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## ALLE IN SOLATION

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Our world-exclusive first look at Creative Assembly's wonderfully horrible Alien: Isolation

# quarantine Xone

PUB: SEGA DEV: CREATIVE ASSEMBLY
PLATFORM: XBOX 360 & XBOX ONE RELEASE: WINTER

t only takes one Alien. That's what everybody seems to forget. Like an Anthrax germ smeared into a stranger's handshake, one Alien can reduce an entire civilisation to a handful of mewling apes, cowering in the corners of acid-eaten vessels. Turn that primeval death-dealer into a pack animal, as James Cameron did with Aliens, and you risk diluting it, reducing it to an expendable asset. Cameron found a balance, in the end, but the same can't be said of his countless imitators, among them the folk of Gearbox Software, developer of last year's woefully ramshackle and attrition-driven Aliens: Colonial Marines.

Creative Assembly wants you to take a step back from all that – a step back from the sickly, writhing compost heap of dog-eared scares this decades-old IP has become. A step back from the circus of subspecies dreamt up by the architects of spin-off novels, games and comicbooks – from Dogbursters

and Praetorians, Smashers and Crushers, Queen Mothers and Arachnoids. A step back from Scott's abortive prequelor-is-it, Prometheus, and Joss Whedon's shambolic Alien: Resurrection. A step back, even, from Rebellion Software's impossibly good Aliens vs. Predator games - impossibly good, given the dreadfulness of the film series of the same name. Isolation purports to be the one clear (distress) signal in an ocean of white noise, a first-person survival horror adventure that's purely and simply the tale of a monster, a series of dingy rooms and a really dodgy motion tracker.

## Something wicked

Untwitch your trigger fingers, veterans of LV-426. Creative Assembly's Xenomorph isn't some brittle, frenzied cockroach, spawned by the dozen. It's no pop-up book kamikaze warrior, like the terrorists from a Call of Duty game. It's a highly adaptable, nine-foot tall apex predator with bundles of rapiers for hands, a bullet-proof carapace and a top speed of around eight metres a second. Rather than expiring in a shower of goo at the first opportunity, it'll reappear throughout the

Isolation campaign and stalk the corridors in search of you - a tenacious horror, palpable in the outline of every bulkhead and fuel line, every bony hummock of machinery. Your goal isn't to beat it, but to trick or avoid it, pitting your puny simian wits against its complex and evolving artificial intelligence. During our inspection of Creative Assembly's vast new console team, we're allowed to spend about 45 minutes in the creature's company. It feels like a little over five.

> The rules of engagement make themselves plain very quickly. Confront the Alien, and you'll die. Run, and you'll die. Pull a lever without checking your motion tracker, and you'll die. Peek out of cover for too long, and you'll die. Breathe too loudly while hiding in a locker, and you'll die. Attempt to 'exploit' what you presume to be the Alien's 'patrol pattern', like Solid Snake, and - well, you get

the idea. "We wanted to reestablish the Alien as this massive, unpredictable, lethal creature," explains creative lead Alistair Hope. "Games in the past have treated it as cannon fodder. We wanted to take it back to what it was like on the Nostromo - really terrifying, believable and intelligent, not something that's just going to run onto your Pulse Rifle.'

Pulse Rifles will be conspicuous by their absence, for that matter. We're obliged to make do with a fancy futuristic spanner, which might as well be a feather duster for all the impact it makes on the Alien's chitin noggin. The presence of resources (for example, 'gel') in crates suggests that players will eventually be able to construct more advanced tools and weapons, but this isn't a first-person shooter by any stretch of the imagination. Isolation's leading lady Amanda Ripley doesn't strike us as somebody who keeps a shotgun handy for close encounters. Her mother certainly didn't.



## Chip off the old block











The game begins 15 years after the events of the first film, when Amanda - an up-and-coming offworld engineer - is contacted by a mysterious 'Samuels' who offers to "shut the book" on Ellen Ripley's disappearance. It transpires that the android manufacturer Seegson has recovered the Nostromo's flight recorder and ferried it to a distant orbital station for study. Needless to say, this proves a Bad Move, and Amanda's subsequent visit doesn't go entirely as planned: she's separated from her crew and, much like Dead Space's Isaac Clarke, must patch up the facility while working her way round to an escape route. We're assuming that there is, in fact, an escape route - Amanda, let's not forget, is long gone by the time her mother awakens from hypersleep at the beginning of Aliens.

## The long dark

Our objective during the demo is pretty straightforward: get from one end of the level to another, punching a few buttons on the way. A hexagonal corridor chopped up by beams of starlight gives out onto a rest and recreation area, the station's colossal bulk unfolding below its floor-length windows. It's here that we see our first corpse, slumped against a rail with a hole where his face should be (in a ghoulish touch, the game's inessential extras are modelled on Creative Assembly staffers), but that's not what unnerves us - brutalised cadavers in a setting of this hue are par for the course. What unnerves us is the audio. A door slams down

behind us with what strikes us as an unnecessary amount of fuss, briefly drowning out the faint doleful strains of the soundtrack - a dynamic, cleverly elaborated-upon version of the film's score that ratchets up when you're in danger, to a fingernails-down-theblackboard frenzy.

# "THE SMAL L THINGS MATTER WHEN IT COMES TO THE ALIEN"

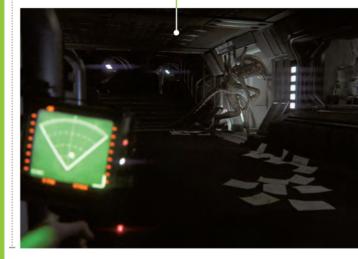
Amanda doesn't sound too amused by the situation either, her voice beginning to wobble as we probe deeper into the area. Isolation's script is painstakingly unobtrusive - there are no fourth-wall-breaking 'notes to self' as you explore, and while Amanda does have a radio contact who goes by the name of Ricardo, he's the quiet kind. "We had her being a lot more vocal, like chatty," says Hope. "Well, not chatty, but talking about the world around her. And you think that makes sense, she's talking about what she can see, but it was rubbish - well, not rubbish, but it just wasn't right. So we went through all these steps, and I can imagine the writers weeping still - just hack it out, get rid of it.

It doesn't take page upon page of self-disclosure to convey a personality, he explains. "The film is very naturalistic in that people say as little as possible, it's a very staccato delivery, and this is where we ended up, with her saying very little. But it was almost like the less she says the more effective she is as a character. That was a big lesson for us - don't put too many words in her mouth. Let her breathe, let her soak things in, she doesn't need to express herself all the time. And small things really matter, like her taking a breath - that can be as significant as a whole line."

The small things also matter when it comes to the Alien, which unrolls from a ceiling vent like the world's least friendly maintenance man during a masterful cutscene (entirely ingame and first person) about 15 minutes into the demo.







# "WE'VE HAD TIMES WHEN WE'VE THOUGHT 'THIS IS TOO HARD'"



## ALIEN ISOLATION



When did it click? Creative lead Alistair Hope explains the game's breakthrough moment

I had this idea of what we were trying to achieve - re: Aliening the Alien, taking it back to its roots. But we also seemed to have put ourselves on this really challenging path. Putting together this Alien that doesn't have any prescribed paths, where it feels like a live encounter. Creating that creature was a really massive challenge, but the guys have done an incredible job.

We've had times where we've thought 'this is too hard, why are we doing this?' But I was convinced we were on the right track, and that once everything came together... We looked at things for a very long time individually, but I was convinced that once we'd pulled it all together, it'd work as a whole. We used to have these morning meetings where we'd look at the Alien - we'd have a whitebox environment, and we'd be playing, and it would behave okay but it was a very cold, flat experience. There was a lot of soul-searching going on.

Working in games is incredibly difficult. There's a lot of questioning going on all the time. But I was sure that once we got everything together, it would work. So we had one day where we put it all together and tried it. We pulled in lighting, we pulled in the world, pulled in the effects, so that it had an of atmosphere, and we pulled correct geometry and the music.

We played it again the next day, with all the main stake-holders in the room. When the Alien grabbed the player, the whole room just leapt. And it was like, that's it. It was the eureka moment. We had a team meeting the next day, where we got all the guys together and played the demo again out on the floor. And the Alien got us again - it was incredible to see the whole team just jump out of their seats.

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What strikes you first about Creative Assembly's beautiful beastie is simply its weight: the floor shakes as the creature stalks from chamber to chamber.

While traumatic, this is helpful, because the game's motion tracker isn't exactly a precision implement - it only tracks movement within a 90 degree view cone, though quarter circles also light up to indicate when there's a threat to your sides or rear. There's no minimap function, either, and Amanda's view of the world dims and loses focus while using the device. To put the cherry on the cake, the Alien can cheat - it'll sometimes make use of a vent to move undetected around the area. "The motion tracker is just there to show you how near you are to death," Hope reveals, encouragingly. 'It's not particularly useful, it supports the horror more than the idea of escaping."

We do manage to escape, in the end, but we die twice in the attempt - a tricky closing puzzle requires that we initiate an airlock pressurisation sequence, then hide in the vicinity when the Alien comes to investigate. There are more complex scenarios later in the game, which trade on the

creature's ability to learn from your behaviour. "There is an element of randomness in there, but also we didn't want it to feel dumb, in that you could always trick him. We're not really talking about the wider gameplay today, but if you do something like that he'll learn that he's been played, and he won't make that mistake again. So that's interesting. 'Interesting' is certainly one word for it. "There's that sense that he understands," Hope continues. "It's not just death without any thought behind it. He'll start to understand what you're doing."

## Robot Wars

## Cabin fever

All the cowering in abject

fear and confusion does at least give us the opportunity to appreciate what a fine job Creative Assembly has done of the environments, which are obsessively faithful to the film. "What I've instilled into everyone is just to be quite blinkered," Hope tells us. "The inspiration has been that first film, and only that first film. Once we had that clear vision of what we were trying to produce, almost everything else became irrelevant. We had our goal, we knew where we were coming from. We were trying to do something different from the things that have come before, [but] in a way we were fortunate, because this has never been attempted before." UI lead Jon McKellan concurs. "A lot of the other source material has been tapped into. Like you say, with the comics and spinoffs and other games - they've all focused on the later aspects of the franchise, whereas very few people have touched the original.

That's not to say the task has been easy. Aside from crafting the Alien itself, Creative Assembly's greatest challenge has been to untangle and expand upon the film's much-praised art direction, which applies decades of wear and tear to the gleaming, highly geometrical starship interiors of earlier, more optimistic sci-fi flicks like Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. With its coffee rings, shabby little dining area, pinned-up Polaroids and nigh-feral housecat, the film's Nostromo is an uneasy mixture of the scarily high











Ladies first
Alien is famous for
demonstrating that
women can star in sci-fi
films without donning
silver bikinis. There was
never any doubt that
Isolation's lead would
be female, says Jon
McKellan. "It just feels
right. When I was made
aware of this project
before I came to work on
it, I think it was in
my mind before I even
came to work on it that
it would have a female
character, that that
would be the essence of
it – it's just something
that ties into the
franchise, it feels right."

Quarantine Zone

tech and the reassuringly domestic, a machine that's become a home – and a hunting ground.

To do the film's complex look and feel justice, the *Isolation* team has committed to a production process that borders on the masochistic. Every prop you'll discover in the game, we're told, is something it would have been possible to create on set in 1979, or even earlier. Amanda owns a hacking device that's modelled on an old World War radio, for instance, an LED screen that's tuned by turning a phat analog dial – worlds and decades away from the holograms of a *Dead Space*, or the glistening contours of a *Mass Effect*.

You can expect an abundance of cathode ray tube displays, it goes without saying, but the developer has gone the extra mile: assets for in-game TV were recorded onto knackered VHS tapes, then recorded back into the game, for an appropriately low-fi finish (in a symbolic twist, Creative Assembly has used VHS copies of Alien for this purpose). As aboard the Nostromo, the game's wardrobe is determinedly cheap and utilitarian: corporate onesies with ungainly sewn-on pockets, rolled shirt sleeves, scuffed leather jackets and Casio watches. The movie's bulbous, ponderous golden space suits have been brought across with virtually no changes – their presence suggests that a trip across the space station's hull is in store. Even the game's concept art is true to the subject matter, mimicking the clean, strictly proportional felt tip set designs drawn up by Brandywine Productions' Ron Cobb and Chris Foss.

## Exhibit A

It's an impressive show of fan service, but proof of nothing in itself — as Colonial Marines demonstrates, a well-appointed virtual museum doesn't necessarily make for a decent game. "It's not authenticity for authenticity's sake," McKellan promises. "It's

## "IT'S WORLDS AND DECADES AWAY FROM DEAD SPACE"

not just pandering to the source material. It's integral to the feel – the size of those corridors, the height of the rooms are what makes it what it is." There's a sinister side to all that finely wrought memorabilia, Hope points out – it may serve as camouflage. "Another aspect to Alien is that a lot of the world looks like an Alien, so there's that misdirection – is it a chain, or a tail? You'll be staring at things, wondering whether to make a move. Is it the Alien? No, it's a pipe. That's deliberate in the film and it's something we've definitely looked at in the game – to keep people second-guessing, on the back foot."

In case you hadn't quite realised, this is the most provocative and promising appropriation of the Alien license in years, though there are still plenty of unanswered questions. Perhaps the biggest right now is whether the sections of the game that don't feature the Alien will be quite as engaging as those that do – according to one, strictly unconfirmed rumour, Amanda is going to be drawn into conflict with humanoid foes, which could be just a ruse to pad out the playlength. Still, nothing we've played so far suggests that Creative Assembly has made any concessions to either the franchise's messier recent history or the timidity of competitors in the survival horror sphere, who now litter their work with nice, safe 'action sequences' for fear of deterring the incurably skittish. It only takes one Alien, after all, and this Alien could be worth the entire hive.





