

THE HORROR SPECIAL » CELEBRATING TERROR IN VIDEO GAMES

HYPER »

ALIEN ISOLATION

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STILL WANT TO SCREAM!

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RIPLEYS, BELIEVE IT OR NOT

HEIDI KEMPS knows the apple never falls far from the tree

ALIEN: ISOLATION

PLATFORM: PS3/4, Xbox 360/One, PC

CATEGORY: Survival horror

DEVELOPER: The Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER: Sega

DUE: October 7



» It's really amazing when you look back on the first Alien movie and realize just how ahead of its time it was. This is a film with a relatable, engaging, resourceful female protagonist who defends herself against a terrifying, living threat – one that seems to defy numerous laws of nature. It's a superb blend of atmosphere, pacing, setting, and practical effects that's just as frightening and engaging today as it was thirty-five years ago in 1979.

The past few decades, however, haven't been the kindest to the Alien series – several poorly regarded later films have essentially beached the cinematic portion of the franchise, and branches in other mediums have been filled with ups and downs. While there have been several noteworthy Alien-themed videogames – games such as Capcom's beloved arcade brawler Alien vs. Predator and Wayforward's superb Metroid-styled Alien: Infestation among them – we also have the awful 16-bit Alien 3, badly-aged 32-bit efforts, and the crushing disappointment and developmental mess that was Aliens: Colonial Marines.

Indeed, in the aftermath of Colonial Marines, any Alien game coming down the pipe would need to be of exceptional quality to make up for the shattered expectations for that title.

After my demos with Alien: Isolation, I feel like I can safely say that Creative Assembly has not only made that quality game, but may have created the best Alien-related title to date.

HER MOTHER'S CHILD >>

Alien: Isolation tells the story of Ellen Ripley's daughter, Amanda, as she searches for her mother. Fifteen years ago, her mother promised she would return home for her birthday, yet she has seen no sign of her since. Now employed by Weyland-Yutani, Amanda hears that a flight recorder from the Nostromo has been found at the decommissioned Sevastopol trading station. She and her crew head to Sevastopol, only to discover that things have

gone terribly, horribly awry – and that something lurks there that wants them dead.

"Ripley's daughter existed in the Alien universe, but her story had never been told before," notes Alien: Isolation creative director Alistair Hope. Her plight of being pursued by the alien on the Sevastopol echoes that of her mother, but Amanda's not a clone of her parent – she is a distinct character in her own right, and being in her shoes gives players the opportunity to experience her completely new story.

But while Amanda isn't meant to be Ellen Ripley 2.0, the developers are trying to deliver a similar experience to what her mother experienced in the film. "One of the things that defined Ripley was her ability to keep clarity of thought under pressure," says Hope. "If you look at the cast in Alien, they all kind of died by their own flaws." This truth carries over into the game, as well: if you are too

NOSTROMO UEMATSU

The Alien franchise has a mixed history in the realm of videogames, but there are some fascinating bits of gaming history that involve the license. One such factoid is the 1987 Aliens game for MSX released by future Final Fantasy creators Squaresoft, complete with a Nobuo Uematsu soundtrack. A version for the Famicom Disk System was planned and cancelled, though a prototype was later discovered. (Perhaps it's for the best – the game's a barely-mediocre action/platformer.)



66 MAKE TOO MUCH NOISE MOVING AROUND, AND YOU WILL BE FOUND AND VERY SWIFTLY EXECUTED



careless, too trigger-happy, too trusting, you may find yourself a bloody mess very, very quickly. Mistakes are harshly punished: fail to hold your breath as you hide in a locker or make too much noise moving around, and you will be found and very swiftly executed. The ability to make smart decisions based on your circumstances is absolutely necessary to staying alive.

The thought of a single screw-up leading to Amanda's untimely demise may sound harsh, but actually playing the game reveals a significant amount of freedom in how you can tackle the various threats. Many games in the

survival horror genre are quite linear, but in stark contrast, *Alien: Isolation* is constantly expanding, and allows you to return to areas you may have already visited. "One of the interesting things we found out early on was how immersed people got into the world," continues Hope. "They were actually taking much, much longer to play the game than we expected. We'd make a section we expected would take 15 minutes, they'd take a half hour, forty minutes. I don't want to give an exact number of hours for how long the game will take to complete, but I think players will find it to be a big experience."

It should also be noted that while the titular xenomorph is the main threat in the game, it's far from the only danger Amanda will be facing. She's not alone in being stuck on Sevastopol with an inhuman killing organism, and some of the other NPCs on the station are... well, not exactly in the most grounded of mindsets, to say the least. Between paranoid, unstable humans and synthetics with extremely rigid programming, Amanda can't really trust anyone or anything to have her back.

"The humans are unpredictable," notes Hope. "Sometimes they are a benefit to the player. But there's also potential for them to be extremely dangerous." Not everyone is good at handling extreme mental pressure in the face of almost certain death, after all.

Adding to the pervasive sense of tension is Amanda's limited arsenal for combating threats. She has some tools she can assemble from scavenged objects - noisemakers, medical kits, Molotov cocktails, and others. Parts like sharp blades, batteries, and ethanol can prove to be scarce in times of need, so making and using the right items at the right times



IT'S NOT CALLED ALIEN: TOGETHERNESS

Alien: Isolation will feature some various play modes, but one thing the game won't have is multiplayer, including co-op. Why is that? Besides going against that whole "isolation" bit in the title, developer Jon McKellan asserted in an interview with website Rock Paper Shotgun that "if you had two or three humans facing up against one alien it's a completely different experience where you're working together to overcome it rather than just trying to survive." Makes sense

is absolutely critical. (The game doesn't pause during the crafting process, either, so you can forget about making a lifesaving item in the thick of being pursued.)

She also has a few weapons, like a revolver and the iconic flamethrower. But these aren't typical videogame guns that annihilate everything with a well-placed headshot: they're cumbersome, loud, and generally laughed off if you try to use them to kill a giant

space creature. Trying to blast your way through the game like a first-person shooter will result in a very painful demise, as the creature (and other humans/synthetics) will be attracted to the source of the sound. Careful thought should therefore be applied before using force - in fact, the developers have gone on record saying that it's possible to finish the game without killing anyone.

Your most useful tool,





therefore, winds up being the motion tracker: a simple device that detects living things moving within your vicinity. Even this lifesaving tool is fairly rickety: while it detects motion around you, it doesn't give the most precise readings of where said motion is actually taking place. Most importantly, it doesn't give you an idea of where things it detects are within 3D space, so if you've got a xenomorph hanging out in the ducts above you waiting to pounce, you're in a very, very bad position.

If all these tough situations aren't enough for you, the game also features a mission-based Challenge Mode outside of the main game. In this mode – which we demoed at E3 – you are put into a small section of the Sevastopol with limited resources and tasked with completing a set task within a time limit. Certain actions, like checking your motion tracker, would give you demerits, while completing bonus objectives, locking down a stairwell, would subtract from the total time at the end. If the alien was threatening before, it was downright terrifying in this mode, seemingly able to be anywhere at a moment's



notice, able to sniff you out from hiding places that looked safe, spearing you through the chest from behind as you believed you had managed to outwit it. A fully-powered flamethrower blast to the face would only stop it momentarily, yet it catching up to you meant a sure skewering.

Despite several attempts, we didn't complete the mission. Challenge mode, indeed.

RETRO CHIC >> One thing

the team at Creative Assembly has nailed down is recreating the overall atmosphere of the original Alien films. This isn't the future as it exists now – it's the future as seen through the lens of when Alien was created, filled with harsh neon-green-on-black glows of CRT monitors and a strange, monotone sterility to the rooms and hallways. It's a bizarre, anachronistic view of the future that doesn't mesh



with our current expectations, making the game's setting feel that much more unfamiliar and foreboding.

"A big part of what we like about that first film is the lo-fi sci-fi aesthetic," says Hope. "It's really unique. You see a lot of games dealing with sci-fi in a shiny, idealized sort of way - holograms, touchscreens, and whatnot. What helped make *Alien* great was its believability... It's a very grounded world, and that's something we really wanted to capitalise on." There are lots of little nods to the films in the setting itself, as well, and fans will find lots within the sprawling corridors of the Sevastopol that helps further expand upon the greater universe of the *Alien* franchise.

Even better is the potentiality of experiencing the inside of the Sevastopol, the retro-sci-fi-aesthetic, and the abject terror of alien pursuit through the VR view of the Oculus Rift. A prototype of the game running on the Oculus

was showcased at E3, and while it's not yet certain if the full game will have support for the fledgling VR device, what the demo showcased was enough to convince us that this would be the ideal way to experience Amanda's struggle to survive. Walking through dimly lit corridors filled with steam and metal, moving your head nervously from the environs to your trusty motion tracker, praying silently that it isn't detecting anything - it's one of the most immersive and emotionally involving experiences we've yet seen with VR tech. It's astonishing just how utterly terrifying seeing your tracker go off and knowing you're being pursued by the alien is when you're completely surrounded by the game. Here's to hoping that the full game on Oculus will become a reality.

ALL THE OLD GANG >> It's pretty clear that the minds working on *Alien: Isolation* are very passionate about

the source material by this point, but what cements their commitment to creating a fantastic experience for fans is the recently announced DLC that reunites the cast of the original 1979 film. The DLC allows players to relive some of the tense scenes from the original film in interactive form, complete with all of the original actors voicing, including star Sigourney Weaver as Ripley.

Players who pre-order the game will be automatically upgraded to the "Nostromo Edition" of the game. This includes the first of two DLC missions, called "Crew Expendable." Brett has been killed, and assuming control of Ripley, Dallas, or Parker, you'll try to find a way to get the *Alien* into the ship's airlock. Each character has different resources and skills at their disposal, giving the DLC some additional appeal and replay value. The second DLC, "Last Survivor," is available to those who pre-order the game at GameStop in the US, and will be widely available to all owners of the game at a later date. This mission puts you in control of Ripley during the film's climax, as you initiate the



ship's self-destruct sequence and make for the shuttle in order to escape.

Alien: Isolation is shaping up to be a noteworthy game on many fronts: a superbly designed survival horror title, a rare example of a superb licensed game, and a fantastic new story for fans of the film universe. We're eagerly anticipating hours of cowering sweaty-palmed in all-consuming terror beneath makeshift cover while a towering, nigh-invincible killer tries to sniff us out. For fans of classic and interactive horror, October 7th can't come soon enough. **«**

66 WE'RE EAGERLY ANTICIPATING HOURS OF COWERING SWEATY-PALMED IN ALL-CONSUMING TERROR

Q+AWith **Alistair Hope**, Creative Director**HYPER: So why do a survival horror game?**

Alistair Hope: I've always been a big fan of the first Alien, and I guess we felt that nobody had yet made the Alien game that we really wanted to play. We had the idea of taking the values of that first film, making a really compelling experience out of them... I guess it was kind of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I knew Sega had the IP, so we just decided, "Hey, let's go for it."

It feels like there's a bit of a resurgence in "traditional" survival horror right now, the sort of games where you are less powerful and have limited resources...

Hmmm... I don't know, I think we've kind of moved away from the Japanese origins of survival horror. Actually, I think you can find a lot of survival horror type experiences in a lot of games, not just those that bill themselves as such. In some ways, I think Minecraft is the most successful survival horror game of the generation – it's about resource gathering, not really having the strength you need... that first night, coming into that game completely cold, when everything comes out and starts banging on your door – that's really quite scary! It's not about killing, not about mowing down foes. And all these kids are into it! That's kind of amazing.

But whether we're directly involved in some sort of resurgence of survival horror? It's hard to say, because we've been working on this game for so long – about four years now. We couldn't really say it was planned. Maybe it's because we live in uncertain times, perhaps the trend is mirroring some feelings people have in real life.

You guys aren't really known for this genre, though.

It's interesting – I was employee #8 at CA, so I've been there a very, very long time. (We're at about three hundred now.) I think two of the strengths of the studio are quality – we have really high benchmarks for what we do – and authenticity, whether that's the Total War guys striving to render historical reality or us now trying to take you back to Ridley Scott's outer space. Because I've been at the studio for so long, I always felt that we were capable of doing things in a wider scope than it seems from the outside.

In a game like this, I imagine that the enemy AI is among the most important elements. How much work goes into the AI to make the enemies believable?

It's been very challenging. The alien also has an incredibly complex layered animation system, which means it can move very naturally and fluidly. But what's rewarding about it is seeing people playing the game, having great experiences, and seeing that work paying off.

What I found particularly interesting in the demo is how the humans trapped along with you can be just as dangerous as the alien. Where did that idea come from?

I was really inspired by the classic War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells. There's a book that's over a hundred years old, but his description of how things fall apart within days is absolutely terrifying... the Martians appear, and society collapses. The sort of savagery people inflict on each other in desperate situations is horrifying. That was something I was thinking about when we started on the project, and it's persisted since.

Is there a lot of pressure to live up to the high expectations that fans of the franchise have?

Considering that this is something we proposed and made ourselves, we're free to take this in a new direction. Nobody else has tried to make this game before. Really, I think we're the ones putting pressure on ourselves.

