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Alien: Isolation

Platforms: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Microsoft Windows, Linux, Macintosh operating systems
Genre: Stealth survival horror, action-adventure
Release date: October 7th, 2014
Developer: Creative Assembly
Publisher: Sega
Director: Alistair Hope
Writers: Dan Abnett, Dion Lay, Will Porter

Overview

Alien: Isolation, a love letter to Ridley Scott's 1979 classic *Alien*, picks up right where the first installment left off: while Ellen Ripley drifts off in outer space after destroying the cargo ship *Nostramo*, her daughter Amanda, now a young engineer haunted by her disappearance, is sent to a decommissioned space station where the black box of the missing ship has been recovered. Amanda hopes to find answers about her mother's fate, but when she sets foot in Sevastopol, she discovers instead that most inhabitants have been eradicated by a mysterious and deadly creature. Direct confrontation is impossible, and it becomes Amanda's imperative to escape the elusive Xenomorph and the many more lethal traps of the orbital base.

Characters

- Amanda Ripley

She is the main protagonist of the game and the daughter of Ellen Ripley, the heroin of the *Alien* franchise. Strong-willed with an occasional sarcastic streak, Amanda is still grieving over her mother's disappearance, and resolves to find closure once it presents itself.

While at first wary of her synthetic partner Samuels, she is shown to be quite trusting and kind-hearted, and willing to go through the worst situations to protect fellow survivors. As an engineer, she can craft many apparatuses to fend off or distract the Alien, however it is her wit on which she must ultimately rely.

- The Aliens

Otherwise known as Xenomorphs, they are a race of highly intelligent predators hellbent on stalking and murdering every other living species that they come across. From their behavior, it can be inferred that they quite enjoy tormenting their preys. Their motivations are otherwise unknown.

- The crew of the *Torrens*

The *Torrens* brings Amanda and two other significant characters on the station, who will become both allies and people to protect (while leaving its captain Verlaine behind):

- Christopher Samuels

Revealed early on to be a synthetic, the player may spend most of the time wondering whether he will turn on the main character Amanda like Ash did in the first film. However, it seems that Samuels has no interest whatsoever in recovering the creature and prioritizes the lives of the humans around him, ultimately over his own. While wary of him at first, Amanda slowly builds a strong friendship with him.

- Nina Taylor

A young administrator for Weyland-Yutani, the massive corporation whose members have almost always been antagonists in the franchise, Taylor is rather meek and reserved. It is revealed that, like many villains, her original mission was to retrieve the Xenomorph, however she quickly abandons it when she witnesses its capacity for destruction. She finds courage in her last moments and helps Amanda prevent the destruction of the station to save the survivors still aboard.

- Henry Marlow

Former captain of the *Anesidora*, the ship that recovered the *Nostramo*'s black box, Marlow is first found in the custody of the local Marshal Bureau. He reveals through a playable flashback that he has visited an alien structure with some of his crewmates, one of which being subsequently attacked by a foreign lifeform. A firsthand witness of the havoc wrecked by the monster, Marlow is determined to exterminate the threat, no matter the cost.

- The survivors: Ricardo and the Colonial Marshal Bureau

Several minor characters help Amanda in her quest before they are gruesomely slaughtered by the Xenomorph, like Axel and dr. Kuhlman, both of which have a very short lifespan. In her adventures, Amanda comes across the remaining surviving members of the Marshal Bureau, helmed by Marshal Waits, who will eventually betray Amanda to assure the

safety of the base from the Alien. His deputy Ricardo however becomes Amanda's lifeline in subsequent levels, and her only remaining ally with whom she must escape. Ricardo is emotionally drained by the situation, but offers her much amicable support.

- The looters and androids

The other survivors consist of straggling looters as well as the dangerous Working Joes, androids that become more and more hostile as the station is compromised. They are marginal to the story.

Breakdown

Fifteen years after the destruction of the *Nostramo*, Ellen Ripley is still drifting in space, forgotten by all but her daughter Amanda Ripley. Unable to move past her sudden disappearance, Amanda now works as an engineer in the sector where she has vanished. The game begins as she learns that the *Nostramo*'s black box has been recovered and sent to the nearest orbital station, Sevastopol, and is offered to accompany Samuels and Taylor, two employees of her mother's former company and proprietor of the retrieved item, to finally find closure. Instead, what they find upon arrival is an empty and damaged station, which they must board manually. Space debris separate Amanda from her partners and she docks alone, unable to contact her ship or the rest of her team. In her search for a way out, she witnesses the death of several survivors at the hands of a lethal creature that lurks in the shadows and air ducts, which starts hunting her down in a harrowing game of cat and mouse in the derelict station.

Finding the right genre for an adaptation can go a long way. *Alien: Isolation* is the culmination of a string of particularly mediocre games that found very little creative ways to breathe life into their respective stories. The horror genre can bring out the absolute best aspects of the story in a way that traditional FPS, like *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (2013), could not: the Alien, as the main eponymous antagonist, needs to be the centerpiece of its plot. What better way to emphasize how terrifying it is by making it impossible to kill, and by having it chase Amanda, in whom the players are emotionally invested? It is vital for a videogame to carry the story from text to experience, and thus it is almost impossible to be entirely safe once engaged in a deadly hide-and-seek with the Xenomorph. Our limited agency over the game is also an efficient tool to convey the character's helplessness.

Hitchcock famously distinguished surprise from suspense in his conversation with fellow filmmaker François Truffaut, and it seems that the writers have taken good note of it: it would have been easy to pack the experience with jumpscare galore, but instead have preferred the nerve-wracking knowledge that something dangerous is lurking somewhere near, without knowing where and when it will strike. Because of that, the few jumpscare that they do have are devilishly efficient. To achieve this transition from surprise to suspense, they added one smart gameplay and narrative element: the motion detector, a staple of the first films. The Alien is not appearing out of thin air anymore: the player can see it pace, search, or prepare to lie in wait. As Janet Murray puts it in her seminal 1997 book "Hamlet on the Holodeck": "as the digital medium

matures, writers will become more and more adept at inventing such belief-creating virtual objects and at situating them within specific dramatic moments that heighten our sense of immersed participation.” Seeing the dot of the Xenomorph on the tracker is incredibly distressing, but even more so when it disappears, and the player can’t help but keep glancing at it every few seconds. It is unfortunate that the game loses some of its intensity through its length: the story is often drawn out through meaningless steps (get the card key, find the password combination, turn on three turbines...) which diffuse the tense atmosphere of the otherwise harrowing first half of its story.

The writers have invested a tremendous amount of time in perfectly tying the game’s story within the franchise’s narrative, and this analysis would be incomplete if the ways in which it relates to the original films are not inspected. The very first lines of the game are the last of the film: the final recording of Ellen Ripley as she drifts off in outer space. Without a doubt this legacy is both the source of the game’s strength and its burden. While the writing is confident and the pacing remarkable, the designers very rarely take any risks with the storytelling, preferring to rely on the tropes and expected twists first explored by the films: Amanda Ripley is in many ways exactly like her mother, down to her name and weapon of choice. And while the story is gripping enough that the players don’t feel bored once the nostalgia fades out, it seriously hampers its emotional impact. We *expect* the first friendly faces that we meet to be slaughtered in front of our eyes, and we *expect* the death of our comrades later in the game. Amanda is betrayed. Amanda trudges through an alien nest and is almost impregnated. Amanda must destroy the station before it destroys her in a climactic final sequence. Amanda finds out that the spaceship that she wanted to escape on is inhabited by an alien, with which she has a final confrontation. Amanda is left drifting off in space, with the ambiguous promise that she might, or might not, be found.

One symptomatic segment however does not feature Amanda. Mid-way through the story, she finds allies in the remains of Sevastopol’s Colonial Marshal Bureau where she meets Marlow, the imprisoned former captain of the ship that had picked up the *Nostromo*’s black box prior to the events of the game. He then recounts how his ship, much like many before in the franchise, had picked up an encrypted distress signal leading them to an inhospitable planet and how they were led to the ruins of an alien structure. Anyone who has watched *Alien* knows exactly what happens next: a small team, including Marlow and his wife, set out to explore the derelict ship. Like Kane and Lambert, they gape at the skeletal walls, the fossilized pilot, and finally, the infamous eggs that will seal their fate. The players break away from Amanda and the main storyline for a little while as they are thrown hands first into the flashback. The sequence is particularly effective in its deliberately slow pacing and eerie atmosphere, letting the players fully experience this key moment of the story. However, by virtue of its extreme resemblance to known instances of the films and absence of new noteworthy elements, it feels like little more than a ride in an amusement park or a guided tour. Janet Murray describes a similar experience with “the CD-ROM version of the starship *Enterprise*”: [...] “the representation is so complete that our visit to the *Enterprise* has a magical quality; it is as if we are aboard the real starship, the canonical location of the fictional world of which the television and movie representation are just copies. But after we check out all the key places [...] the visit loses its immersive hold because nothing is happening there.”

While Murray believed that “the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated space is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content,” she also nuanced her argument with the necessity to fill the space with meaningful elements. It is from this need that has sprung environmental storytelling. In *Alien: Isolation*, the players have an added risk when they read emails and logs of being caught by the alien, and every piece of information and story safely gleaned is a reward. Sevastopol is a truly wondrous setting, and along with its operating company Seegson it gives the game the right amount of washed out corporate atmosphere it needed. They are so beautifully crafted however that the writers seem to have almost forgotten to inhabit them with people. The logs almost entirely focus on the rise and fall of Seegson to the detriment of making it feel like it was alive at some point. It could be argued that it is also in some way one of the peculiar charms of the game, this sense of being pitted against a stranded phantom station overcome by corporate emptiness, hostile androids on the cusp of the uncanny valley, and ultimately by Xenomorphs as well.

While the first half features wider expanses and pits Amanda and several supporting characters against the single alien, as the story unfolds the dynamics slowly shift: the levels tend to shrink down to tight spaces, protagonists are killed off one by one and the heroine finds herself increasingly alone against a growing number of hostiles. The story grows more claustrophobic and breathless despite the sometimes long stretches of meaningless tasks. The game’s sprawling levels can feel disorienting. The player has a map, but it only shows what has already been explored. It’s up to the player to make a bee-line to the goal or try to find safer, alternate routes. According to Murray, the narrative theme of the labyrinth may be seen as “a means of evoking and controlling terror,” which resonates particularly well with the game’s genre. It is even more potent when a lot of the game’s topography remains out of reach of the player: the air ducts, the Alien’s favorite method of taking unaware characters by surprise. Moreover, she adds another layer of interpretation for the virtual space of the labyrinth as “a physical manifestation of the effort to come to terms with the trauma, it represents the mind’s repeated efforts to keep returning to a shocking event in an effort to absorb it and finally get past it.” In other words, Amanda’s scurrying around unlike her static companions can be seen as a representation of her inability to put her own ghosts to rest, running as she is after a presumably dead woman whom we know she will never meet at the expense of other personal relationships.

Unsuccessful Element

Without a doubt, its weakest narrative feature is the poor characterization of the protagonists, and its repeated failure to give weight to the death of Amanda’s friends and allies, which is a damning flaw in a horror game. Many characters die behind a glass panel as the player is powerless to do anything but spectate. As fans of the franchise we are back again in front of a movie screen, both the guarantee that the player cannot do anything but cannot be harmed either. Taylor is even thrown against it when the *Anesidora*’s reactors explode, after sacrificing herself for the sake of everyone else’s survival, almost to prove the point. Unfortunately, we have not

had the time to truly connect with her, and not much more with Samuels who encounters a similar fate. Other protagonists meet their end off screen: Marshal Waits, who betrays Amanda, is anticlimactically found dead later. So is Ricardo's death, when it should have been one of the story's emotional high point and the moment when the player truly feels alone and defenseless. Curiously enough, the death scene that was given the most importance was that of an early friendly survivor, Axel. He was neither likable nor interesting, and it was certainly not a surprise that he would be the first victim of the Xenomorph. Even if the scene serves more to introduce the lethality of the Alien than anything else, why would the game give his death more dramatic highlight than important supporting characters?

Strongest Element

The story itself discreetly recedes as it lets the complex AI of the Alien take over. In that respect, the game is doing something brilliant: it is creating emergent storytelling within an otherwise linear (and somewhat flat) plot. The monster *adapts* to the player throughout play. If they hide too much in lockers, that's where it will look first. If the player overuses distractions like flares, the Alien will start ignoring them. It will prowl, search, wait for the player depending on their former behaviors, as if it was truly thinking, and not just computing. With the right amount of unpredictability, these encounters with the Xenomorph creates a second narrative within the story. In other words, it is a form of storytelling that is unique to videogames. It is unfortunate that the emergence is wrestled away from the player as the ending draws near and more scripted events take precedence.

Highlight

One of the most terrifying moments takes place soon after Amanda has gotten rid of the pesky Alien by blowing it off into space, and is going down into the station's core to understand why everything is still on lockdown. While most players must have had a suspicion that they were not done yet with the Alien and that the core's corruption can only be the sign of its activity, the effect of the elevator's doors opening to reveal the core overrun by a sprawling nest is enough to turn anyone's blood cold. Upon this discovery, the players realize that there are without a doubt more than one Xenomorph on the station, and that the nightmare is far from over. Not only that, but they must proceed deeper in the literal bowels of the organic nest to overload the reactors (in the hope of taking down the station once and for all.) At first, the nest is eerily quiet and empty, but when the players turn on the generator, which emits a loud booming noise, they realize with horror that the motion detector lights up with a dozen lights all around blipping on and off. Numerous of the fiendish creatures start wailing through the walls. Now blind to hostile movement and with few places to hide, the players are left to fend off several monsters as best as they can in one of the most distressing sequences in recent videogame history.

Critical Reception

The critical reception was overall positive with some mixed reviews, while giving props to setting it in the horror genre and breaking with the FPS trend.

IGN gave the game a mixed 5.9. The reviewer, Ryan McCaffrey, mostly took a strong dislike to the length of the game. “Ripley’s nightmare became my own as *Isolation* moved its goalposts back so many damn times that it was almost comical,” he claims. “Worse, I strongly believed that *Isolation* was ending on at least two separate occasions, with the second of those times even seeing the resolution of Ripley’s original motivation: to get some sort of lead or closure on her missing mother. It turned out I wasn’t even close – I had another few hours to go, but now without any real reason behind it.”

Kotaku’s review, written by Kirk Hamilton, is more positive than IGN’s, hailing the ways that the story pays homage to the original film, but still laments the lack of characterization, jumpscars and truly original plot. Hamilton found the pacing to be strong overall, with similar comments to McCaffrey’s about the length of the ending sequence. “*Isolation*’s production values are generally high” he adds, “which makes the crusty character models and wonked human AI all the more jarring. Both undercut the impact of a few sections of the game, which is a shame.”

Writing for PCGamer, Andy Kelly gave the game a whopping 93/100, with however reservations about the story: “[it] is disappointing, retelling a familiar yarn we’ve already heard countless times in the *Alien* universe: sinister corporations, murderous androids, rogue AI, and others 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* (emphasis added.)” About the characterization, he adds: “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 that 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.”

Lessons

- Lesson 1

I believe this game is a stellar example of both how to take and how *not* to take from a movie. The painstaking efforts that they put in recreating the atmosphere and tying Seegson and Sevastopol within the overarching narrative were worth it. Some of the tropes were treats to

relive, but they never went beyond what we expected. The short lesson to be taken from those reviews is that they were waiting for more, especially given the otherwise excellent production value. The writers played it safe, and because most players would be so familiar with the franchise, this simply is not enough. Today, storytelling is not, and should not be secondary to the gameplay.

- Lesson 2

Characterization can go a long way. A very long way. And it could have, without a doubt, propelled this game from good to excellent. Samuels, Taylor and Ricardo were forgettable as friends, and Waits and Marlow forgettable as enemies. Our lack of emotional investment in any of the protagonists made their deaths flat and meaningless, and in a genre where death is so incredibly important and emphasized, this is an unforgiving misstep.

- Lesson 3

Videogames must be exploited in the unique ways that they can contribute to storytelling, and *Alien: Isolation* makes a valiant effort in that respect. For the longest time, the intellectual community has been torn over the never-ending debate between narratology and ludology, each side arguing that either story or system must take precedence over the other. It's because traditionally, story in games has been thought as a bunch of blank-filling texts slapped over a pre-existing system. That the system itself can contribute to the story is a bit of a novel idea. Jesper Juul writes in "Half Real" that "rules are the most consistent source of player enjoyment in games;" so why not take what makes rules so enjoyable and incorporate it to the storytelling?

Summation

Alien Isolation is a great horror game. As far as story goes, it is adequate, but never takes the risks necessary to go from gripping to visceral. It is both taking its strength for the film, but is also brought down by it, and its reliance on worn tropes prevents it to become its own major installation in the franchise, despite the large budget and beautiful environmental storytelling. However, it tries to inject narration in an otherwise underappreciated space: the game's mechanics themselves. It uses what gives the medium an edge: your own participation as a player can shape the story. In "Hamlet on the Holodeck" Murray wondered: "How can we impose endings that yield complex story satisfactions on a form that is based on win/lose simplicity?" Perhaps this is how we can start to answer it.