ALIEN: ISOLATION
DEVELOPER CREATIVE ASSEMBLY
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## HEAR YOU SCREAM

## Defeating our fears of another disappointing Alien game in Alien: Isolation

The franchise that should be a PC gaming license to print money has always struggled, most recently with Colonial Marines. But **SIMON PARKIN** wonders if stripping the concept back to its roots can, well, make Alien work.

arly into the development of Alien:
Isolation, a first person horror game
based on Ridley Scott's seminal 1979
science fiction movie, the development
team invited members of the public to
play the game. While the team at Creative
Assembly knew they were making a horror
game about vulnerability not power, they
nevertheless gave each player a powerful
gun to hold as they crept around the
darkened space station.

After a few moments they set the Alien - the H.R. Giger-designed black space monster that drips with saliva and venom – free in the environment. In every single case, the player chose to drop to their knees and crouch under a nearby table rather than try to engage the monster.

In the final game there will be no guns to hold, not even for the plucky player who wants to attempt a head-on assault.

"There is no weapon waiting in a locker that will solve your problem," says Alistair Hope, Alien Isolation's creative lead. But even so, the experiment proved to the team that, even with a gun in hand, their Alien was already frightening enough to scare people into cowering.

The gun anecdote is interesting because it demonstrates not only that the team has re-created the Alien monster's (there's only one in the game) fearsome appearance. But also that they understand successful survival horror is about making a player feel disempowered, not formidable.

#### FEWER BUGS, MORE TERROR

While Hope doesn't directly reference the disaster that was 2013's Aliens: Colonial Marines, he is happy to make clear that previous Alien titles haven't quite hit the spot for him.

"I always knew there was a more meaningful interaction that a player could have with the Alien than just viewing it as a bullet sponge at the end of their gun."

That relationship requires, according to Hope, a return to the roots of the

series. It's an oft-repeated cliché for game developers working on treasured film franchises that have gone awry, but it's one that seems apt here.

"We approached the project as if we're creating a haunted house in space," he says. 
"It's a story about an underpowered and underprepared character facing overwhelming odds. In other words: a survival horror game based on the survival horror."

#### FEAR OF FEAR ITSELF

In play, the game succeeds in making the player feel immensely vulnerable. The short demo is characterised by creeping through the dark, hugging shadows in the flickering electrical light while the Alien crawls and stomps in search of you. As soon as the Alien spawns into virtual reality, it begins to sweep the area. It doesn't run on any set paths but instead roams, looking for light, movement or sound. When it senses any of these things it triggers a 'suspect' response, which gives the player a few seconds to



react, silently shifting position perhaps, or sliding quietly into an empty locker.

Later in the game you will be able to craft items that allow you to distract the Alien (although, in time it will supposedly learn to overlook these tricks) but at this stage there's nothing to do but creep, breathe lightly and hope for the best.

At nine and a half feet tall, the Alien is incredibly imposing, especially in the cramped corridors of a space station. His rangy height allows him to move from a creep to a sprint in seconds and, with three years' worth of animation and Al work already invested in this single monster, it's a formidable beast.

At the end of the demo section we have to

UNCOMMON ACCESS The Creative Assembly team has worked closely with 20th Century Fox on the storyline, with full access to the original movie's vaults and files including the original soundtrack. As the soundtrack featured just 90 minutes of music, Creative Assembly has taken the original score, re-recorded it with many of the same musicians who played on the original, as well as adding in new material that's based on the original's sounds and composition.

the subject of any books, movies, or games in the Alien extended universe and as such is the ideal candidate for the game's protagonist.

The game's story begins 14 years after the end of the film, as Amanda – who now works as an engineer – begins the search to find out what happened to her mother. She heads to a nearby space station, which is in the process of being decommissioned in order to locate the flight recorder from the USCSS Nostromo, Ellen's ship. This is where everything begins to fall apart.

The station feels in direct keeping with the dusty high tech of the film's aesthetic. It's something the team has worked hard to achieve. Storyboards were drawn up in felt tip in the same style as those that were created for the original film. The icons and signs seen in the movie are recreated in the game as the UI to guide the player around the environment. The colour palette of an screens are based on Spectrum and Amstrad computers with a low colour, almost garish look and feel.

The 'motion tracker', the player's most important tool that shows a green dot if the player could endure twelve or so hours of that level of tension. The abandoned space station provides some opportunities for, if not comic relief, then at least a moment's sanctuary.

"It's about tension and release," says

Hope. "You can't expect players to endure this
kind of intensity. When people finished the
demo they let out a sigh of relief and that's
every bit as important as the trauma that
came before it."

There's also the challenge of how to expand upon the basic game of cat-and-mouse, something that is tough when there's only one primary foe in the entire game. Hope is eager to emphasise there will be other threats to the player's safety.

"We do have wider threats and peril," he says. "There are lots of things other than the Alien to keep the player engaged and fearful. But it's very much about the one-on-one encounter between the player and the Alien. The level designers have spent so much time trying to make the monster something very different to a bad guy with a bunch of heavy armour. You should instantly know to cower, rather than engage."

The team continues to balance the game's basic interactions in an attempt to eke out the most amount of tension. That means restricting information - like the Alien's location.

"As soon as you knew everything all of the time any sense of tension was destroyed. That showed us how much horror games are about the trade in information: how much does the pursuer and the fleer know about the other. With omniscience, the tension was ruined and it became a kind of dance."

One thing that doesn't need to be balanced is the fleeting amount of time that the Alien is on screen. One of the original film's taglines read: 'Sometimes the scariest things come from within.' Hope agrees: "So often it's the empty spaces that provide the canvas for our horrors. We paint our worst fears onto the walls. The players do the work for us."

# "We keep the player fearful. You should instantly know to cower, rather than engage."

make a dash for an airlock, making it through the closing doors seconds before the Alien slams its full weight into the other side of the steel. It's terrifying, intense and, above all, entirely reminiscent of Scott's tense film.

#### GENERATIONAL CHANGE

The story – co-written by the DC comic book writer Dan Abnett – is also reminiscent of the film not least because it features Amanda Ripley, daughter of Ellen Ripley, the character that made Sigourney Weaver famous more than 30 years ago. Amanda has not yet been

Alien is nearby, has a low-fi tech aesthetic. It's not just a visual choice: it also informs the game design as the tracker is something that must be heaved up to eye level before use, slowing the pace and upping the tension.

Rather than using middleware, the Creative Assembly team built its own engine and tools so they could have full control of the game's rendering in order to ensure all props in the game were to the exact size and scale as those in Scott's film. Every chair is the correct height. The detail is exhaustive.

The demo is incredibly intense, but no





#### WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

Like her mother in the movie,
Amanda Ripley is thrust into
close contact with co-workers, a
community forged by circumstance
rather than friendship. Before
recording the dialogue the cast
of actors did read-throughs,
implementing their feedback into the
scripts, before being scanned using
cutting edge 3D techniques to bring
their likenesses into the game.

An PCPOWERPLAY







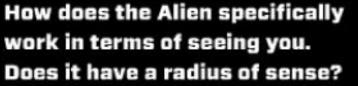




## How are you creating the safe spaces on the space ship that the Alien can't access?

AH: It's definitely not a ghost ship in space. You're arriving in the situation as it's unfolding. It's not the sci-fi cliché of arriving ten years later and having to

work out what happened. You're in the thick of it. The station is being decommissioned but it's not derelict. Some things still work, and that gives us plenty of license to create safe areas that make narrative sense.



AH: Kind of. It's more like multiple 3D cones of vision and hearing. There are sensors sensitive that are more or less sensitive in different diections.

### Do these sensors become more sensitive as the game progresses and the player's tool-set increases? Does he become stronger?

AH: We do play around with the intensity and aggression of the Alien but we don't cheat by allowing him to see or hear better. It's more like he's more aggressive in certain areas of the game, never that he has been enhanced and is a super charged version of himself. One of the interesting things for us as his creators is that we continue to die in the game. That's either a testament to our lack of skill or the skill of our creation. He catches us out.

## Is there anything surprising you've seen from watching people play?

AH: Everybody presses start at the same moment but within ten minutes they are all in radically different situations. It is fascinating to see how different everyone's play-throughs are. One guy was almost crouched the entire time: very cautious with a peek and a lean around every corner. Another guy would run everywhere and, as soon as he saw the Alien, he'd sprint to the nearest locker. We're so excited to see all of the different ways that people play via the new streaming services on the next-gen consoles. The speed runs in particular will be fascinating.

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