how the thing moves, and how the creature chooses to behave.

OPM: I noticed the skeletal eye sockets are back on the alien's head, as they are in the original rubber suit. JB: We have mixed feelings about that. The reason we had those there is because that's

You'll sense the alien everywhere – even when how the original prop was built. That was there in the original movie. [It's obscured by] the backlighting in the movie so it may not be clear to some people, but others are aware of it. That may or may not be perceived by the player, but we're still going to care about having that kind of detail in there.

GN: You look at the tiny details that some of the art guys have put into the world, and it's just incredible. The coffee grinder in the kitchen, the boxes of cereal from the Nostromo. I don't know if you noticed, but the circuit breaker from the handle in the demo you played is the exact handle from the self-destruct sequence at the end of the film. The thing about the movie props, and it's just a personal thing, is how real they appear. You see Sigourney struggling to pull that thing down, and I absolutely loved it.

JB: One of the things we've done in the art is to ensure that there is something in every room that ties us back to the original film, be that something as insignificant as a lever on the wall, or the shape of the door. There's something everywhere that will tie us back to the original movie. That's not to say that we're over-egging the connection there, the environments we produced are hugely diverse. We've managed to build what could be authentic, just by virtue of understanding how the original stuff was built, deconstructing that and putting it back together. We understand the aesthetic of the original

film. Once you've deconstructed everything and understood how it works, you can build anything and it'd be in keeping to that stuff.

We've tried to limit ourselves to only things which could've been or were available in 1979. Down to the pieces of equipment, we've built from components which pre-date '79 and could've been built on the set at Shepperton for example. We've maintained that authenticity almost to ridiculous levels really. It gives us a framework in which to check our work and make sure we're delivering what we want and not jumping the shark.

OPM: So much of what I've enjoyed about today has linked to the fact this game goes against the grain with what's going on elsewhere in first-





He might not have eyes, but he can hear and see just

person games. I think for many hardcore gamers and journalists, it's a dream scenario. How did this game came about, and how did Creative Assembly come to be making it?

GN: I came to this studio to make this game. I signed the [non-disclosure agreement] in my interview and I played the little slice they had.

and I knew the second I

THE SECOND I SAW THAT ALIEN APPEAR, I KNEW I HAD TO WORK ON THIS GAME.

saw that alien on screen and the way it was being portrayed, I needed to work on this game. The design challenge about making it about that one alien was incredible. I think that's why we've also managed to attract so much talent from across the industry. JB: Exactly. We built the team from the ground up for this game. The premise was there three years ago, and Sega was right behind it after our prototype. We had room to create an amazing team. We've got people from EA, Ubisoft, Crytek, Rockstar, people from all over who have come to join this game. Like we said, it's a dream project for a lot of people. As soon as people see what we're doing, they sign the NDAs, and get on the next plane.

OPM: As well as building up a team from

scratch, you've built a new engine, too. How did you approach such a process?

GN: It's been a big challenge. Developing a new IP with a new team and a new engine in the same period was a massive task.

JB: It was the right thing to do. We knew from the inception of the project what we wanted to do, what we want at the end, and we were very much aware that on the horizon somewhere there was next-gen too – we didn't know what that was, but we didn't want to paint into a corner. We needed to create an engine that would make the alien agile, yet still move with the times.

GN: Our scripting tools alone are just fantastic — they allow our designers to build something super-quick, get it in, have a look at it and play it.

JB: To the point of it looking good now. Please remember we're pre-alpha, it's going to look a ton better than it does at the moment.

GN: That's what makes me so confident. We're so proud of the game

so proud of the game we're making. What you saw was a very small slice of the game. We're due to release at the second half of 2014, and right now we've got a game that's playable from start to finish. So it's like: iterate, polish, get that content at its best. We've still got the time to make this an incredible game.

