"Game Over, Man. Game Over": Looking at the Alien in Film and Videogames

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Abstract: In this article we discuss videogame adaptations of the *Alien* series of films, in particular *Alien: Colonial Marines* (2013) and *Alien: Isolation* (2014). In comparing critical responses and developer commentary across these texts, we read the very different affective, aesthetic and socio-political readings of the titular alien character in each case. The significant differences in what it means to 'look' at this figure can be analyzed in terms of wider storytelling techniques that stratify remediation between film and games. Differing accounts of how storytelling techniques create intensely 'immersive' experiences such as horror and identification—as well as how these experiences are valued—become legible across this set of critical contexts. The concept of the 'look' is developed as a comparative series that enables the analysis of the affective dynamics of film and game texts in terms of gender-normative 'technicity', moving from the 'mother monster' of the original film to the 'short controlled burst' of the colonial marines and finally to the 'psychopathic serendipity' of *Alien: Isolation*.

1. Introduction

Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien* and James Cameron's 1986 sequel *Aliens* are foundational reference points for action videogames. *Aliens* in particular has remarkable tenacity across the history of blockbuster science-fiction videogames, most notably through its squad of memorable marines and their equally memorable hardware. Tough-guy soldiers have hosed down hordes of aliens in multitudinous videogame homages to these marines. First-person shooter franchise *Halo* pays direct homage to *Aliens*' gruff, cigar-chomping Sergeant Apone with its own Sergeant Johnson; Midway's 1980 arcade game *Xenophobe* directly adapts H. R. Giger's now-ubiquitous "razor-toothed phallic monster" (Kavanaugh 1980, p. 94) to an extent that verges on plagiarism; Nintendo's *Metroid* series makes a direct nod to *Alien* with an alien antagonist adopting the name 'Ripley'. Official adaptations or extensions of the film franchise include beat-em-ups, arcade shooters, and first-person titles. These include *Alien* (Atari, 1982), *Aliens versus Predator* (Jorudan, 1993) and its many sequels, *Alien 3: The Gun* (Sega, 1993), *Aliens Infestation* (Sega, 2011), *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (Gearbox, 2013), and *Alien: Isolation* (Sega, 2014).

The films' visual motifs thus recur "explicitly through games adapted from the film franchise and implicitly through games which mimic it" (Weise and Jenkins 2009, p. 111). However, just as many of the themes of *Alien* are somewhat muted when filtered through the tonal shift of the second film ("This time, it's war" the sequel's marketing material assured us), so too have videogames drawn a very selective set of inspirations from the *Alien* series. Mainstream videogames are bedazzled by the colonial marines and their impressive military hardware, yet remain relatively disinterested in the gender politics or critiques of technological corporate culture that film theorists have long noted as being

so prevalent to the films (Bundtzen 1987; Creed 1986; Doherty 2015; Greven 2011; Kavanaugh 1980; Sloan 2016).

Here, we will make a comparative study of storytelling techniques utilised by *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (hereafter *Colonial Marines*) and *Alien: Isolation* (hereafter *Isolation*), situating these two titles as a way to explore the complexities of remediated storytelling across film and videogame forms. *Colonial Marines* sought to remediate the feel of Cameron's sequel film in the action-FPS (First Person Shooter) genre, and in many ways exemplifies the tendencies in game design identified by Weise and Jenkins. Conversely, *Isolation* explicitly rejects many of the typical design mechanisms that games draw from *Aliens* and reintroduces feminist themes of techno-pessimism from Scott's first film.

In comparing these texts, we will focus on what it means to *look* at the titular alien monster, beginning with Creed's (1986) discussion of maternal monstrosity and the 'fifth look' of horror film. Second, through Weise and Jenkins' analysis, we examine how the alien reverses its valency in FPS games such as *Colonial Marines*: rather than looking away from the horrific mother monster, players instead *focus* their gaze in order to eliminate multiple aliens in 'short controlled bursts'. Finally, we discuss how *Isolation* reintroduces the critique of technicity present in the original films, thematised through its design of 'psychopathic serendipity'.

2. The Mother Monster and the 'Fifth Look'

Alien is a landmark of sci-fi horror, and has long been read in terms of psychoanalysis. Here we will focus on the important reading by Creed (1986) and the notion of the 'abject'. For Kristeva (1982), the abject represents the ambiguous maternal body as the site of conflicting desires. The subject desires both union with the maternal body as a source of plentitude and comfort, as well as the differentiation and individuation from that same body that is the precondition of entry into the paternal symbolic order (in the film, represented by the quiet and logical rhythms of spaceship life).

The individuated subject is, however, never free of the tension it locates in the maternal body: expulsion of the abject is not a discrete event so much as a ritual repetition (Creed 1986, p. 48). Horror films are a key site in which this expulsion of the abject is 'staged and re-staged': the awful monsters of horror cinema may be defeated, but are often liable to return and wreak more havoc. *Alien* is exemplary: the creature, which through Geiger's design invokes viscera and excreta, must be literally abjected into space for the peaceful and controlled routines of the spaceship to return to normal.

Creed argues that the xenomorph's maternal monstrosity is more radical than the theory of abjection, theorising an 'archaic' mother-figure that precedes any relation to the patriarchal order. Kristeva's psychoanalytic notion of the abject, Creed argues, still places the maternal body in relation to the father as the signifier and guarantor of the symbolic order. Unlike this pre-Oedipal mother, the archaic mother is not simply the opposite of the father in a relationship of lack, but a truly different and autonomous psychical function. The archaic mother works outside the symbolic order entirely as the black, gaping womb or maternal body, as a pure generative force: "The womb is not the site of castration anxiety. Rather, the womb signifies 'fullness' or 'emptiness' but always as its *own point of reference*" (Creed 1986).

This procreative force is often coded negatively, as the terrible goddess or Medusa, a devouring mother asserting sovereign claims over her offspring. While Creed argues that the archaic mother is so remote that it can be difficult to fraction out within the complex of the 'monstrous-feminine', the threat here is less a crippling or numbing dismemberment (as in the castration complex) than a swallowing-whole that completely de-individuates the subject: death, the fade to black. The elongated form of the creature, pharyngeal jaws, and lack of facial features and organs of sense give prominence to the fangs, "the most living part . . . the most terrifying for neighbouring animals" (Bataille 1985, p. 59).

Alien is a key example. Creed associates the creature in *Alien* with the Medusa myth, pointing towards the stunned transfixion exhibited by characters when they first catch sight of the creature in the film. The archaic mother is operative here as "the voracious maw, the mysterious black hole which . . . threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate

everything in its path" (Creed 1986, p. 63). Certainly, the alien is extremely toothy—often the first thing that is recognised through the darkness is the gleam of its fearsome dentition. Horror film has often made use of the returned gaze—the sudden realisation, which shocks audience and character alike, that eyes are staring back—but here, the returned 'gaze' is not one of recognition (however sudden and horrid), but of pure hunger; not an exchange over a void but a one-way trip down the gullet. Characters often doomed once the camera cuts between their horrified face and the drooling creature in *Alien*; but this trope is further reinforced by the literal incorporation of human crew members into the alien reproductive matrix. Creed's association of the creature in *Alien* with the Medusa myth is echoed in *Isolation* with the player's knowledge that once the alien is spotted, it can often be too late to do anything other than wait for death and reload the game (a point expanded below).[1]

The key point for our discussion is the account of how the 'sighting' of the Medusa-mother-monster has the power of transfixing the viewer—both diegetic character and extra-diegetic audience member—with shock (Jayemanne 2017). This relates to a crucial element of how Creed understands the operation of horror film. As a medium, film utilises strategies and processes of identification (such as montage) through which it 'sutures' viewers in a kind of 'immersion' in cinematic space and time. Horror film both makes use of and challenges these strategies of identification:

> In contrast to the conventional viewing structures working within other variants of the classic text, the horror film does not constantly work to suture the spectator into the viewing processes. Instead, an unusual phenomenon arises whereby the suturing processes are momentarily undone while the horrific image on the screen challenges the viewer to run the risk of continuing to look . . . strategies of identification are temporarily broken, as the spectator is constructed in the place of horror Geiger. (Creed 1986, p. 64)

Creed argues that this relation be considered a 'fifth look' that can take its place among the suturing techniques of cinema. In particular, it can be seen as an expansion of Willemen's 'fourth look' (Willemen 1980), which itself draws on Mulvey's (1975) discussion of three cinematic looks. While this is not the context to review these accounts in detail, we want to highlight the increasingly 'interactive' or 'immersive' quality through which key critics have described the fourth and fifth looks—indicated by the importance of affective states such as shame and horror in these critical accounts. There is also a *punctual* element: as Creed writes, the suturing processes are undone 'momentarily' in the horrific shot.

Willemen notes that, in describing the three types of 'look' she discerns in cinema (such as the camera lingering on a character's face, or two characters exchanging a glance), Mulvey focuses on intra-diegetic phenomena. He suggests a 'fourth look', analogous to Lacan's mirror stage insofar as it is a moment of self-consciousness arising from a fragmented field that reflects the piecemeal nature of subjectivity itself: 'an imagined look experienced by the audience as a sense that is seen in the process of seeing' (Freedman 1991, p. 69). This look is the sense that the cinematic apparatus itself has powers of agency and judgment and thus has a potential for generating surprise, self-critique and shame in audiences—an incorporation of the viewer as not simply passive but as in some sense *responsible* for their continued looking. Scopophilia, typically considered an attribute of subjects, is refigured as an *activity*. As such, the fourth look's extra-diegetic dimension can be seen as a forerunner of the feedback loops by which players are woven into videogame space and time (Jayemanne 2005) and come to experience a different kind of immersion than that prompted by classic processes of cinematic suture. Similarly, Creed's fifth look operates as a meta-cognition of the self's relation to the text: a certain

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[1] The xenomorph's capability of incorporating both victims and environment into its hive to use as raw materials for more monsters is only magnified by the rest of the film series. For example, Cameron's *Aliens* introduced the Alien Queen as the ultimate mother-monster, while also exploring Ellen Ripley's own maternal impulses (in her case, coded positively) through the character of Newt. This is further emphasised in the extended cut through the loss of her daughter (that we play in *Isolation*) to old age while Ellen drifted through space. Later films continued the use of themes and imagery that are evocative of both the pre-Oedipal and the archaic mother, indicating the acumen of Creed's (along with other scholars such as Bundtzen 1987) analysis of the original film.

'looking back'; only here the effect is maximally intensive. The fifth look is perhaps most evident in the technique of the jump-scare, where sudden montage creates suture and identification in the same moment as repulsion and fear.

In violently halting the process of identification through the shocking appearance of the monstrous and abject, then, horror film in general—and the alien in particular—puts the spectator's sense of a unified self into crisis: "By not-looking, the spectator is able momentarily to withdraw identification from the image on the screen in order to reconstruct the boundary between self and screen and reconstitute the 'self' which is threatened with disintegration" (Creed 1986, p. 65). Looking in the face of a shocking appearance becomes gruelling labour and risk. Horror film derives some of its most powerful effects through the fifth looks' 'jamming' of the very technical-psychological mechanisms and feedback loops that the cinematic text has worked so hard to perfect.

3. 'Short Controlled Bursts' and 'Para-Social' Camaraderie

The above discussion of the reception and remediation of *Alien* is admittedly very brisk, but our goal here is not to engage with the detail of psychoanalytic film theory or its critiques (see for example Shaviro 2010) so much as to identify key characteristics of Creed's highly influential reading as basis for a comparative method. We will proceed by comparing Creed's 'fifth look' with another perceptive critical response to looking at the alien: Weise and Jenkins' praise of the videogame *Alien vs Predator 2* (hereafter *AvP2*). This will serve as a means to triangulate some of the complexities of remediation between film and the normative conventions of blockbuster videogames. Weise and Jenkins' piece is explicitly responding to Steven Spielberg's 2000s foray into gaming: i.e., they are posing the question of what a film director is liable to overlook when making a videogame.

Where for Creed the horror film's fifth look works through a traumatic risk or labour of 'looking away' from an abject scene or object that jams the suturing codes of cinema, the action videogame demands a constant and unwavering gaze (or what Chesher (2004) conceives of as videogame's sticky 'glaze'). This association is powerfully affirmed in the marquee genre of the First-Person Shooter, which integrally relates scopophilia and militarist dominance over space: the look is sutured to the fetish of the firearm. In *AvP2*, this requires 'riding' the weapon in what Weise and Jenkins term "short controlled bursts" following the advice given in the film by the level-headed Corporal Hicks. Key to the videogame player's successful sortie against the swarm of aliens is the *need to keep looking* that is necessary to effectively control the marine's weapon. Far from looking away from the alien appearance, first-person shooter players repetitively perform the expulsion of the abject by keeping their eyes (and their crosshairs) firmly fixed on the target. Weise and Jenkins thus articulate the visual and identificatory logics of the first-person shooter in *completely inverse terms* to Creed's account of what it means to look at the alien. Between these two responses, as Shaviro notes in another context, "something has happened to the act of looking" (Shaviro 1993).

The short controlled burst is as far as can be from the Medusa-like transfixion of *Alien*'s fifth look. However, it is also the exact opposite of the blind-fire panic of the marines in the latter half of Cameron's sequel film, in which the marines are overwhelmed by the alien swarm as Lieutenant Gorman loses control of the situation in spite of his videogame-like command apparatus. Weise and Jenkins marshal psychological and social insights in their characterization of why the 'affective dynamics' of *AvP2* make it an exemplary videogame adaptation of *Aliens*. They praise *Aliens* for its "high affective intensity", but attribute this intensity primarily not to the horror of the aliens nor to the character arc of the film's protagonist, Ripley, but to the "para-social" (Weise and Jenkins 2009, p. 115) camaraderie between the team-members of the marine squad. Exposure to the personality and mannerisms of each squad member in the earlier parts of the film feeds into the audience's investment in the team during the frenetic combat scenarios.

This intensity also resonates with the marines' ritualistic military argot. The iconic high-tech weapons (pulse rifle, sentry and smart guns) and equipment (shoulder lamps, IR goggles, dropships, motion-trackers) of the film are critical to the experience of space in the first-person shooter.

These technological devices have their own specific properties that train players in the "embodied literacy" (Keogh 2018) and "tactile habituation" (Jayemanne 2017) needed to succeed at the game:

> The possibility space of *Aliens versus Predator 2* is derived most directly from the moment-to-moment experience, seen repeatedly in the film [*Aliens*], of being a marine trapped in close corridors with aliens. This may sound like a generic scenario from many videogames, but its uniqueness comes from the specific player tools, enemy behaviour, and level design derived from Cameron's film. (Weise and Jenkins 2009, p. 114)

The role of the technological paraphernalia from the film is key to transitioning fully to the game situation: "Once the player has mastered most of these tools, she has become, in essence, a good colonial marine" (Weise and Jenkins 2009, p. 115).

Weise and Jenkins synthesise their reading in a key passage as an attenuation of the multi-character 'para-social' ethos of the film into the individualist and technophilic design of a successful videogame—giving the individual to fulfil the promise of the many:

> The affective mechanics of the game might better be described as ego-centric, restricted to what can be known and experienced by a single character . . . the game designers shape our affective experience through procedural design, through the properties they program into our weapons . . . When these devices are deployed effectively, they can yield a satisfying emotional experience; they can make us cry, experience fear, shock and horror, or feel exhilaration depending on the choices we make and their outcomes.

This transition from cinematic para-social to ludic ego-centric engagement manifests in what it means to look at the alien in this context. Where the player character condenses the affective dynamics of the marine squad, the singular creature conversely becomes the dispersed and unthreatening pop-up targets of the skeet-shoot. The occasional jump-scare notwithstanding, *Alien*-adapted first-person shooter videogames consist of acquiring and eliminating multiple targets, rather than desperately avoiding the petrifying gaze of one invincible monster. There seems little point in debating whether the alien in *Colonial Marines* represents a pre-Oedipal or archaic mother monster—numbing shock or complete oblivion. Instead, the key question becomes how efficiently the player's short controlled bursts—the look-firearm complex—can remove it from play. Failure to do so efficiently just means a reload and perhaps a visit to the 'difficulty' toggle.

The creature thus has inverted both its storytelling function and its role in generating an experience of immersion, becoming something that *presents* itself to players. The alien's pliant 'defeatability' is ramified at every level of design. Where the monstrous appearance in *Alien* halted the cinema's characteristic 'strategies of identification', in the first-person shooter the monster aids and abets those of the videogame. Both cinematic and videogame experience could be described as 'immersive', but very different affective infrastructures are operative in each case. Rather than being constructed in the space of horror through the fifth look, looking at the alien through the short controlled burst constructs videogame players as ego-centric subjects who dominate fictional space through mastering multiple feedback loops. These loops are painstakingly calibrated through playtesting so that players with normative ability can both experience affective intensities and win the game through 'colluding' with the apparatus. The affective camaraderie that Weise and Jenkins argue is central to the para-social dynamics of Cameron's *Aliens*, then, is transferred onto the ego-centric relation of empowerment and collusion between player and videogame as represented by the fictional and fantastical military hardware.

4. Videogame Technicities and Techno-Masculine Anxiety

It is important to recognise that Weise and Jenkins' reading of *AvP2* is partial: they explicitly focus on the single-player rather than the multiplayer aspects of the game, as well as the alternate modes which allow play as alien and Predator characters. We shall argue that what is left out of their

analysis—including these alien 'looks' and of course Ellen Ripley—are potentials that are in some sense seized upon in *Isolation* through its design of 'psychopathic serendipity'. However, Weise and Jenkins' articulation of the affective dynamics of looking at the alien through the short controlled burst is acute as a metonym for widespread design philosophies and approaches to videogame storytelling in the mainstream industry and its occasionally ornery but reliably lucrative consumer culture: the notion of player empowerment as collusive, ego-centric 'technicity'.

Along with the psychoanalytic tradition represented by Creed, many scholars have noted the reversal (and convergence) of traditional science-fiction gender roles in *Alien* and its sequels (Bundtzen 1987; Kavanaugh 1980; Doherty 2015). Criticism has also focused on the pessimistic attitudes of the films towards technology and capital:

> *Alien* offers a pessimistic vision of humanity dominated by a technological empire. Programmed by an unethical corporation . . . , technology emerges as a ubiquitous, insidious, and totalitarian force. The human victims of the technological system have been so conditioned to its rule that they perceive its stranglehold as the natural state of things, not even recognizing their enslavement. (Dinello 2013, p. 193)

These themes are intertwined in *Aliens* as the traditional male heroes are satirically shown as completely incapable of dealing with the alien creature. Hudson's iconic line "Game over, man. Game over!" in *Aliens* is, despite being an explicit reference to a videogame phrase, rarely remembered by those games that celebrate the dominating power of the colonial marines through ego-centric design, and this is the ethos that Weise and Jenkins articulate for the apparent benefit of Spielberg.[2]

Numerous authors have traced how patriarchal values have influenced understandings of both videogames specifically and digital technology more broadly through their symbiotic development across the 20th Century. Lister et al. (2009, p. 290). Observe that "if computers and video games have made computer technology accessible and popular, they have, in doing so, effectively commodified computer technology, turning the radical hacker ethic into consumerist entertainment". Hackers birthed the videogame form, and imbued an ethos, attitude, and culture "that is produced by the conjunction of particular kinds of young men, technology and the mathematical systems of coding that are the language of computing" (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, p. 38). Directly influenced by a neoliberal subjectivity through their ancestry in the hacker mythos (see Chun 2011, p. 7; Keogh 2018), the videogame works historically most often valued by videogame critics, enthusiasts, and scholars alike are those that allow players to express an individualistic sense of freedom, agency, autonomy, power, and control. Players take on powerful roles like commander, mayor, god, soldier, gangster, and indeed colonial marine to both save the world and, fairly routinely, 'save the girl'. It is here that the ego-centric underpinnings of blockbuster videogame design highlighted above find their center of gravity. Weise and Jenkins' reading of *AvP2* as a 'great' videogame adaptation of *Aliens* must *necessarily* elide the feminist critique of technicity found in that film in the course of valorising the transition from para-social affect to ego-centric design. Ripley cannot reprise her role as protagonist in this schema because in her survivalist strategy the short controlled burst is at best a means and not an end in itself.

As a consequence of videogames' historical alignment with a hacker mythos that favours technological competency, formal virtuosity, and systems literacy, discourses around videogames (both scholarly and popular) have produced what Dovey and Kennedy note is "an 'ideal' player subject that is naturalised as 'white', 'male' and 'heterosexual'" (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, p. 63;

2　There is considerable evidence that Spielberg was already across these issues, given that he wrote the introduction to Martin Amis' *Invasion of the Space Invaders* (1982): 'The aliens have landed, and the world can never be the same again . . . I speak as one who knows. I have actually exceeded 500,000 at Missile Command . . . the Invaders, far from confining their activities to public places and consenting adults, have established themselves in our homes in various shapes and forms, to the extent that there's really nowhere left to go to avoid them. Well—that's if you really want to. I don't want to be accused of collaboration, but some of them are really quite friendly when you get to know them . . . ' (Amis 1982, p. 7). The director's return to filmmaking after a hiatus with 2018's *Ready Player One* also speaks to conversance with the medium.

see also Kirkpatrick 2012). Ego-centric design often facilitates a highly gendered and conservatively formalist notion of videogame play: a set of "anterior motives" (Jayemanne 2017) that both push players forward and reliably gratify them should they 'ride the weapon' just so. Those videogames that have goals to achieve, complex systems to master, and surmountable challenges to overcome become exemplary of a videogame form perceived as primarily about gaining skill and exerting power through conscious choices or the cybernetic gratifications of the short controlled burst. At the same time, those videogames deemed to be too easy (not enough challenge), too challenging (not enough fairness), too cinematic (not enough agency), or too 'linear' (not enough complexity) are commonly marginalised as lesser examples of the form (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, p. 37), as 'walking sims' or 'notgames'.

The notion of 'technicity' is useful here to unpack this interplay of gender and technology. We draw on Tomas's coining of this term in his exploration of William Gibson's *Sprawl* novels. Tomas (1989, p. 123) advances the notion of technicity to account for the "different systems of identity composition" that emerge in "cyborg-dominated culture". Dovey and Kennedy (2006) productively build on Tomas's outline in the context of videogame culture. The concept of technicity brings concerns of gender, ethnicity, and class to account for how particular socio-cultural power dynamics both form and are formed through technological competency, access, and literacy. Further, technicity designates how certain modes of identifying with technology become hegemonic and obscure myriad other "marginal, subaltern or oppositional identities which define themselves in reference to the dominant group" (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, p. 64). Through technicity, the complex critiques of technology and gender present in *Alien* can be seen as intimately connected.

What we can now identify as a normatively masculine technicity can be traced across conventional blockbuster videogame design in its focus on individualistic and empowered player positions that echo those of dominant Western masculinity and neoliberalism: a privileged individual given all the right tools so that every challenge faced is surmountable through just the right amount of effort. The individual in the end finds themselves in a position of great power (and often just as importantly, universal acclaim) that they obtained through what seems like hard work but what was, in reality, a world in which even the most alien being appears as a slippage between para-social and ego-centric affective dynamics: a guarantor that players were and always will have been capable to succeed. Boredom is never the consumer's fault.

This dominant technicity is a powerful influence on videogame storytelling in the form of what Boluk and LeMieux (2017) have incisively termed the 'Standard Metagame'. The influence of this standard metagame is reflected in numerous studies into gender and videogame culture. These critiques of ego-centric design range from the dominance of particular action genres at the expense of other genres that focus on emotions or empathy (Dovey and Kennedy 2006), to the systemic sexism of online videogame communities (Harper 2014; Shaw 2014), to the dramatic gender inequality of the videogame industry (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Blockbuster videogames typically promise experiences of technology-aided mastery and concomitant domination of both opponents and space (Wajcman 1991; Keogh 2015; Giddings and Kennedy 2008).

These dynamics are most legible in the storytelling techniques of the game that most stridently attempted to actualise Weise and Jenkins' notion of realising para-social dynamics through ego-centric design. When Gearbox released the first-person shooter *Aliens: Colonial Marines* in 2013, it was met with derision, critical panning, and even a lawsuit from disgruntled fans. The oppressive atmosphere and intimidating aliens of the films were diluted by the game as bored players sprayed waves of groggy creatures with machine-gun fire. A scathing review from game journalism outlet *Polygon* claims the game "fails to grasp the functional core of the series" and accuses the developers of "just checking off the list of 'Stuff that should probably be in an *Alien* game'" (Gies 2013)—that is, the very criteria that Weise and Jenkins attribute to a successful ego-centric game design.

Tellingly, "stuff that should probably be in an *Alien* game" does not include Ellen Ripley, who remains absent from *Colonial Marines*. Instead, the story of *Alien 3* is retconned to revive the

marine Hicks: the guiding figure of the 'short controlled burst'. Significant efforts are made to evoke the para-social dynamics of *Aliens*, with Lance Henriksen and Michael Biehn reprising their roles as the voices and likenesses of Bishop and Hicks respectively. Marines bark orders, banter, callsigns, waypoints and hardware designations as players move their PC behind his gun and blast away countless alien creatures. All seems set for another ego-centric design. Yet the negative reception of the game shows it could not provide the affective intensities its marketing material had promised: it failed at both maternal monstrosity and short controlled burst. *Colonial Marines* marks a catastrophic breakdown of the collusive relationship between what is expected of a first-person shooter (action, powerful technology, hordes of defeatable foes), and what is expected of *Alien* (terror, untrustworthy technology, a small number of invincible foes).

This is not to say that the game does not display, at one level, a healthy skepticism of corporate power, figured through the rapacious Weyland–Yutani corporation. The ending of *Colonial Marines* sees the vengeful marines vowing to eliminate the head of a corporation that views them as expendable. However, the result of the corporate malfeasance forms the pretext for another moment of para-social camaraderie—a far cry from the claustrophobic Mother computer in *Alien* or the betrayal by Burke in *Aliens*. In *Colonial Marines*, the critique of technology is recouped within the family-like structure of the marine unit itself. It is also subordinate to the affective camaraderie players like to imagine they have with the game industry itself: the promise of a sequel with more pulse rifles, more smart guns, more defeatable aliens and more nostalgic design (Sloan 2016). The largely male marine fraternity is freed from the failure of *Aliens* not just by the ego-centric design noted by Weise and Jenkins but also by the para-social consumerist ethos that such design fosters at scale.

The intensity of the fan backlash shows that this transfer was botched but potent. The animus against the game was sufficient that it would re-surface in 2018 after a story emerged that *Colonial Marines*' A.I. deficiencies were due to a simple typo rather than some arcane technological slipup (Machkovech 2018). In this light, the sidelining in *Alien* videogames of Ripley—who so often has to deal with ego-centric men—in favour of techno-fetishist marines exemplifies the gender dynamics that have historically conditioned the videogame form. This backlash is also one early forerunner of later movements that show how the ego-centric and para-social affects cultivated by blockbuster videogames can be mirrored in society at large through targeted use of communications technologies; a kind of 'hacking the social' (Milner 2013).

5. Isolation

Creative Assembly's 2014 title *Alien: Isolation* here marks a significant intervention, explicitly engaging with the thematic anxieties of the *Alien* films through complications of ego-centric videogame storytelling. As Creative Lead Alistair Hope (2015) notes in a lecture on the game's design process, the developers were less interested in *Isolation* feeling like an *Alien* videogame than in feeling like *Alien*. That is, the conventions and norms of blockbuster videogame design that are mulishly rehearsed by *Colonial Marines* become incidental in *Isolation*, and in fact are shown up as ripe for subversion.

Taking place in the decades between *Alien* and *Aliens* (while Ellen Ripley drifts through space in stasis as a sole human survivor of the events of the first film), *Isolation* follows the story of Ripley's daughter, Amanda. When the flight recorder of the doomed *Nostromo* ship finds its way to the Seegson corporation's space station Sevastopol, Amanda Ripley travels with representatives of Weyland–Yutani in the hope of learning her mother's fate. Instead of finding her mother, Amanda is caught up in her own nightmare encounter with the alien creatures that echoes many of the story beats that her mother endured in the original film *Alien*.

The game begins on a ship that just happens to be the same model as the *Nostromo*. Reinforcing the sense of re-enactment, other characters regularly refer to Amanda simply as 'Ripley'. Once on the Sevastopol station, Ripley survives malfunctioning androids, malignant corporate agendas, cowardly and incompetent men, and, of course, the horrific alien itself. Through Amanda Ripley, *Isolation* pays homage to *Alien*, allowing the player to walk in Ellen Ripley's footsteps both literally and figuratively.

Immediately, then, *Isolation* engages with a mother/daughter complex central to the films but typically ignored by videogame adaptations. As Bundtzen (1987, p. 14) notes: "the major confrontation of [*Aliens*] will not be impotent male marines vs. Alien Big Mama, but between Ripley, a woman who practices the maternal as compassionate care vs. biological-maternal principle of monstrous proportions, embodied in the Alien other". *Isolation* engages with this paradigm from the inverse perspective: not the mother protecting her daughter, but the daughter searching for her mother.

Ego-centric ways of conceptualising how players engage with videogames see player-consumers held in a privileged position: *using* the technology to do what they want it to do, to make the choices they want to make, to beat the inhuman aliens in the same gesture as they beat the inhuman videogame machine; to get the high score, to win. Such conceptions of ego-centric design ignore the coercive and inequitable aspects of how such desires are generated in the first place—to some degree, this is supposedly the 'natural' orientation of videogame consumers. *Isolation*, on the other hand, draws on the tradition of survival horror games to powerfully reject the ego-centric paradigm of *Alien* videogame adaptations and re-thematise the critical elements of the films. Where ego-centric design sees players as exceptional and privileged, *Isolation* instead works to place them at the whim of both game and alien in a literal convergence of the alien creature's "organic machinery" (Dinello 2013, p. 197). Just as *Alien* presents a "pessimistic vision of humanity dominated by a technological empire" (Dinello 2013, p. 193), *Isolation* places players in a space saturated with this techno-pessimism. Survival horror stages not just the fulfilment of desire but its *production* in a maximally intensive form, decentering the assumption of collusion between player and game.

This skepticism towards technology is carried into *Isolation*'s world through the Seegson corporation. Weyland–Yutani is high-tech, sleek and wealthy; Seegson is incompetent, dilapidated and in financial trouble. Weyland–Yutani has lifelike androids that can pass as humans; Seegson's are 'future-retrospective' robotic, unreliable, malfunctioning beings whose front-loaded artificiality brings corporate callousness into a far future that still advertises a yearning for the posthuman. While *Isolation* is one of the most technologically competent videogames of its contemporaries (nominated for numerous awards for its sound and visual design, as well as the creature's convincing intelligence), it is not celebratory of technology as a source of liberating, cathartic empowerment.

Through parodic corporate aesthetics, retro-futurism and inhuman androids, *Isolation* expresses what Dinello calls the "techno-totalitarianism" of the original film. Where titles such as *Colonial Marines* embrace the advanced technology and weaponry of the marines in order to defeat the creature, *Isolation* embraces retro-futurism, presenting not a far future but the future of the late 1970s that produced *Alien*. Machines are clunky and analogue; computers blurt out DOS-like text onto cathode-ray monitors and trill like old school modems. The clunkiness of *Isolation*'s retro-futurist technologies, the claustrophobia of room-sized computers and whirring machines, and the eerie hum of fluorescent lights each reinforce that cutting-edge technology is not the solution to defeating the alien beast—players are much more likely to find a cassette tape than a laser cannon. Likewise, the cutting-edge technology that allows this videogame to exist will not provide the typical, ego-centric sense of empowerment typically promised by blockbuster videogames.

This pessimism contradicts the celebratory ways in which empowerment through technology is commonly marketed to videogame players—typically as an extension of the ego-centric empowerment afforded *by* videogame technologies themselves. Where Weise and Jenkins suggest a worthy *Aliens* game would be one where players are reliably given the tools and know-how to defeat the alien and thereby vindicate the 'para-social' affects set up by the movie's early scenes, Dinello's observations suggest that a worthy *Alien* videogame is one that *rejects* players' ability to dominate either the virtual space or the alien creature; it would instead be one where the player is *dominated by* both alien and corporate technologies.

6. Psychopathic Serendipity

The most powerful element of *Isolation* is players' encounters with the alien itself. The creature that stalks the halls of Sevastopol cannot be defeated nor can it be easily predicted. Bullets or explosives or hits will not kill this creature and if the alien sees Ripley, it is already too late for players to do anything other than freeze like a transfixed character in the films and wait for death. Looking at the alien becomes a game of hoping that the alien doesn't ever look at you. In this way the game recreates the *affect* of *Alien* within the blockbuster first-person space, and it achieves this in part by stripping out the 'shooter'. Firearms are limited and even then they are counter-productive: firing one connotes not domination over space but a fatal error in which the alien becomes aware of where the player character is. This gameplay restores Ellen Ripley's survivalist tactics to prominence—which, after all, were far more successful than the gunplay of the marines in *Aliens*.

As innumerable online videos will attest, the alien of *Isolation* well and truly regained the powers of horror that were so dulled by repetition and ego-centric design in *Colonial Marines*. However, while the alien's power of transfixion is once more in evidence, it would be inadequate to suggest that this is merely the return of Creed's fifth look. Instead, we suggest a final type of 'look' to characterise the affective dynamics of *Isolation*. To do this we draw on a term suggested by the game's artificial intelligence director Andy Bray: 'psychopathic serendipity'. This refers to the A.I. design such that the 'alien will always find itself in the right place at the right time' (Thompson 2017): a set of techniques used to modulate tension in players. This potential for the alien to burst forth from the environment at any moment means that the short, controlled burst is not merely inadequate: it is an invitation to a hideous death.

Psychopathic serendipity indicates that the creature is guided by its own procedural intelligence rather than the canned foreknowledge of a game designer: it is the *alien*'s look that is important. The creature may lurk in the one corridor for long minutes, forcing players to hold their breath in a locker only to unfairly turn back around the moment players think they are safe. If players too often rely on throwing flares to distract the creature, it might begin to inspect where the flare was thrown *from*. The biological and technological fears that the creature embodies in the films are dramatically collusive in *Isolation* through the fear of an alien programmed to be both unstoppable and unpredictable.

As the players attempt to navigate Sevastopol's hallways to their goal (ultimately: escape from Sevastopol), *Isolation*'s alien feels less like a ludic challenge to learn, overcome and enjoy, and more like an intentional, unpredictable and malicious glitch in the system to be avoided at all cost. *Isolation* fosters an explicit need to compromise and adapt to situations, insisting through design on Ripley's survivalist ethos. In this way *Isolation* not only adapts many of the original *Alien* film's anxieties towards gender (Kavanaugh 1980; Bundtzen 1987; Doherty 2015), technology (Dinello 2013), and corporate-inflected imagery of totalitarianism (Dinello 2013), but *converges* them through the many procedural, artistic and narrative techniques of the videogame form.

Through 'psychopathic serendipity', *Isolation* disturbs the affective camaraderie between player and game not only by reintroducing a female protagonist and neutering gunplay but also through the creature's superior adaptation to the dilapidated industrial space station. The level designs and environmental art conspire to emphasise that industrial environments are better suited to the alien than to the worker, bringing back the films' theme of a para-social relation between creature and corporation (which from the point of view of Amanda Ripley is decidedly *anti-social*). Furthermore, the soldier's advantage of choosing their battlefield—so often a core assumption of ego-centric videogame design through notions such as 'balance' or 'fairness'—is subverted. Compared to most videogame 'boss monsters' which are encountered in arena-like locales in which their spectacular designs make sense but can also be predictably exploited, *Isolation*'s creature could potentially be staring back at players as they creep through any of the game's depressing environments. Ripley's survivalist approach is the only successful response to the collusion between alien and environment, but rarely does it allow the player to feel powerful or in control.

Psychopathic serendipity is a pointedly subversive 'look' that, analogous to the fifth look before it, jams the strategies of the ego-centric style of videogame storytelling: both the retro-futuristic technologies of the Sevastopol space station and those of the videogame that give the creature its procedural intelligence are at the service of the creature's empowerment, not that of players. It is *Isolation*'s mutual *subversion of* the collusiveslippage between para-social and ego-centric looks, fusing corporate and biological antagonisms while still leveraging powerful contemporary videogame graphics technology, that reintroduces a fundamental aspect of what it means to look at the alien: the power to terrify.

7. Conclusions

The alien character has been subjected to intensive critical analysis amidst consistent popular appeal, making it a fruitful locus for comparative analysis. In tracing what it means to 'look' at the alien across these manifestations, we have highlighted the complex ways that affective dynamics work across very different storytelling functions and media forms to create differential forms of immersive experience. From 'fifth look' to 'short controlled burst' and finally to 'psychopathic serendipity': all are powerfully 'immersive', but very different in their aesthetic underpinnings. Each look is a moment in which the text returns the gaze and seeks to construct us through powerful effects of attraction and repulsion. Each acts as a locus for discussing the set of artistic techniques and critical responses that are operative in a series of alien appearances—and also the breadth of issues that can confront critics in trying to describe storytelling and varieties of immersive experience across media even within the very limited domain of a single, if alien, character.

Isolation's auto-critique of gaming's technicity highlights the game's canny reversal of the approach crystallised in Weise and Jenkins' reading: in remediating *Alien*, the game moves not from para-social to ego-centric dynamics but from ego-centrism to wider aesthetic, social and political issues. This reading shows why the powerful affective storytelling techniques identified by Creed have lain fallow in gaming for so long; only to emerge when the ideologies of tech platforms come to a rolling boil. The centrality of ego-centric design imperatives guides assumptions about 'what gamers want'—and hence processes of development and investment that mean that the alien is present in and conditional of our very desires.

Recent years have seen a wider range of fringe videogame creators pushing back against the ego-centric design norms favoured by the blockbuster videogame industry. *Isolation*'s commitment to a look of psychopathic serendipity shows up the hidebound nature of videogame adaptations of *Alien* and thereby points towards the imaginative inertia which has led blockbuster videogames' palette of theme, subject matter, character and so on to be so impoverished, even amidst constant technical innovation. Although it does itself end with a conventional narrative resolution and the seeming promise of more consumer-friendly storytelling, our reading valorises *Isolation*'s brilliant revivification of the immersive powers of *Alien* through very different technical means, and points to other unrealised potentials latent in the videogame form.

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