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ISOLATION

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Dynamic lighting is used to replicate the look of the film.

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Freedom! Bright, noisy, alien-attracting freedom.

Lockers. They're great, aren't they? You can keep your coat in them, pin up some photos, even squeeze inside one and close the door if you feel the need. I am midway through a 40-minute session with *Alien: Isolation*, and I've suddenly acquired a very pressing need to climb inside one.

It's seen me. At least, I think it's seen me. Giger's monster is standing about 25 feet away, at the dark end of a long curving corridor. I was – stupidly, perhaps – following it, figuring that if I could slip past, I would have a short run to the ladder that would get me out of this half-ruined section of the station.

The alien turns, slightly, and its eyeless head tilts just enough to bring me into what I presume is its line of sight. It pivots and starts to move and suddenly breaking eye contact with it feels like the most important thing in the world. When I entered this area I'd meticulously combed the edge of the room looking for a solution to a situation like this. I memorised the location of each bank of lockers, observing that I could tap a button to climb inside if I needed to. I need to.

Ready or not

I hear it clank-clank-clank across the gantry as it sprints to investigate, but I get inside the locker before it can tell where I've gone. It's not stupid, though. The alien stalks the immediate area, notices the lockers, and comes over to investigate. I peer through the grille and find myself face to face with it. Saliva pours from its twin jaws. A prompt tells me that I can hold a button to hold my breath, and that it's possible to lean away so that it won't see me. I do both.

I'm playing on a PC using an Xbox controller, and it's a natural fit for the game – despite the first-person perspective. *Alien: Isolation* allows for tiny gradations of analogue movement, from leans and peeks to – in this case – a kind of terrified squat. The alien loses interest in the locker and turns away. I bring up my motion detector and watch it recede, until it enters an adjacent room and I lose sight of it.

Games confront me with big decisions all the time. I've adjudicated the fates of planets and sent well-liked characters to their deaths. Mustering the courage to climb out of that locker is as tough a choice as I've ever made. I wait a moment longer, just to be sure. Lockers are pretty great, I think. Maybe I'll stay.

It has taken the better part of a decade for Creative Assembly to bring *Alien: Isolation* into being, and what they've produced is very exciting. Alien has hardly had a great year, as movie licences go, and *Colonial Marines*' very public failure is alluded to – if never explicitly addressed – as Creative Assembly and Sega introduce this new take on the series to the world.

But it's not just Gearbox's wonky FPS that is being redressed. It's the AvP series, the action games that preceded it, and the later movies. *Alien: Isolation* is not an Aliens game – it's an Alien game, rooted in the tone and themes of the original film. Cameron's marines, dropships and pulse rifles do not feature. There is a single xenomorph, and it doesn't fling itself around the environment like a velociraptor full of helium. It stalks, it hunts, and it kills you if it can. You might look at the screenshots and think 'sci-fi FPS' – don't. Think *Amnesia* in space.

You play as Ripley's daughter Amanda, 15 years after the disappearance of her mother at the end of the first film. In that time she's grown up and – following her mother's footsteps in the first of

> **"I peer through the grille and find myself face to face with it"**

several ways – joined the Weyland-Yutani corporation as an engineer. When she discovers that the Nostromo's black box recorder has been located at a remote space station, she signs on with a mission to investigate. Her team finds the station – Sevastopol – in disarray, its inhabitants scattered and desperate thanks to the predations of our eight-foot-tall, acid-blooded friend.

Old world charm

Sevastopol has been created with the help of Fox's movie archive, and I'm shown art and prop diagrams that demonstrate an extraordinary attention to detail on Creative Assembly's part. User interface designer Jon McKellan explains that they have created nothing for the game that could not be created on a movie lot in 1979: this is a vision of the future as it was thought of in the past, with none of *Prometheus*'s holographic interfaces or flying scanning balls. Think BBC Micro

keyboards, enormous mobile phones, and VHS.

This attention to detail is apparent throughout the game. Ripley doesn't carry weapons in the traditional sense – in the section I played, her key tools were a handheld motion tracker, a hacking device and a torch. The torch is adjustable, but I didn't use it because I'd been warned in advance that its beam could tip off the alien to my location – and I'd rather squat in the dark than be impaled, generally speaking. The hacking tool forms the basis of a minigame that, in this case, was used to extract some key data from a PC right before the alien made its entrance. In the final game, you may have to complete this straightforward puzzle under more substantial duress.

The device itself is the lovechild of a World War II radio and an old-school portable TV – another nod to the original film's take on technology – and after tuning it in ▶

There's no UI – you have to bring up the motion tracker manually.

you know, what your target knows, and how you can use that to your advantage. Unlike those games, however, *you're* the target. The feeling of being pursued is a rapid route to some pretty primal emotional responses, and I felt that the game was genuinely testing my awareness, courage and initiative – personal traits, not gaming skills. At the very least, my special degree of cowardice made me the only journalist at the event to beat the demo without dying. I think I've got a childhood spent hiding in school lockers to thank for that.

Level design will play a huge role in keeping this experience varied over the course of the campaign, as will the tasks you're asked to perform. At the end of the demonstration, I pressed a button to cycle an airlock, creating a great deal of sound and light and starting a nonspecific timer that I'd have to wait out before I could escape. This sent me back into my safety locker, and as soon as the alien finished looking for me by the airlock it made a beeline for it – the last place it had suspected I was hiding.

"The alien learns," Al Hope tells me. "It can't necessarily be tricked. You might get away with it once, but after that it'll think 'hang on, I've been played.'"

This gives the developers the freedom to create challenges in interesting ways. Simply removing lockers from the equation would probably be enough to do for me, but

TERROR LEVEL Previous Alien games, rated by scariness

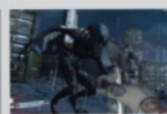| Alien	AvP Arcade	Alien Trilogy	Alien vs. Predator	Aliens: Colonial Marines
Release 1984	**Release** 1994	**Release** 1996	**Release** 1999	**Release** 2013
The Spectrum Alien game was effective despite its simplicity, thanks to clever randomisation: you never knew when the alien would attack.	The height of '90s comic-book Alien: it's basically *Contra* with xenomorphs. Substantially less scary than the dodgy arcades you'd find it in.	Answers the question "what would happen if Ripley was played by the *Doom* marine?" A decent shooter, but not a great fit for the subject matter.	The game that most notably figured out that the motion tracker is scarier than the monster itself. A serious attempt to nail the atmosphere.	Dodgy AI and a wonky pace made this a high-profile failure. It'll be a while before anyone revisits Cameron's take on the series.
Scare-o-meter	Scare-o-meter	Scare-o-meter	Scare-o-meter	Scare-o-meter

the alien's own adaptation will likewise force players to change their approach. The game will include other ways to deter or distract the monster, few of which they're willing to talk about at the moment – but the inclusion of lootable bits and bobs in the demo suggests that crafting items will play a role.

Not in the script

It's suggested that you'll encounter other enemies – likely dangerous survivors of Sevastopol's current crisis. While human-on-human violence isn't unprecedented in the films it'd be a huge shame if *Isolation* devolved into a *Colonial Marines*-style man-shooter. That said, the sequence I played was impressive enough that the final game could survive the odd duff sequence if it

manages to deliver open-ended horror sequences of that calibre.

One of the most exciting things about *Isolation*, though, is the fact that it's a big-budget licensed game with a serious, systems-led design ticking away under the hood. The developers understand that scripted spectacle isn't ultimately what makes games great, and the idea of seeing that sentiment return to game development as a whole is tremendously promising.

"We're not fans of taking control away from the player unless we really, *really* have to," Al Hope says – and rightly so. By putting control in the hands of the players, Creative Assembly are giving them the power to find their own scares. And as my time with *Isolation* proves, they'll find them in the strangest places. ■

"The alien learns. It can't necessarily be tricked."

The environments are designed to look lived-in.

Perhaps hiding behind something transparent was unwise.

The station's inhabitants don't much care for their new guest.

you're asked to dial in a particular geometric shape before a time limit expires. It's designed to give you the sense that you're hammering in commands that could save your life as danger approaches – and you really *are* in danger.

Isolation's alien is not cannon fodder. It's substantially taller and more humanoid than traditional game interpretations of the creature have been, and creative lead Al Hope points out that, in the original movie, you generally don't see it move very fast. "From the outset, that was the alien we were aiming for," he says. "A creature that looks down on the player. There have been depictions of the alien where they're more like angry dogs – below your waist. We wanted something dominant, monolithic." The restoration of details from Giger's original design – like the outline of a human skull behind its face – establish that this is a return to form, not another videogame mutation.

In the demo, the alien entered the level at a set point. In the final game, it might enter any environment at any point if you make too much noise. It is, after all, hunting you. "Once you've met the alien, that's it," Hope says. "When it appears from then on is very much dynamic."

It has no set movement pattern or route, instead using its own intelligence to follow sights and sounds around the level. My adventure in the locker was specific to me, a product of a dozen systems

working together to create a horror movie on the fly.

"It's been a long journey for us in order to be able to create that," Hope says. "It's a very difficult creature to animate. It looked like a bloke in a suit for a while, or a hockey player – we had throw away what we knew about old approaches to delivering character animation, and go for something much more subtle."

It's alive

The creature's movements aren't canned animations. They way it moves is intended to give you some sense of what it knows and where its focus is. If it doesn't know where you are, it'll prowl – tail flicking at the environment, mostly upright, moving as silently as possible. When it clocks you, it freezes – head snapping towards you and lowering, body hunching forward as it moves into a headlong sprint. At these moments the game's soundscape will emphasise its footsteps and your own breathing, and then if it catches you you'll be treated to one of many first-person depictions of what it might be like to be caught by Giger's monster. It's horrible – in a good way.

"We want it to feel personal, like it's happening to you," says Jon McKellan. "We could go over the top, and I think that would kill it. By being subtle, we give people an idea they can extrapolate from."

This is a stealth game at its heart, and like *Dishonored* or *Hitman* it's ultimately about information – what