

# ALIEN ISOLATION

**PLAYED IT** An all-new encounter with terror.

**P**laying *Alien: Isolation* feels like learning to swim for the first time. When you're first dropped into Sevastopol space station (through an air duct in the ceiling, in my case), you feel total uncertainty about what's safe and what's not. Where can I hide? When is it OK to run? Will the Alien see me under this desk? How far away can a gunshot be heard? How long will cowering in a locker like a bullied teen protect me from a nine-foot death machine?

Being left – being trusted – to answer those questions through my own bravery, anxiety and failure was really satisfying. The half-hour section I played seemed pretty early into the game, but it was free

of any clumsy hand-holding or tutorial. The demo didn't cover much physical distance, but I had to consider each step carefully.

After gathering a few materials I'll use later for crafting, I approach the only exit in the locker

room I've dropped into. The automatic door opens with a pneumatic *whoosh* – and the first thing I see is a body slumped on the floor, blood smeared across the bulkhead. The only light sources in this section of the ship are auxiliary, but I decide to keep my flashlight off, not knowing whether it could alert the Alien.

The space station, even with the sticky layer of gore splattered all over it, is gorgeously rendered in '80s sci-fi style. Chunky electronics sit at workstations, green screens glow. Everything is lightly rounded, sterile, generally beige or pearl. It's a very pleasant aesthetic, despite the occasional corpse.

I curl around a few more corridors, never leaving the crouched position, peeking my head into the vacant labs and areas I pass along the way. I haven't seen or heard the Alien, but I'm moving more carefully than I ever have in a videogame. The sound design makes me hyperattentive to my movement, orientation and what level of light I'm standing in.

It's at this point that I start to develop a close personal relationship with the motion

## READ ME

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The gore and claustrophobic feel of the station reference the original film.



The motion tracker aids evasion – and ups the fear level nicely.



A flamethrower will buy you time, but that's pretty much it.

tracker, a piece of equipment that barely leaves my hands for the remainder of the playthrough. A single blip populates its Game Boy-green screen, an abstract reminder that the Alien is lurking, unseen, somewhere in the station's air vents.

It's an extremely helpful device, but it also feels like an integral part of the story, and not merely an in-game crutch. It isn't simply a way of mitigating my fear and giving me more control – if anything, knowing exactly how close the Alien is, or that it's sprinting towards me, puts me even more on edge.

Plodding on, dodging the Alien by hiding in lockers or under beds, I'm able to make it unscathed to a central area of the space station where looters lurk. They're holding pistols, but getting into a firefight with them using the flamethrower and pistol I carry would only pan out as 'whoever wins, we lose'.

There's another way to deal with these people, thankfully. I crouch underneath a medical station, reach into my crafting menu, and use the materials I've gathered to make a noisemaker that I then lob down the corridor. The looters chatter, baffled at what has caused the racket that's about to

get them killed. The Alien is on them in seconds, gutting them unceremoniously, striding confidently from victim to victim.

This was the only few minutes that pulled me out of *Isolation*'s otherwise gripping immersion. The Alien's animations were a little disconnected, it turned on its heels too quickly to find another target, and it didn't flinch when the looters or I, foolishly, unloaded our weapons at point-blank range. I don't expect the thing to bleed, but

**“Knowing how close the Alien is, or that it's sprinting towards me, puts me more on edge”**

it's a strange to not have an enemy react at all when you shoot it.

Eventually I came to a level section that ended up being just as terrifying as my encounters with the Xenomorph. In a generator room, sealed off from the Alien, I had to complete a quick puzzle at a command station in order to activate an emergency system. Between me and it, though, was a synthetic: a glassy-eyed android programmed to stop me. I

was trapped in this tiny, symmetrical square room, and he chased me tirelessly, barking commands.

Meleeing and lighting it on fire did absolutely nothing. A headshot didn't kill it. Was I missing something? I looked for environmental clues. I shot a red barrel that didn't explode. Red barrels are always supposed to explode! Finally, after minutes of panicked fleeing, my last bullet chambered, I weakly pointed it back at the synthetic. A second headshot put him down, crumpling him into a sputtering, still-scary mess on the floor. Phew.

*Isolation* makes you realise that every *Alien* game for the past decade has been a thematic mismatch. *Alien* isn't about its Marines, its pulse rifle, or its action. It's about fear, uncertainty and how a single, fragile human copes with a genetically superior monster-predator. It's wonderful to see Sega supporting a premise – admittedly after supporting one or two other conventional directions for *Alien* that didn't pan out – that's driven by emergent storytelling, and trusting that the game's systems are designed to produce a great experience for everyone. ■

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