

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come



Info

- » **System:** PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch
- » **Year:** 2014
- » **Developer:** Creative Assembly
- » **Key People:** Alistair Hope (director), Jonathan Court, Oli Smith (producers)

Go Deeper

» Actor Andrea Deck plays Amanda Ripley, after *Isolation* she went to work on popular TV series like *The Crown* and *Homeland*.

» Creative Assembly's *Xenomorph* is ever so slightly tweaked from the original HR Geiger design.



» [PS4] While fighting the Xenomorph head-on is futile, you can temporarily ward it off with a bit of fire.

Creative Assembly's love letter to all things *Alien* is one of the best horror games from the last ten years. *Retro Gamer* explores why you should brave this space station of terror

Words by Drew Sleep

ALIEN: ISOLATION

THE BACKGROUND

When Sega acquired the rights to develop games based on the *Alien* series in the mid-Noughties, UK developer Creative Assembly saw an opportunity. After the studio shipped *Viking: Battle For Asgard* in 2008, a small team of *Alien* fanboys pitched a rough prototype where a Xenomorph hunted down a hapless human in a game of hide-and-seek. In this initial pitch, the alien was controlled by a developer, but the idea was that in the final product, a deeply refined AI would control the creature. The idea rippled throughout Sega, and Creative Assembly soon found itself holding a golden ticket, granting it the licence to create an *Alien* horror game. While the studio possessed a deep love for the source material, it was known as a strategy game developer and lacked the knowledge on how to make a first-person horror game, so it had to staff up with specialists, bringing in developers who'd worked at Ubisoft, Crytek, Bizarre Creations and more. What that team created was a pant-wettingly perfect sci-fi horror experience, and one of the best licensed games ever made.

THE GAME

Alien: Isolation is a sequel to the original 1979 film, and before you get triggered by the words 'alien' and 'sequel' don't worry: this one's good. Set before the filmic follow-up, *Aliens*, it follows Amanda Ripley as she searches for the truth behind what happened to her mother – Ellen Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver in the original movie. Amanda is approached by the shady Weyland-Yutani Corporation which tells her the that recorder of her mother's ship, the *Nostromo*, has been recovered and is residing on a space station called Sevastopol, and she's invited to retrieve it. Upon arriving at the installation, Amanda soon discovers that it's pretty much derelict, and the people she does come across are terrified and paranoid that there's *something* hunting them. Of course, that 'something' is an alien Xenomorph. Amanda finds herself trapped on Sevastopol, a mouse in a gigantic maze – with a very hungry, competent cat always on her tail – and has to find a way to escape the doomed space station, as well as locate and retrieve the *Nostromo*'s flight recorder.



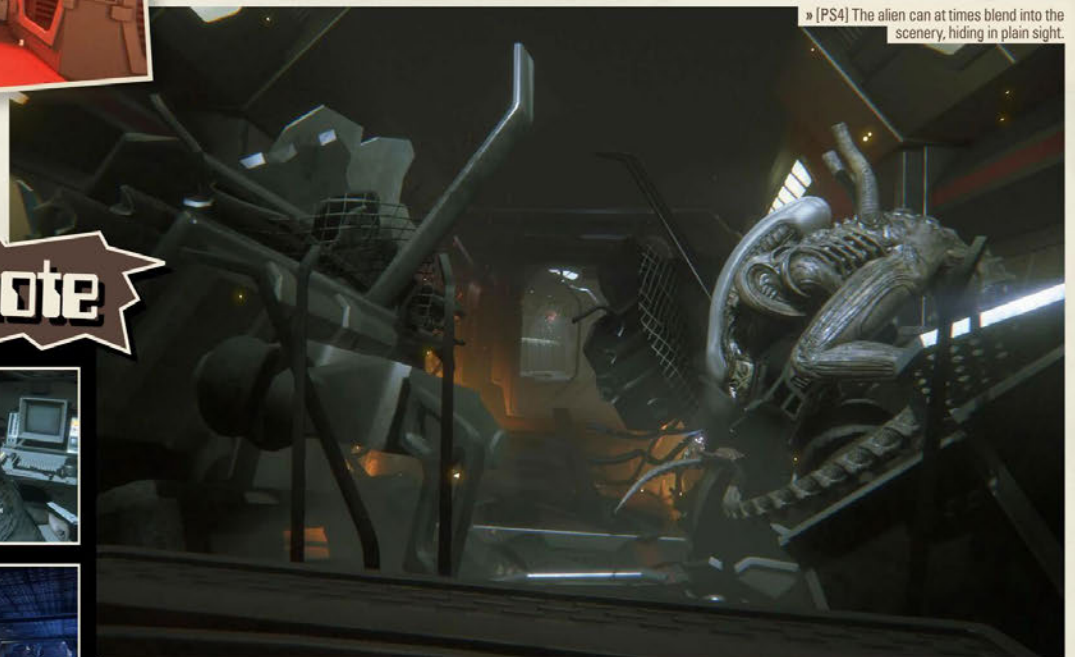
» [PS4] Sevastopol has seen better days and is falling apart by the time Amanda arrives.



» [PS4] *Isolation* is probably the best piece of *Alien* canon since *Aliens*.



» [PS4] We're getting flashbacks to poor old John Hurt on the dinner table...



» [PS4] The alien can at times blend into the scenery, hiding in plain sight.

Things of note

FILMIC HOMAGE

There's lots of Easter eggs to hunt down for *Alien* lovers. This particular one is a nod to the odd way Ash tries to murder Ripley in the original film.



GET OUTTA THERE!

You're given a motion sensor to help locate the alien. If you're using a PS4, the controller even beeps with it. Careful, though, the Xeno can hear it, too.



HARD WORK

The Xenomorph isn't your only problem on Sevastopol. The Working Joe androids have gone haywire and will kill you on sight.



CAST A SPELL

The cast from the original *Alien* film returned to do voice work in *Isolation* for audio logs and the DLC, adding more authenticity to the game.



RETURN TO THE NOSTROMO

Speaking of that DLC, the *Crew Expendable* and *Last Survivor* add-ons are reimaginings of the events on the USSCS *Nostromo*, and are a treat for fans.



What sticks out the most about *Alien: Isolation* is the sheer attention to detail. It's clear the team had deep love for the franchise, as it feels like you're walking around a film set. The retrofuturistic aesthetic is all faithfully recreated, and everything you operate comes with a chunky, tactile 'cathunk' or 'schunk' sound. The devs at Creative Assembly pored over tons of concept art from the films when designing *Isolation*, and it shows. That considered world design goes deeper, too, to a much more psychological level. When you're crawling through vents, for example, you might come across a pipe or wire formation that looks a little bit too elongated – a bit like a Xenomorph's head, perhaps? Most of the time, it's a trick of the light and you'll find yourself breathing a sigh of relief, but sometimes it's the real deal and you're as doomed as poor old captain Dallas.

Speaking of that titular alien, *Isolation's* Xenomorph is one of the greatest videogame antagonists we've encountered, and that's largely down to its AI. In that initial pitch, CA was bold enough to infer that it'd be as smart as a human – by having a human stand in for it – and it pretty much hit the mark. While you're given tools to fight it off, they're next to useless, so your best option is to hide. You have to pay attention to where the creature might be heading as well as how much sound you're making. You can craft and use gadgets to help distract it, but you can't rely on them as the Xenomorph *learns* how to counter your mechanisms. For example, say if you frequently

chuck a Noisemaker to draw the creature to a certain location, the creature will figure out to head to the object's point of origin (in other words, you) rather than its destination. Knowing that your adversary changes tactics depending on your approach is a terrifying proposition when it's a regular human, let alone a so-called 'perfect organism'. And don't think you can go and run to a save station and quickly save and load the game when things are looking dire. There's an agonisingly long pause between when Amanda slots in her keycard and the act of actually saving the game – time where the Xenomorph can pounce on you with your back turned.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

Ultimately, *Alien: Isolation* is the best in class when it comes to horror, and that still rings true five and a half years after its debut. In recent years, we've seen more examples of 'pursuer' type enemies – notably Mr X in *Resident Evil 2* – and none of them come close to *Isolation's* intelligent Xenomorph. What's most disappointing about the game's legacy is that it sold under expectations, despite its critical acclaim, and the talented development team ended up disbanding, with key players moving onto different projects, while Creative Assembly pivoted back to making strategy games. Still, we should be glad we even got *Alien: Isolation* in the first place. A true love letter to both *Alien* and horror, its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility. ★