

Meet your own personal extraterrestrial stalker for the next 15 hours. 'If you can read this sign, you're too close.'



Format PS4, XO (reviewed), PC **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Creative Assembly **Out** 10 Oct **Players** 1

ALIEN: ISOLATION

The talented (and terrifying) Ms Ripley



Turns out, fear doesn't get old. Whether it's bricking it over an eight-legged visitor in the bath or being relentlessly pursued by a perfect organism with a phallic-shaped head, getting scared silly is not something you tire of. That Creative Assembly makes being frightened quite so addictive throughout its 15 hour horror house in space is a real achievement. More than that, what the Total War studio has created stands as a remarkably faithful homage to a movie masterpiece.

Alien: Isolation is the most effective use of a license since Rocksteady got its claws into a certain iconic cowl. Granted, Team Xenomorph can't outdo Team Bats – a slightly bloated campaign and frame rate hiccups on console mean Sega's

survival-horror doesn't quite match the first two Arkhams. Yet there's no denying this is a slavishly accurate stand-in for Ridley Scott's sci-fi landmark. From extended cues of Jerry Goldsmith's haunting film score to environments that utterly nail Alien's late-'70s set design, this is the game you've been having night terrors about ever since John Hurt's chest cavity went kaboom.

Dead space

Before we get into ribcage-busting delights, let's sit down for a short story. Isolation's plot set up is refreshingly clear: you play Amanda Ripley, hard-grafting space engineer and daughter to Sigourney Weaver's hero, on a quest to find her mother. Set 15 years after Ellen blew up the Nostromo, Amanda is lured to the Sevastopol space station by the promise of unearthing her momma's flight recorder. Direct, simple to follow and reasonably well acted, the biggest

compliment we can pay is that it's done well enough to accept the game's events as movie canon.

If the story is straightforward, the actual stealth which informs much of the action is decidedly less so. Even if you've hidden in every shadow with Sam Fisher or cuddled up to a cardboard box with Snake for the last decade, you've never played a sneaker quite like Isolation. Unlike those two icons, Ripley spends 95% of her time in the Sevastopol as prey, not predator. This is a hide-and-seek sim where crouching in vents, cowering under gurneys and crying in lockers is very much the order of the day.

Isolation deploys an AI system that goes far beyond short-sighted Metal Gear guards. The Alien's behaviour is almost entirely procedural; often showing up in non-scripted fashion and never following quite the same route or behaviour patterns when you die and retry sections. Using the cavernous

network of air ducts dotted around Sevastopol, the Alien can show up in a slithering instant at almost any moment.

The sparse amount of pistol rounds Ripley ferrets out do nothing but annoy the monster further. Until you get a flamethrower about halfway through, which temporarily scares the beastie back into the vents, the only tactic you can deploy is hiding. At least the franchise's legendary motion tracker can help steer you away from danger, and its nifty depth-of-field effect certainly adds a film-like flair.

Safe word

Even when the Alien isn't physically around, the threat of its presence casts a long, damn scary shadow. You constantly hear ducts wheezing and contracting with scurried movement, while far off shrieks punctuate the atmosphere with constant unease. This isn't Resident Evil - there are no 'safe' typewriter rooms here. Instead, you're denied the cathartic comedown Capcom's titles have weened many horror fans on in favour of staying forever alert and agitated.

One of the big questions going into Isolation was whether or not Creative Assembly could stretch out the core concept of its cat-and-mouse hunts into a full-length title. Could creeping around corners and hiding in cupboards really sustain an entire 15-20 hour game? Good news: the pacing in Isolation is mostly spot-on. The Alien isn't overused - its introduction is a pleasing slow-burn and the creature even disappears for a couple of hours later on.

When the old acid gurner isn't around, stealth sections against fellow frightened

THE HUNT IS ON

Survive Sevastopol space station's many scares

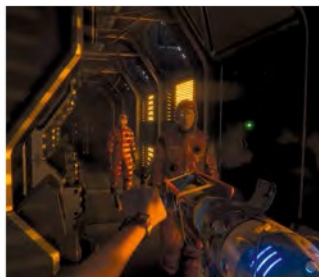
The Alien is far from the only threat on this floating haunted house: almost everything in Isolation wants you dead, including your fellow civilians and working synthetics. Follow these tips to keep Ripley whole... for at least a few extra seconds.



1 Use the flamethrower to scare the Alien off. But be careful, fuel is short and the beast always returns.



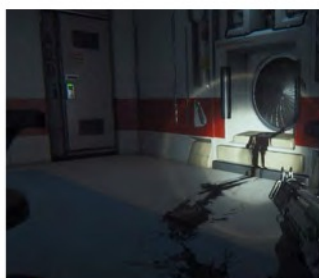
2 On a less fire-friendly note, don't bother using Molatovs on Working Joes. They keep on truckin' regardless.



3 The Rivet Gun is a better tool to take bots out with. Charge it for a few seconds, then unleash droid death.



4 Hold the left trigger with the motion tracker to change the depth-of-field to focus on your surroundings.



5 Always be on the lookout for ducts - they often provide safer shortcuts to Ripley's next objective marker.

"COWERING UNDER GURNEYS AND CRYING IN LOCKERS IS VERY MUCH THE ORDER OF THE DAY"

station survivors and the hellia creepy Working Joes (Isolation's glowing-eyed synthetic lifeforms) remain engaging, if not quite as nerve-shredding. Surprisingly, many of Isolation's best moments come from the simple, eerily silent thrills of walking through the beautifully lit corridors and creaking wards of Sevastopol. A constant sense of progression and a varied tour of the station's many distinct wings keeps you merrily pushing forward.

Long story short

But it's unquestionably too long. It took us north of 16 hours to finally silence the screams. If Isolation was 30% shorter, it'd arguably be a bolder, sharper experience for the snip. Indeed, there's a point around the tenth chapter that would have been a better climax than the one that comes five hours later. The game also commits a sin around mission 14 that fundamentally takes away from the Alien's aura. That the game rarely drags



SCARE BEARS

How does Alien stack up to other horrors?

As you cower mere inches away from the Alien's mandibles, it's hard not to think Isolation is one of the scariest games the genre has birthed in years. It remains unnerving long after the likes of Outlast and Slender's short frights have finished. It also returns the genre to the PS1 Resi titles' manual saves, in a nostalgic, tension-forging move.

in spite of its padded length is testament to the incredibly rich atmosphere.

Audio-wise, you'll be hard pressed to stumble upon a game that does a better job of putting your lugs through all the emotions. Such is the craft that has gone into every bump in Isolation's night, the cavalcade of spine-tingling thuds, screeches and rattles sells the Alien's brand of dread as effectively as John Williams' 'du-dun, du-dun, du-dun' did for Spielberg's toothy underwater menace.

Like its extraterrestrial boogie man, Isolation has its ugly side. On a decent PC, hitting and maintaining a locked 60fps isn't an issue. In contrast, the console versions often plummet below their 30 frames target. Yet tech issues never fundamentally dilute the base pleasure of being seduced by those scares.

Before Creative Assembly honoured sci-fi's seminal horror film, there were dozens of Aliens games (I'm blaming you for Colonial Marines, Cameron). Now, there's precisely one Alien game. Could it do with a little trimming and better optimisation? Absolutely. But lock yourself in a dark room with a good pair of headphones, and Isolation's thrilling chills mean this is one ET you'll never want to go home. ■

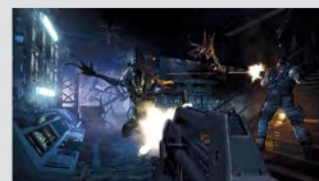
GM LOVES...

- ✓ Just about the best 'boo!' moments you'll play in any horror.
- ✓ The Alien is a thing of deadly, beautifully-executed grace.
- ✓ The spookiest and most savvy sound design of the year.

GM HATES...

- ✗ A couple of droid-heavy acts sag in what's an overly long quest.

Better than...



Aliens: Colonial Marines

Wrecks film canon while rocking truly dreadful mechanics and game-ruining glitches.

Worse than...



Resident Evil 4 HD

Leon's Spanish siesta isn't quite as scary as Alien, but it's a high-on perfectly-paced horror quest and an exemplar of the genre.

DLC



Two pre-order bonus slices of DLC take you back to the nightmare on the Nostromo, as Ripley and the rest of the original Alien crew try to find, then later escape from, their savage stowaway.

GM JUDGEMENT

81%



A masterfully produced horror that overcomes length issues through supreme scares.
Dave Melkham