

Why Being Hunted in 'Alien: Isolation' is So Damn Terrifying

By Phil Hornshaw
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Sometimes video games aren't meant to empower or immerse, but for something much more primal: to scare the crap out of you. *Playboy's* Fear and Loading series peers down dark hallways and checks under gaming's bed to find the games that terrify us, and delves into how and why they work.

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There may be no more frightening rendition of the sleek black creature from director Ridley Scott's 1979 horror classic *Alien* than the one that appears in the game *Alien: Isolation*.

Most games based on the *Alien* franchise just throw the titular creatures at you in droves, which turns them into little more than acid-bleeding cannon fodder to be wasted by the hundreds. To say that the fright factor associated with artist H.R. Giger's gross, vicious, rape-y alien creature has been diminished over the years is underselling how badly most games have used it. *Isolation*, on the other hand, tries to capture the feel of the original *Alien* (rather than its militarized Vietnam-esque follow-up, *Aliens*) and focuses on a single, nine-foot-tall, unstoppable monster.

No number of molotov cocktails or revolver bullets can destroy it. A flamethrower acquired part-way through the game only briefly scares it off. The alien is unstoppable and implacable, and the only chance for players is to stay out of sight and move as quickly as possible.

On film, the alien is terrifying for being unseen, unfolding from hidden positions against walls or in ceilings, appearing silently to tear apart its human prey or drag them into darkness. But in the game, the alien creates a whole new level of dread in players. Throughout *Isolation*, when the creature is nearby, you hear it clamoring through air vents and stalking through hallways. You know it's there, and it's always searching for you.

What makes the game so effective, though, is not just the creature's presence, but that the alien is dangerous. It's coming for you, and you believe it might really succeed. That makes the game one of the scariest in recent memory.

IN SPACE, NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU RAGE QUIT

Creating a sense of impending doom and constant peril is *Alien: Isolation's* greatest triumph. It's also one of the key elements of any good horror game: as a player, you need to at least feel like you're really in some kind of danger, because the reality is you're sitting in front of a TV, and that reality is boring.

Making the player feel like they're in peril means providing them with credible threats to their in-game safety—essentially, it often means making the game difficult. But that has its challenges too; for one, if the game is too tough, it'll cease to be scary and become simply tedious or frustrating.

When talking about his return to horror with 2014's *The Evil Within*, *Resident Evil* creator Shinji Mikami and his team often said that with horror games, it's important to balance the player's feelings of being both helpless and powerful. In Mikami's estimation, players want and need to feel strong enough to overcome adversaries, challenges, and—maybe most of all—monsters. But making players afraid means also keeping them vulnerable, because if you can easily trounce any eldritch fiend that wanders past, you've got nothing to worry about.

Vulnerability comes in many different forms in horror games. In older titles such as *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*, it's usually translated to gameplay difficulty.



RE sometimes starts you with a knife, for example, and in the early moments of that game, you dodge past more zombies than you kill. *Silent Hill 2* starts you with a hunk of wood with which to (just barely) fend off disgusting creatures. And both like to obscure your view of the enemies coming after you. *Resident Evil* does so with hard, static angles that often have your character facing the camera with creatures out of sight beyond it, while *Silent Hill* covers its game world in thick fog.

Eventually you find stronger weapons, but both games work to keep you from feeling too strong by making ammo scarce, forcing you to consider how vulnerable you'll be left by spending a bullet now, or saving it for later.

Latter-day horror games often take weapons away entirely. In this year's *SOMA*, you're forced to hide from enemies, and even looking at them can have detrimental effects. That idea went a step further in 2013's *Outlast*, where your only options are to hide from enemies or, more often, to sprint away from them. Both games ask you to adapt to a situation uncommon to most video games by taking away the tools and weapons you depend on to survive.

In both, however, the danger eventually starts to feel exaggerated by the circumstances. In *Outlast*, for example, you quickly find enemies on predictable routes you can avoid, and if you do have to run, it becomes apparent that no one can really catch you. Many monsters in *SOMA* seem to be no threat at all if you just stop moving and look away from them. With *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*, before long, you learn the vulnerabilities of the enemies, or how to exploit them to easily escape. Essentially, the longer you play, the more the balance skews in your favor, and in some key ways, the less scary the games become.

Alien: Isolation also carefully balances giving players the tools of survival and making them feel vulnerable. But the game is at its absolute best, and scariest, when it skews toward seemingly oppressive difficulty.

THE PERFECT ORGANISM



Isolation cultivates peril in a number of clever ways. For one thing, it lets you see the alien often and hear it even more as it thuds through hallways and clamors overhead.

The creature operates on a set of parameters that allow it to reactively hunt the player based on things like sight and sound. You'll never see the alien patrolling an area in a set pattern, because it has no set patterns. It becomes impossible to predict what the alien will do, and facing off against it is always a desperate, losing proposition.

You have a number of tools for dealing with the alien, even though you can never actually defeat it. Apart from bombs or distraction devices you can build out of scrap, there's the aforementioned flamethrower for emergencies. More than those, you'll use the motion tracker, a low-fi beeping screen that gives you a sense of the alien's movements around you and helps you to avoid it.

But the more you interact with the alien, the more it adapts. Throw too many noisemaker devices to distract it, and it learns to ignore them. Blast it with the flamethrower too often and it'll learn to stay just out of range, reacting when you level the barrel rather than when you fire. The thing learns from you. That's genius on the part of the developers—and terrifying.

SCARY DREAMS



Alien: Isolation is at its purest in "Nightmare" mode, a difficulty level most players will probably never experience. "Nightmare" was a downloadable offering released long after *Alien: Isolation* launched and goes beyond the original three difficulty modes the game includes. It ratchets up the difficulty in several key ways: It makes components for weapons and tools much scarier; it removes the in-game map; it turns your motion tracker into a buggy, unreliable piece of trash; and it makes the alien become much smarter, much quicker.

At first, without the key tools of survival players rely on in the easier difficulty modes, Nightmare feels like an insurmountable challenge. Instead, though, it shows how powerful difficulty can be in creating fear for players. With limited tools, your only hope is to be quick, observant, and smart—either you adapt, or you die.

Nightmare mode is *Alien: Isolation* as it feels like it was meant to be experienced. It's the version of the game that gets closest to recreating those terrifying, classic moments from the 1979 film. The difficulty it brings to the experience instills the feeling of constant danger, just out of reach of the senses, that so often allows horror to get under our skin, to leave us marked with dread and anxiety long after the film, book or game creating those feelings is long since concluded.

Alien: Isolation makes a case for embracing difficulty in horror. Nightmare mode could run the risk of frustrating the player, but taking away your tools of survival doesn't create an unfair advantage for the alien—it requires the player to find new ways to survive. In that way, *Isolation* doesn't just present players with something to fear. It forces them to fight through it.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of *So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel and the Space Hero's Guide to Glory*. He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

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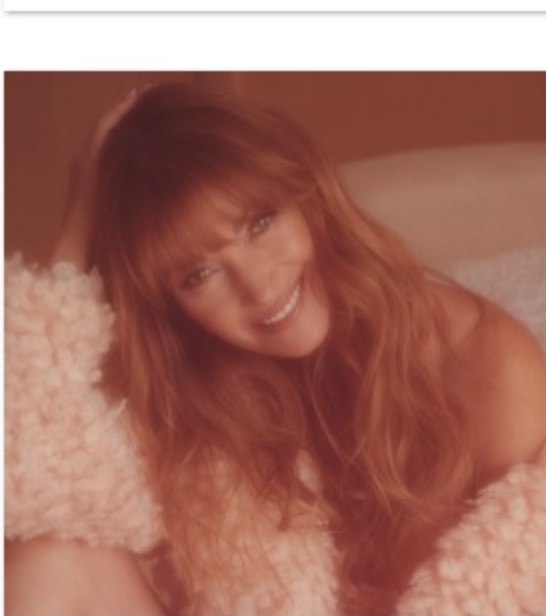
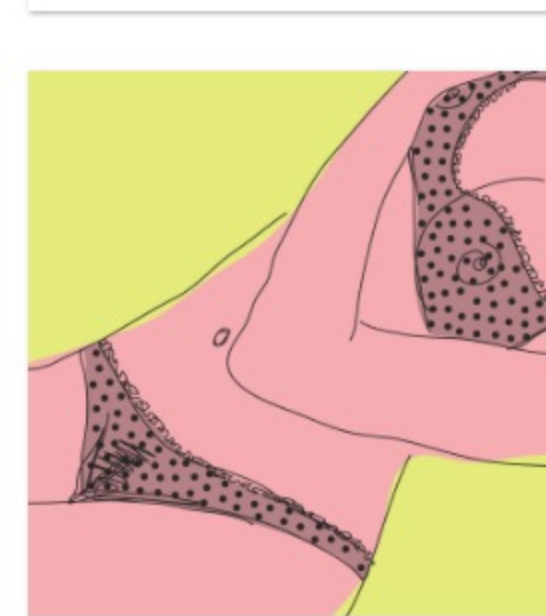
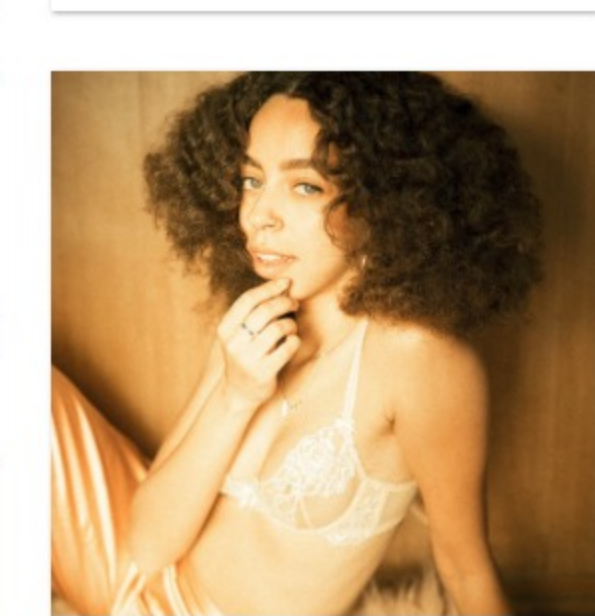


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