

“The good news is that Sevastopol isn’t short of places to hide”

Need to know

What is it?

Sci-fi survival horror aboard a stricken space station.

Influenced by

Ridley Scott’s *Alien*

Play it on

2GB GPU, 3GHz CPU, 4GB RAM

Alternatively

Amnesia: The Dark Descent, 88%

Copy protection

Steam

HUNTED

ALIEN: ISOLATION finally does Giger's monstrous creation justice. *By Andy Kelly*

Set 15 years after Ridley Scott's original film, *Alien: Isolation* casts you as Amanda Ripley, daughter of Ellen. An engineer for megacorporation Weyland-Yutani, she joins a mission to the space station Sevastopol after learning that the flight recorder for her mother's lost ship, the *Nostromo*, is being held there – a potential clue to her whereabouts. But it's clear from the moment she arrives on the ruined and mysteriously abandoned space-city that something has gone horribly wrong.

Sevastopol is a warren of corridors, vents and tunnels. It's in the process of being decommissioned, and in a severe state of disrepair. Lights flicker, automatic doors malfunction, tangles of cable spill from maintenance panels, and steam spews from broken pipes. Occasionally the tight spaces open into larger areas, but most of the game is spent in the claustrophobic confines of the station's twisting metal bowels.

But while we've explored environments like this before in *System Shock* and *Dead Space*, it's the art design that sets *Isolation* apart. Resisting the urge to create a fashionable, contemporary vision of the future, with floating holograms, shiny surfaces and smooth curves, The Creative Assembly has looked to the production design of the original film for inspiration. The team have built their world as Scott and his special effects team would have in 1979, using only technology from the period.

The chunky keyboards and phone receivers, green-screen CRT monitors and blinking coloured lights should all look dated, but they have quite the opposite effect. This is a tactile, practical and convincing science fiction world, with machines

and environments that are functional and utilitarian, rather than overtly futuristic. You almost feel you can reach out and touch it. As a result, in terms of consistency and thoughtful design, it's the most visually striking game world since *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

But a sci-fi corridor, no matter how pretty it is, isn't much without something horrifying to chase you down it. So it's a good thing that *Isolation* is the first game – and it's amazing it's taken this long – to make HR Giger's alien every bit as formidable and intimidating as it is in the films. In *Alien*, Ripley asks Ash how they can kill the creature that burst from Kane's chest aboard the *Nostromo*, and he replies gravely, "you can't." This, unlike the dumb drones you blasted your way

through in *Colonial Marines*, is also true of Sevastopol's alien. It's a merciless, unstoppable force. "A perfect organism."

You can shoot it, but it'll just get angry and pounce on you. You can burn it, but that'll only scare it away for a few seconds. *Isolation*'s magic lies in the fact that you have to outsmart its single alien predator rather than kill it. This turns what could have easily been yet another FPS with xenomorphs into a thrilling, drawn-out game of cat-and-mouse with the scariest cat imaginable. It's a deft blend of stealth and survival horror that, thanks to dynamic AI and clever, systemic design, is much more than the sum of its parts.

Close behind you

You'll know when the alien is near. As you creep through the station, you hear it above and below you, behind the walls, under the floor. You're relatively safe when it's hidden away like this, but you never know what vent, crack, or hole in the ceiling it'll suddenly emerge from. It arrives with a beastly hiss – a sound that becomes your cue to hide or run. Then you hear the pounding of its footsteps as it wanders the corridors, hunting for its prey. It's a massive, heavy thing that towers over Ripley, and if it sees her it lunges with a shriek, killing her in a grisly, cinematic death sequence.

The alien is an almost constant threat, but there are other dangers on Sevastopol. Malfunctioning androids called Working Joes wander the station, brutally killing any humans they come across. Their rubbery, emotionless faces and glowing eyes are genuinely unnerving, and sneaking through groups of them is as nerve-racking as facing the alien. Get too close and they'll grab you, bludgeoning your ▶

Flashback

The two DLC missions are set on the *Nostromo*



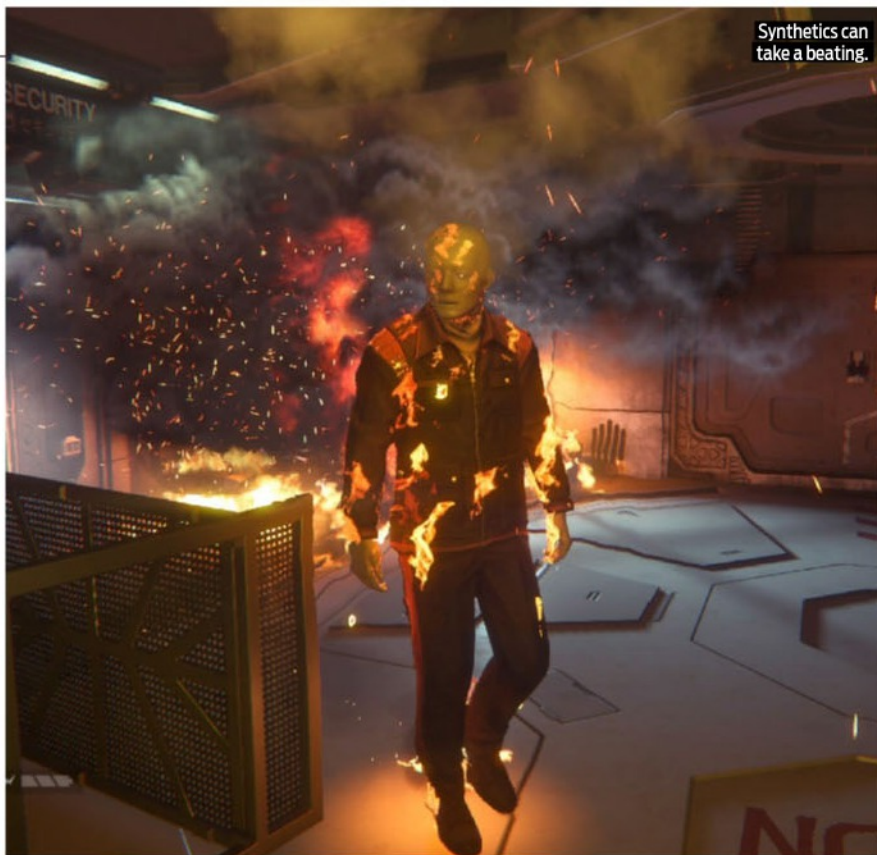
Crew Expendable

Play as Dallas, Parker or Ripley as they try to trap the alien in the *Nostromo*'s vents.



Last Survivor

Ripley evades the alien as she attempts to activate the *Nostromo*'s self-destruct.



Synthetics can take a beating.



Terminals hold vital story clues.



It's like time froze in the 1970s.



Is Kepler worth dying for?



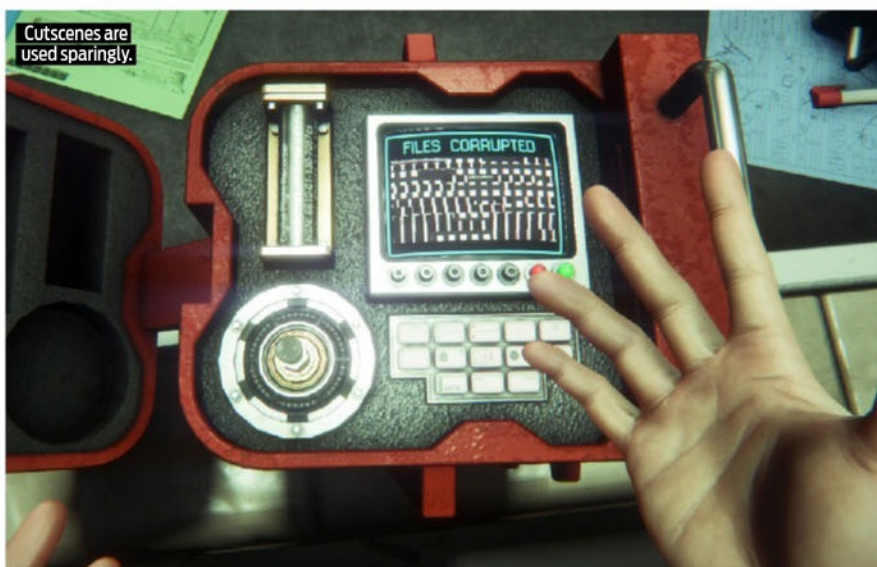
Sevastopol is littered with bodies.



Chase the alien away, briefly, with fire.



Amanda was based on Sigourney Weaver's mother.



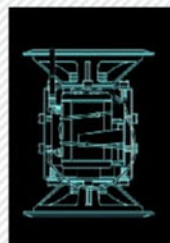
Cutscenes are used sparingly.



If you see this, you're dead.

Space craft

How to make Ripley's best gadgets, and what they do



NOISEMAKER

- Charge pack
- Sensor
- SCJ injector

This thing makes a loud noise and attracts nearby enemies. You can throw it or plant it like a mine.



MOLOTOV

- Ethanol
- Blasting cap
- Sensor
- Compound B

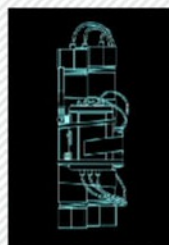
Good for dealing with groups of androids and humans. Humans die instantly, androids take a while to drop.



EMP MINE

- Charge pack
- Sensor
- SCJ injector
- Bonding agent

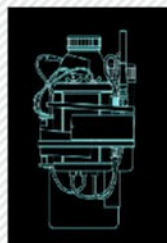
This will cause androids to malfunction and puke up their weird white blood. So that's fun.



PIPE BOMB

- Ethanol
- Blasting cap
- Sensor
- SCJ injector

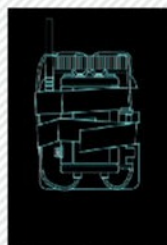
A good old-fashioned improvised explosive. Does great damage to humans and androids, but very noisily.



FLASHBANG

- Blasting cap
- Sensor
- Bonding agent

Temporarily blinds humans and androids, and will give the alien a scare. Be careful, because you can blind yourself too.



SMOKE BOMB

- Ethanol
- Sensor
- Bonding agent

Stealthy players will make frequent use of this. Use it to create cover as you sneak through areas being patrolled by humans.

“The instant you fire, the alien will come running”

health until you manage to break free. You *can* kill them, but they take a lot of resources to bring down, making stealth the best option. They're a lot slower than the alien, but every bit as deadly.

Then there are the other survivors. You run into them less often than the alien and the synthetics, and they're much easier to kill, but they're scared and hostile, and usually work in groups. They won't shoot on sight, giving you a few seconds to back away if you wander into their territory, but it doesn't take much to send them into a frenzy of gunfire. Luckily, if they shoot at you, the noise will attract the alien and it'll kill them all. This is often the best way to get past human foes: provoke them, then wait for the bloodbath.

Whichever enemy you're up against, sneaking is always the key to survival. You'll pick up a shotgun, a revolver, and a few other weapons as you progress through the station, but they're more of a curse than a blessing. For one, they're only really effective against humans. It takes a dozen headshots with the revolver to drop a Working Joe, and the alien is essentially bulletproof. But the bigger problem is that the instant you fire any weapon, the alien will come rushing to your location and slaughter you. The motion tracker, a series staple, will give you a rough idea of where enemies are, but they'll

be drawn to its bleeps if you're too close. I didn't use it as much as I thought I would.

The good news is that Sevastopol isn't short of places to hide. There are lockers and cabinets to cower in, vents to escape through, and desks to crouch under. Any noise, from sprinting to knocking a chair over, can give your position away, so you'll spend much of the game creeping silently and methodically between objectives. This might sound dull on paper, but the presence of the alien makes almost every moment exhilaratingly tense. After getting through one particularly long, difficult section, my palms were sweating and I had to go for a lie down. This is not a game you want to play just before bed.

Whisper who dares

The audio design is just as accomplished as the visuals, using many familiar effects from the film, such as the metal scrape of vent covers opening and the electronic chatter of the computers. But it's also a vital part of the stealth, and I advise playing with a good pair of headphones or surround sound. You can actually track the movement of the alien by hearing alone, gauging its distance and position by the muffled thud of its footsteps. I'd become so familiar with one area of the station that I knew exactly where it was just by the sound of nearby

automatic doors opening and closing as it moved past them.

Encounters with the alien are not scripted. Its behaviour is unpredictable, and the impressive, reactive AI creates the illusion that it's an intelligent creature. You really feel like you're being hunted as it moves from room to room, tracking your movements, sniffing you out. In one level I was crouching under a table directly facing a door that opened onto a hallway the alien was walking down. As it passed, the door opened, and I was directly in its line of sight, but it kept moving. I crawled out, thinking I hadn't been spotted – then it burst into the room and grabbed me. Whether this was the AI tricking me, or just a random occurrence, it doesn't matter, because it *felt* like the former.

But as smart as the alien is, there are ways to exploit and confuse it. Faced with a group of looters blocking an exit, I consider my options. I can shoot them, but then I'd attract the alien. I could toss a Molotov, but I don't have the materials to craft one. But I *do* have a noisemaker: a device that emits loud, garbled electronic squeals. I hurl it in their direction, then I hear the hiss of the alien dropping out of a vent above them. It's a massacre. Once it's crawled back into its hole, I stroll to the exit, stepping over their mutilated corpses. I used this method a few times, until I

Emotion sensor

Measuring the tracks of my fears



“Isolation succeeds where countless others have failed”

developed a weird Stockholm syndrome relationship with the alien, as if it was my friend, or a faithful pet. Ripley has a strangely intimate relationship with the aliens in the films, and I felt the same thing happening to me in *Isolation*.

Ripley Junior being an engineer is as good an excuse as any to include a crafting system in the game. Raw materials litter your surroundings and can be taped together to create items. As well as the noisemakers and Molotovs, you can make smoke bombs, EMP mines for disabling synthetics, and flashbangs. The effects of these are all temporary, but if you stun an android with a mine, you can whack it over the head with your wrench for an easy kill. Flares can be tossed to lure the alien, and if you toast it with your flamethrower it'll scream and run away – but not for long. Combining items and weapons in interesting ways, and playing with the enemy AI, gives the game a lot of unexpected depth, and kept it interesting for the entirety of the 25 hours it took me to finish it.

Yeah, that's right: 25 hours. This is a long game, but it never outstays its welcome. That's down to the pacing, which is pretty much perfect. It's constantly switching things up so you don't feel yourself slipping into a routine. In one level you might lose the use of your motion tracker. In another, the alien won't be around so you can merrily shotgun androids like it's *Doom 3*. Then your weapons will be taken away, forcing you to

make smart use of your gadgets. It does this all the way through, forcing you to adapt and readapt to different circumstances, using all the tools at your disposal.

Level variety also helps keep you engaged. Even though the game consists almost entirely of sci-fi corridors, there's a good mix of themes and moods. There are industrial areas, medical facilities, subway stations, server farms, rec-rooms, and even a shopping mall section that reminded me a lot of *BioShock's* Rapture.

Sevastopol is a space that feels like it was once teeming with life, which makes its current state even more eerie. It's a convincingly lived-in setting, and there are subtle traces of life everywhere: a photo of the White Cliffs of Dover pinned to a monitor, a physics textbook on a desk, a dirty mattress surrounded by beer cans. These small details tell the story of the station's residents, before and during the crisis.

Deadly distractions

As you move through Sevastopol you'll notice blocked-off areas, locked doors, and rooms filled with poison gas. Tools that you acquire as you play through the story, such as an ion torch that lets you cut through metal, and a gas mask, give you a chance to return to these areas later in the game – but only if you want to. The backtracking is largely optional. Alien fans will definitely want to, as the rewards include audio logs from the *Nostromo*, some of which are read by the original cast. Doing this added a good few hours to my final playtime. If all you care about is the critical path, you'll probably finish the game sooner.

But now for the weak link. The story is disappointing, retelling a familiar yarn we've already heard countless times in the Alien universe: sinister corporations, murderous androids, rogue AI, and other things I can't talk about because of spoilers. The good thing about this is that it lets you relive classic Alien moments and experience them from a more visceral perspective. The bad is that it feels derivative, never taking the opportunity to make its own mark on the mythology. There's a level the

developers asked me not to mention to keep it a surprise – so I won't, obviously – but any Alien fan will see it coming a mile away.

Flat voice acting and insubstantial characters only add to the disappointment. There are moments where your allies are in peril, but I knew so little about them I found it hard to care. The only time I felt any real emotional resonance from the story was a powerful moment that relates directly to the film, but you'll have to experience that for yourself. Really, the story is just a means of getting you from place to place, and in that sense it doesn't matter that it's lightweight. It's ultimately the journey and the moment-to-moment experiences that define the game, not the overall narrative.

They've done an excellent job with the PC version. On ultra settings at 1080p, the game runs at a solid 60fps on my fairly decent 2GB graphics card at work, and loiters somewhere around 30-40 fps on the relatively ancient 1GB card in my PC at home. The geometry of the levels is pretty simple when you look at it closely, but it's the beautiful volumetric lighting and smoke, detailed levels filled with clutter, and bold visual design that give it its fidelity. Sevastopol is a stunningly atmospheric place, and the alien looks brilliantly sinister and organic as it skulks through the shadows. A noise filter, which you can disable, gives it the grainy texture of a '70s sci-fi film.

It's ridiculous that it took the developer of a historical strategy game to finally create an authentic Alien game, but The Creative Assembly has managed it. It has succeeded where countless others have failed by treating Giger's monster with the reverence it deserves: as something to be feared and respected, not faced head-on with a pulse rifle. *Isolation* is a taut, confident, and electrifying horror game that perfectly captures the essence of Ridley Scott's legendary film. I just wish the team had been braver with the story. ■

VERDICT

The game the Alien series has always deserved. A deep, fun stealth game set in an evocatively realised sci-fi world.

PC GAMER
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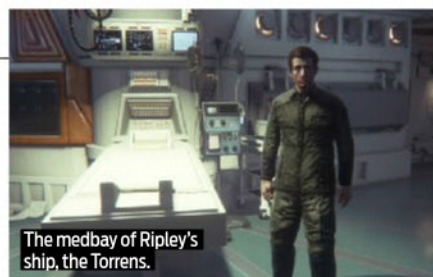
◆ Expect to pay £40 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Developer The Creative Assembly ◆ Publisher Sega
◆ Multiplayer None ◆ Link www.alienisolation.com



Some survivors will work with Ripley.



Others won't be so friendly.



The medbay of Ripley's ship, the Torrens.



Cheer up, mate. You're in space.



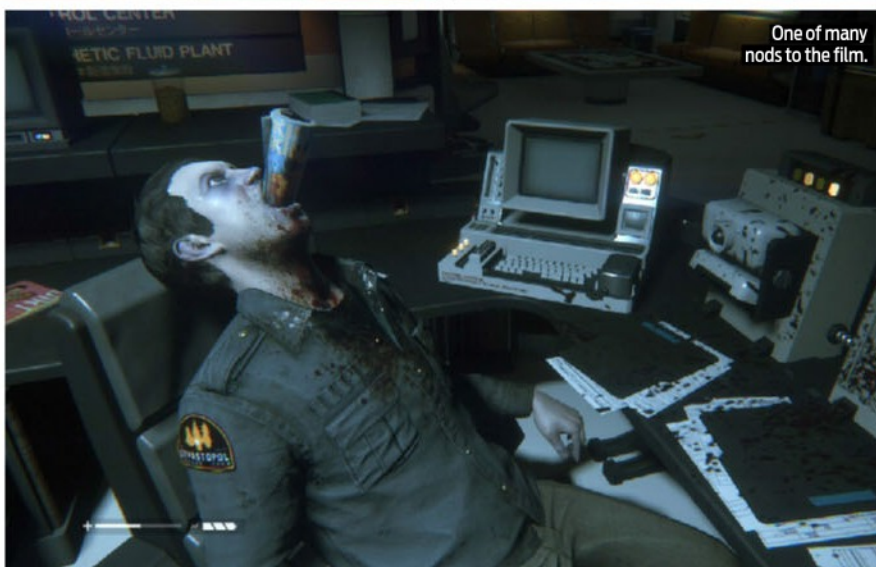
Never turn your back on the alien.



One of the station's many hazards.



The motion tracker evens the odds.



One of many nods to the film.