

# Homesick for the unheimlich: Back to the uncanny future in *Alien: Isolation*

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This is the accepted manuscript of an article published by Intellect Journals in the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* in 2016, available online from :

[https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.8.3.211\\_1](https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.8.3.211_1)

## **Homesick for the unheimlich: Back to the uncanny future in *Alien: Isolation***

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### **Abstract**

In 2014 Sega released Creative Assembly's *Alien: Isolation*, a video game sequel to the 1979 film *Alien*. As an attempt to create both an authentic homage to the *Alien* franchise and a credible successor to Ridley Scott's original film, *Alien: Isolation* was received as both a work of remediated nostalgia and as a deeply uncanny survival horror. This article discusses *Alien: Isolation* framed by theories of the uncanny (the unhomely) and of nostalgia (the homely), with the aim of revealing how the production design of the game reconciled these seemingly contradictory but nonetheless overlapping aesthetic qualities. By drawing on examples from *Alien: Isolation*'s visual and level design, this article discusses how the integration of nostalgic and uncanny qualities could be of value to horror and sci-fi game design, in particular to the development of sequels within existing franchises, and to remediations, remakes and reboots.

### **Keywords**

Nostalgia, uncanny, survival horror, science fiction, production design, level design

Creative Assembly's sci-fi survival horror, *Alien: Isolation* (2014), is predicated on the virtual reconstruction of a familiar yet unsettling cinematic world. In other words, it is a video game that is devoted to the dual aesthetics of nostalgia and the uncanny. Within Game Studies this presents us with a particularly interesting case study, as both nostalgia and the uncanny are important concepts to the analysis of video games. The former is of increasing relevance to the study of retro games, remakes, games history, games culture, and the collection, curation and preservation of games (e.g. Garda 2013; Heineman 2014; Sloan 2015; Suominen 2007; Swalwell 2007; Taylor and Whalen 2008). The latter has been applied broadly to studies of horror in games, in particular to the study of survival horror as a sub-genre (Kirkland 2009b; Reed 2015; Tinwell et al. 2009), to games that feature uncanny representations such as doubles, ghosts and the undead (Hoeger and Huber 2007; Spittle 2011), and to examples of overt simulation and glitches that create unexpected, uncanny experiences (Brown and Marklund 2015; Holmes 2010).

## **Introduction**

From the perspective of Game Design, it is valuable to examine how the design and development process of *Alien: Isolation* accounted for this duality of uncanny and nostalgic aesthetics. There are clear differences between the warm feelings of nostalgia – which we might regard as a bittersweet emotion grounded in fond memories of times-gone-by (Wildschut et al. 2006) – and the feelings of anxiety, dread and panic that are associated with uncanny works. But there are also commonalities that could have repercussions on how we design and encounter game environments. Not only should we acknowledge that nostalgia and the uncanny are dichotomous (in reductive terms, they apply to encounters that we perceive to be either homely or unhomely), but we should also consider that they both imply the existence of spatiotemporal discrepancies. On the one hand, nostalgic reconstructions

play to imperfect memories, selectively presenting us with a remembered (rather than objectively accurate) past. On the other hand, the uncanny is experienced when we perceive subtle inconsistencies that lead us to question the authenticity of our surroundings.

*Alien: Isolation* is a notable example of a sci-fi-themed survival horror video game that aims to provide players with an experience that is both nostalgic and uncanny. However, it can also be identified as part of the wider move to produce contemporary video game sequels, remakes, remasters or reboots of well-established sci-fi and horror franchises. This includes ongoing sequels and remastered releases within the *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) and *Silent Hill* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, 1999) survival horror series, and reboots and remakes of archetypal sci-fi horror video games such as *Doom* (id Software, 2016) and *System Shock* (System Shock Remastered, 2016). How these video games balance an atmosphere of uncanny dread with potential audience nostalgia should be of interest not only to games scholars, but also to Game Developers (particularly to Environment Artists and Level Designers).

The aim of the current article is to analyse the production design of *Alien: Isolation* in order to better understand how the developers created virtual spaces that are simultaneously uncanny and nostalgic. Specifically, the article sets out to address two questions:

1. Is it possible for players to have feelings of nostalgia for an uncanny world, and how can we understand this seemingly contradictory player experience?
2. To what extent does the production design of *Alien: Isolation* demonstrate successful integration of nostalgic and uncanny qualities, and how do these two aesthetic qualities interact?

In the following sections, I present a case study of *Alien: Isolation*'s production design framed by the literature on nostalgia, on the uncanny, and on the *Alien* franchise. I first

discuss the commonalities between the uncanny and of nostalgia, with a particular focus on Vidler's (1992) discussion of the architectural uncanny. I then briefly discuss the history of the *Alien* franchise, the uncanny qualities of *Alien* as a work of sci-fi horror, and how the development, release and reception of *Alien: Isolation* supports the notion that players can experience nostalgia for an uncanny world. Finally, I provide an analysis of the production design of *Alien: Isolation* that considers its spatiotemporal discrepancies and its presentation as a simulation of a period cinematic space.

This article is limited in scope in that it specifically investigates the development of one video game remediation of an existing cult film. However, it is hoped that this discussion of nostalgic and uncanny production design in *Alien: Isolation* will inform the future design and analysis of game environments that are based on familiar spaces from personal, social or cultural memory.

### **Linking the uncanny and nostalgia**

Our experiences of the uncanny and of nostalgia can be related to ideas of familiarity (the unhomely, or the homely) and an orientation towards the past (a past that is either repressed, or remembered fondly). In this section I discuss the underlying literature that links the uncanny and nostalgia, primarily the work of Vidler (1992). The ideas discussed in this section underpin the subsequent analysis of *Alien: Isolation*.

In his attempt to understand the uncanny as an aesthetic emotion, Freud ([1919] 2003) identified the *unheimlich* – translating literally as the unhomely – as an appropriate term. Freud was clear that the unhomely was an experience that sat within the parameters of fear: that it 'belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread' (Freud [1919]

2003: 123). As Vidler comments, Freud thought that the *unheimlich* ‘was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream’ (Vidler 1992: 7). In this sense the uncanny can be related to the idea of alienation and our encounters with alien presences. Freud emphasized, however, that the uncanny does not stem from alien knowledge, but from repressed knowledge: that the uncanny is ‘nothing new or strange, but something which was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed’ ([1919] 2003: 148). In particular, Freud argued that uncanny is experienced whenever we are confronted with unconscious and primitive fears, primarily; fear of castration, confrontation with a double, compulsive repetition and animism.

In video games, it has been noted that the survival horror genre is invested in the presentation of the Freudian uncanny (Kirkland 2009b; Reed 2015; Tinwell et al. 2009). More than this, the ‘homeliness’ of the environments in the survival horror genre has been stressed. For instance, Kirkland (2009a) has pointed out how domestic locations feature prominently as the sets for survival horror games, and that this fits with Freud’s initial definition of the *heimlich* as ‘belonging to the house’. This stems from the necessity for the Freudian uncanny to present us with familiar settings and locations, before subverting this familiarity to create unexpected and eerie representations that are unfamiliar to our senses.

We can therefore assert that a degree of homeliness is an important trait of the survival horror video game, but this homeliness can often be rudimentary (i.e. basic images and representations of the generic home). While the uncanny concerns unexpected confrontations with objects that subvert the familiar, nostalgia can be considered a conscious attachment to a familiar past. Initially identified as a form of chronic homesickness (Davis 1977: 414), nostalgia is better understood today as a longing for the past (Pickering and Keightley 2006:

920). In contrast to history – which could be described as a means of documenting the past with the intention of achieving objectivity – nostalgia, as experienced by individuals and within cultures, is less concerned with accuracy or historical ‘truth’. As Erll (2011: 8) explains, ‘memories are not objective images of past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled’. Starobinski (1966) has postulated that nostalgia arises from what he terms ‘memorative signs’: images that trigger our memories for spaces in time, and which in combination facilitate reflection on a past which can no longer be completely restored. Reflection and restoration are key terms for Boym (2001), who puts forward the idea that nostalgic performance can be categorized as either reflective or reformative. The former emphasizes the act of remembrance – of dwelling on and longing for the past – while the latter involves the active reconstruction of the past. These two forms of nostalgic performance can be related to Baudrillard’s argument that nostalgia is a form of ‘narcissistic regression’ comprised of two parts: a search for origins (reflection) and a search for authentic craftsmanship (reformation) ([1968] 2005: 80).

The interaction between the uncanny, nostalgia, and our interpretation of space has been explored in previous work, including studies that have examined cities (Della Dora 2006) and film locations (Fiddler 2007). In his seminal work on uncanny architecture, Vidler identifies what he terms the ‘traditional links’ between the uncanny and nostalgia (1992: 7), and argues that the former is often seen to incite enhanced feelings of the latter (that our feelings of homesickness grow in response to an intrusion of the unhomely). Importantly for our understanding of video game spaces, Vidler suggests that uncanny works, including architecture, concern the ‘perpetual exchange between the homely and the unhomely, the imperceptible sliding of coziness into dread’ (1992: 57). It is therefore interesting to consider

whether the environment design for all survival horror video games can be considered as interplay between nostalgic and uncanny representations.

For Vidler, our orientation towards and understanding of the past provides one important foundation for our appreciation of the architectural uncanny. We can think of this as a form of temporal uncanny. On the one hand, we can consider how cultural knowledge gives rise to uncanny effects. Vidler is clear that the elements that make up an uncanny space (e.g., the individual features of a Gothic haunted house) are not in themselves uncanny. Identification of the uncanny within architecture is reliant upon our understanding of how cultural knowledge can frame perceptions of reality and authenticity. Vidler advises that architectural attributes will be ‘emblematic of the uncanny, as the cultural signs of estrangement for particular periods’ (1992: 11). On the other hand, we can think of a temporal uncanny that emerges from our more intimate knowledge of unhomey houses. Vidler argues that the home provides ‘an especially favored site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits’ (1992: 17). With this in mind, we can see how any example of Boym’s nostalgic reformation can lead to uncanny representations. The act of rebuilding a remembered space is liable to result in environments that fall short of expectations, that mix (intentionally or unintentionally) historical referents, and that blur the lines between our knowledge of the past and our experience of the present.

In addition to temporal ambiguities, Vidler discusses how the spatial qualities of architecture can infer the uncanny. Rather than there being ‘invisible slippages between a sense of the homely and the unhomey’ (Vidler 1992: 37), the spatial uncanny can instead be identified through the use of qualities such as repetition, disorientation and claustrophobia. Using Piranesi’s drawings as an example, Vidler discusses how architectural design can infer



instability and an ‘endless drive to repeat’ (1992: 38). These spaces can suggest a continual feeling of movement without progress, or an ‘abyssal drive toward nothingness’ (1992: 38). Quoting Charles Nodier, Vidler recognizes the perceived fragility of Piranesi’s environments and the risks that travellers would face if they attempted the climb, only to be presented with an endless repetition of spatial challenges (1992: 39–40). Piranesi’s nightmarish, labyrinth-like spaces play with our perceptions of reality whilst instilling a sense of dread. The resultant disorientation – a feeling not only of being lost, but also of repeatedly returning to the same locations – is described as being particularly uncanny (1992: 43). Using Freud’s own example of being lost in a town, Vidler argues that the act of getting lost within a space that is at first familiar can in turn invoke a sense of paranoia: the uncanny feeling of attracting attention through one’s own repetitive actions. In *Alien: Isolation* and in survival horror more generally (where the objective is to avoid attention and escape) this would therefore appear to be an ideal aesthetic quality. If spaces are designed to at first incite player feelings of nostalgia, then the sense of fear and panic that would result when players become lost (and pursued) within these spaces would arguably be exaggerated.

### **Alien 1979–14: From uncanny horror to nostalgic nightmare**

In *Alien*, Ridley Scott (1979) and Swiss surrealist H. R. Giger crafted one of cinema’s most uncanny universes. Mixing the familiar with the grotesque, the *mise-en-scène* of the film provoked feelings of disgust, fear and alienation in the audience. Hurley argues that *Alien* erodes the boundaries between alien and human, ‘defamiliarizing the human body by eviscerating it’ (1995: 220). These uncanny representations of the inhuman and posthuman are mirrored in *Alien*’s environments, which are reproduced and imitated in *Alien: Isolation*. Giger’s work on the set design incorporated visceral images of death, decay and eroticism.

The incorporation of flesh, bones and sexual imagery into an unsettling and alien environment is the foundation of the film's uncanny aesthetic (Nathan 2011: 89–90). *Alien's* grotesque sets were juxtaposed against the more familiar industrial production design of the starship Nostromo, creating a sense of visual dissonance. At the time of *Alien's* release, sci-fi representations of interstellar space travel typically depicted sleek technologies and advanced civilizations (as in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* [Wise, 1979]) or fantasy cultures in distant galaxies (as in *Star Wars* [Lucas, 1977]). As a horror film that essentially applied a sci-fi styling to a haunted house plot (Scobie 1993), there was a need for *Alien* to eschew the unfamiliar fantasy worlds of popular space operas in order to present a more familiar setting. The gritty, lived-in sets of *Alien* provided a necessary familiarity and realism that helped to exaggerate the sense of shock when primitive, gruesome and violent representations intruded into this space. More than this, though, the industrial realism of *Alien* laid the groundwork for a visual style that would impact on future sci-fi cinema, television and video games.

The long-term critical and cultural impact of *Alien* has been significant (Bould 2003: 92). The film produced three direct sequels – *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986), *Alien 3* (Fincher, 1992) and *Alien Resurrection* (Jeunet, 1997), with a fourth sequel announced in 2015 – generated crossover media and movies with the *Predator* (McTiernan, 1987) franchise, and served as the foundation for *Prometheus* (Scott, 2012) and its upcoming sequel *Alien: Covenant*. There have been numerous video games affiliated with the *Alien* films and storyworld, including *Alien* (Fox Video Games, 1982), *Aliens: The Computer Game* (Activision, 1986), *Alien 3* (Probe Entertainment, 1992) and *Alien versus Predator* (Rebellion, 1999). Beyond spinoff games, however, the film series has had a wider impact on video game design and culture. For example, the *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) series originally took inspiration from *Alien*. The first sequel, *Aliens*, is not only regarded as a milestone in action-sci-fi film-making, but is also noted for introducing concepts that are now common features in action video games. The

use of mobile gun turrets, secondary fire options, motion trackers, and even air vents in games can be traced to Cameron's film (Houghton 2013).

By the time of the release of *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (Gearbox Software, 2013), it was clear that a degree of nostalgic reverence was being placed on the early films in the series. Sega's 2013 game sought to remediate the sets, narrative and performances of *Aliens* in order to capitalize on gamers' feelings of nostalgia towards the film, whilst also integrating the type of first-person action shooter gameplay that the film originally inspired. As it turned out, the sense of nostalgia achieved by the designers was one of the few aspects of the game that critics regarded positively (Cooper 2013; Ogilvie 2013; Owens 2013). One year later, the release of *Alien: Isolation* delivered a more comprehensive and fulfilling adaptation, this time of the original *Alien* film. By defining *Alien: Isolation* as a stealth-based survival horror, the developers Creative Assembly sought to create a natural successor to the original film without falling back on first-person shooter mechanics. The game was met with mixed reviews. On the one hand, critics such as Gies (2014) and McCaffrey (2014) expressed disappointment, albeit framed by high expectations due to the cultural importance of the original film, and hesitations over the extended length of the game. On the other hand, many reviewers identified *Alien: Isolation* as the most satisfying and authentic virtual adaptation of the *Alien* franchise to date. In particular, critics praised the risk that was taken in creating a Triple A first-person game that emphasized problem-solving and survival, and that punished bravado and attempts to fight back (Kelly 2014; Riendeau 2014).

In *Alien-Isolation*, the player takes on the role of Amanda Ripley, daughter of film's protagonist, Ellen Ripley. The game challenges the player to evade a predatory Xenomorph aboard the space station Sevastopol, using gameplay tactics that are based on disorientation and distraction. If the player makes too much noise – e.g. by running or interacting with

objects – the Xenomorph will quickly descend on their location to investigate. This approach to narrative and gameplay design makes a direct connection to the original film, placing a non-combatant into an isolated protagonist role in a survival horror context. It also means that the environment of the game is integral to the player's experience, both functionally (in terms of how the player navigates corridors and hides from adversaries) and aesthetically (in terms of how it achieves a sense of nostalgia for the uncanny spaces of the original film).

Like *Aliens: Colonial Marines* before it, *Alien: Isolation* has been discussed in terms of its nostalgic handling of the *Alien* storyworld, including by the game's developers. In an interview with Develop, creative lead Alistair Hope discussed not only how personal fandom underpinned the original pitch and subsequent development process, but also how the ethos of Creative Assembly ensured that *Alien: Isolation* remained faithful to the world of the film. In his words, the initial concept was to move away from *Aliens* (the source inspiration for the majority of *Alien* games) in order to take gamers 'back to that feeling of being on the Nostromo, being hunted by just one Alien' (Chapple 2015: 41). To achieve this nostalgic transportation, Creative Assembly identified the production design as one of the core elements that needed to be perfected. On the film's production design, Hope stated that 'it feels really unique. It's this fantastic snapshot of the '70s and of the imagined future of that decade'. Gaining access to 20th Century Fox archives clearly satisfied the nostalgic yearning of the development team, but more than this it also enabled Creative Assembly to craft an accurate representation of *Alien*'s lo-fi aesthetic. With a heritage of making historical strategy games, Hope stressed the importance of authenticity to the studio. This is something that UI Lead Jon McKellan touched on in an interview with GameSpot (CBS Interactive Inc. 2014), where he stated that the work of *Alien* concept artist Rob Cobb was closely studied by the team. By scrutinizing Cobb's process, the team hoped that they could greatly expand on the *Alien* storyworld while remaining faithful to the source material. In the same interview, Art

Lead Jude Bond stated that imposing the following production design rule further safeguarded authenticity: the team should not build any virtual assets that could not have been built for the film set in 1979.

It is therefore clear that the environments of *Alien: Isolation* are a product of a creative process driven by both nostalgia and rigorous historical analysis, with a desire to accurately imitate the uncanny environments and events of the original cult film. The nostalgia for *Alien* that is expressed in *Alien: Isolation* appears grounded in fandom (both developer and player) and a longing to revisit the sets of the original film. This isn't nostalgia for a cinematic space that is permanently lost (as the film can be watched again any time), but fan nostalgia for the memory of watching the film: of witnessing the Xenomorph for the first time, of watching and re-watching the film on VHS, and of consuming sequels and related media and merchandise. *Alien: Isolation* recognizes this nostalgia, and targets fans' desire to return to the familiar world of the original film. Indeed, *Alien: Isolation* would arguably lose much of its appeal if it were a survival horror game set within an entirely unfamiliar world.

We can understand fan nostalgia for the uncanny world of *Alien* in two ways. First, *Alien: Isolation* facilitates nostalgia for the pleasurable horror of the original film, acknowledging that the uncanny in works of horror can generate diverse pleasures and appeal for horror fans (Tudor 1997). In this sense, it is indeed possible to feel a sense of nostalgia (a longing for a perceived better past, or in this case a perceived genre exemplar) for something inherently uncanny (a sense of dread and fear that, while repulsive, can be interpreted as pleasurable to horror audiences). Second, the Freudian uncanny encompasses a sense of pleasure that can be derived from compulsive repetition. As Brown and Marklund have commented (2015), 'anything which reminds us of this inner compulsion to repeat despite repulsion is uncanny'. Thus, repetition can be considered a unifying factor between nostalgia (a desire to repeat a

treasured past) and the uncanny (which is experienced through repetition of the repulsive). In horror video games that involve a form of repetition of the past (as remake, reboot, remediation, or simply through reference to shared concepts of childhood homes and past times), we could therefore propose that nostalgia and the uncanny are inherently linked to the player experience.

### ***Alien: Isolation* and the spatiotemporal uncanny**

In the following sections of the article, I present a case study analysis of *Alien: Isolation* framed by the above discussion of nostalgia, the uncanny, and the development of the *Alien* franchise. First, I want to consider how *Alien: Isolation* presents us with a virtual world that is spatiotemporally dislocated in a manner that is not only conducive to fan nostalgia, but that also gives rise to new uncanny experiences that are distinct from the grotesque uncanny aesthetics of the original film.

Upon entering the world of *Alien: Isolation* it quickly becomes apparent that the game's sets are heavily informed not only by the aesthetics of *Alien*, but also by the technologies and tastes of the 1970s. In the opening sequence we are introduced to Amanda Ripley in a third-person view. She is carrying out welding work in a dark and industrial environment filled with heavy machinery, chains and metal grates. This is a mechanical environment that appears distinctly primitive by today's technological standards, never mind our current expectations of future technologies. The overall environment is neutrally coloured, comprising mainly shades of grey with touches of beige and orange-brown. Cushioned patterning on the walls is reminiscent of the recurring, geometric patterns popular in kitsch 1970s graphic design and textiles. Even food dispensers – plastic, translucent tubes containing generic cereals – appear distinctly simplistic and of their time.

When we gain control of Amanda on board the starship *Torrens* we are presented with an environment immersed in an atmosphere of 1970s sci-fi. The white, beige and orange colour choices, the scooped brown leather chairs, and even the design of lockers, wall panels and light fittings make a blatant connection to the period. While all of this is in keeping with the aesthetic of the film, the nostalgic act of restoring the period production design of *Alien* has resulted in virtual environments that are saturated by a conscious exposition of 1970s taste. It can feel distinctly uncanny to be immersed in a reproduction of a familiar time period, particularly when this is at odds with the timeframe of the game. This is a game set in our future, but as a product released in 2014 it is now clearly an alternative future: a future where past tastes and technologies are maintained to ensure continuity with a 1979 film. In short, this is no longer a future that we can accept as plausible: the temporal disconnect creates an uncanny perceptual gap that transforms the conceivable sci-fi vision of the future in 1979's *Alien* into an inconceivable alternative future for contemporary players.

When it comes to the temporal uncanny in *Alien: Isolation*, perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the game's production is the design of computer and electronic interfaces (see Figure 1). Over the course of the game, players interact with and control a number of electronic devices. Some of these devices make direct connections to the film series, establishing a nostalgic link to the *Alien* storyworld (such as the motion tracker of *Aliens*, shown in the bottom right screenshot of Figure 1). More generally, however, these devices make reference to the household computer technologies of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Recall that Creative Assembly constrained their production design by only permitting the inclusion of objects that could have been built for the original film set. In consequence, players encounter representations of computer technologies that stimulate their own memories of the early years of home computing. Those players who are too young to recall first-hand the electronics of the period will nevertheless recognize their features through

consumption of period film and television, through handling of electronics owned by older family members, or even through their visits to design and technology museums.



**Figure 1:** Screenshots captured from *Alien: Isolation* (various missions).

These devices arguably present the most complete unification of nostalgia and the uncanny within *Alien: Isolation*'s prop design. The physicality of devices – the use of telephones, keys and dials – is directly at odds with current technological trends towards touch, gesture, motion and voice control. Low resolution, limited-colour screens and electronic loading sounds satisfy player nostalgia not only for the lo-fi aesthetic of *Alien* but also for the early days of home computing. However, while these devices serve as memorative signs for the



emergence of personal computers, their presentation out of time is unnervingly uncanny. After all, the player is trapped in deep space, being hunted by one of the deadliest creatures to be depicted in cinema. Trusting corded telephones and the equivalent of ZX Spectrums to protect us from both the abyss of space and horror of the Xenomorph provides the perfect fusion of technological nostalgia and uncanny fear.

The constant threat of the Xenomorph could also be interpreted as a means of temporal disruption. First-person narrative-driven games such as *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015) provide players with ample time to explore their nostalgic sets. In these video games, player nostalgia for past times is embraced. *Alien: Isolation*'s sets are similarly decorated with the artefacts of nostalgia, in particular references to *Alien* sets and props. However, there is scarce time to indulge in nostalgic reflection in *Alien: Isolation*. The Xenomorph lurks around nearly every corner, and is liable to show up whenever the player pauses for too long. The effect is a conflict between nostalgic desire and uncanny dread. In a sense *Alien: Isolation*'s environments are like Vidler's unhomely homes: this is a cinematic home recreated for fans to explore, but it is not one that fans can explore in comfort or security. The authenticity of the game's environments invites players to examine and carefully scrutinize a detailed virtual reconstruction of a fondly remembered cinematic space. This makes the threat of the Xenomorph all the more personal, and thus all the more horrifying. But the Xenomorph can also be seen to reflect the painful reality of nostalgia: that it is possible to long for the past, but dangerous to believe that we can fully return there.

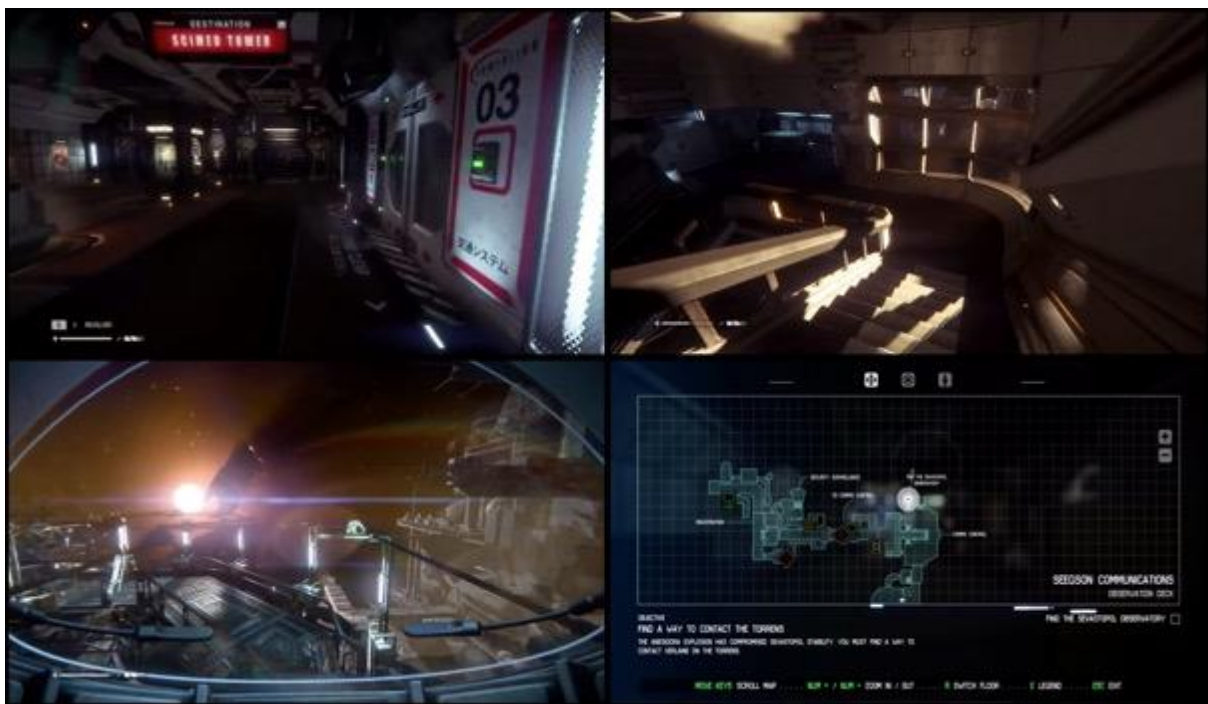
While the temporal discrepancies of *Alien: Isolation*'s production design serve to disorient the player in time, spatial disorientation is integral to both level design and the overall gameplay experience. *Alien: Isolation*'s levels are designed to facilitate the cyclic player

experience of dread, fear, panic and calm. This repeated emotional loop is supported and sustained by spatial disorientation. In essence, *Alien: Isolation* is aesthetically and functionally reliant on experiences of the uncanny that are seeded by perceived spatial discrepancies. The spatial uncanny can be identified in *Alien*, but this particular form of the uncanny is far more prominent and effective when adapted to a first-person survival horror video game.

Sevastopol station is a vast labyrinth of corridors, vents, rooms, hubs and rail links. The majority of the game's missions take place on board Sevastopol, but the station is not neatly broken down into self-contained environments. While the game narrative and mission order is linear, the station is more open for exploration and the player will frequently return to areas visited in earlier missions. Backtracking leads to the unlocking of previously inaccessible areas, typically by using tools such as the Plasma Torch (and upgrades such as the Ion Torch) that the player collects later on in the game. As the player completes missions more of the station becomes unlocked, allowing them to move freely around Sevastopol using the transit system (shown in the top left screenshot of Figure 2). Map updates can be collected, providing the player with a detailed representation of the overall station (a section of which is also shown in Figure 2). However, the complexity and looping nature of Sevastopol results in a map that merely reflects the maze-like qualities of the station. Getting lost in the Sevastopol labyrinth is fundamental to one of the game's most effective aesthetic qualities: the fear of being detected. Just as Freud described the uncanny sense of drawing attention to oneself by continually returning to the same places, so too does the player fear that their spatial disorientation will attract the Xenomorph.

The effect of uncanny spatial disorientation in *Alien: Isolation* echoes the effect that Piranesi's drawings had on Vidler. In addition to the feeling of getting lost, a sense of

movement without progress is experienced when playing *Alien: Isolation*, what I earlier identified as Vidler’s ‘abyssal drive toward nothingness’ (1992: 38). The recurring use of the same materials, fittings and fixtures makes Sevastopol a repetitive space. This is logical in the game’s narrative, given that the station would presumably have been built in a modular fashion (and in Game Development, modular design is equally desirable), but the repetition nevertheless reinforces the idea that the player is locked into a circular movement around a seemingly inescapable tomb.



**Figure 2:** Screenshots captured from *Alien: Isolation* (various missions).

Sevastopol has several levels, meaning that the player must take into account height (as well as width and depth) when trying to navigate from area to area. This incessant movement up and down the station – frequently to repetitive spaces – further enhances the player’s sense of dread. On the occasions when the Xenomorph chooses to reveal itself, dread can be replaced with panic as the player is forced into deciding not only which corridor to head down, but also whether they should climb or descend Sevastopol (one of the station’s stairwells is

shown in the top right screenshot of Figure 2). For most of *Alien: Isolation*'s approximate fifteen hours of gameplay, players will find themselves confounded by spatial disorientation, often heightened by the need to avoid or hide from adversaries. Given the criticism of the game's length, it is interesting to consider whether the extended duration of *Alien: Isolation* might actually be necessary to achieving the effect of a virtual Piranesi drawing.

Continuing the allegory of a Piranesi drawing, we can read that deep space in *Alien: Isolation* serves as the abyss beyond the Piranesian construct. In the later missions of the game, players are equipped with a suffocating space suit and are thrust outside of Sevastopol (see the bottom left screenshot of Figure 2). It is at these points that players will experience the strongest sense of spatial disorientation. The space suit can be considered a sci-fi convention that draws clear attention to the alienation of outer space. Not only is the player's vision obscured by their helmet, but also their movement is severely constrained, deepening the sense of claustrophobia. This is juxtaposed with the agoraphobia felt when confronted with the vast and towering appearance of Sevastopol as it rotates through space. The complex exterior of the station reflects the labyrinth contained within. Outside, when faced with the horrifying abyss of space, a strange desire to return to the Xenomorph's maze emerges. The never-ending maze is more appealing than the infinite void.

From the above examples, we can summarise that the production design of *Alien: Isolation* is built upon a foundation of spatial and temporal discrepancies that integrate and contrast player nostalgia and the uncanny. References to a period film highlight a temporal gap that services the nostalgic longing of fans, but that subsequently generates discrepancies and inconsistencies that create an unsettled, uncanny effect. We can also reflect that uncanny representations are typically preceded by a feeling of homeliness (Kirkland 2009a), and that

stronger feelings of nostalgia can therefore serve to heighten the player's experience of the uncanny.

The example of *Alien: Isolation*'s temporal uncanny can be extended to consideration of horror game design more broadly. For example, while not strictly a horror game, *Gone Home* successfully contrasts a paranormal uncanny aesthetic with a nostalgic, mid-1990s US production design. The initial nostalgia could be intimate – as with a literal childhood home in *Gone Home* – or cultural – as with the remediated sets from a cult franchise in *Alien: Isolation*. On one level this nostalgia can create an aesthetic contrast that helps to exaggerate the uncanny. On a deeper level, as with the example of *Alien: Isolation* and its peculiar use of outmoded technologies, temporal discrepancies can create secondary unsettling effects. Meanwhile, the spatial design of *Alien: Isolation* clearly satisfies fan desires for an authentic recreation and presentation of a remembered space. However, it is the uncanny qualities that result from spatial disorientation and repetition that come to dominate the player experience. In the video game form, we find that the spatial uncanny of *Alien: Isolation* is more immediate and effective than it is in *Alien*, which presents similar labyrinths, repeating sets, and contrasts between enclosed and wide-open spaces. The potential for the survival horror to maximize player feelings of paranoia and dread through a spatial design that enforces panicked backtracking and seemingly endless movement without progress is exemplified by *Alien: Isolation*.

### ***Alien: simulation***

While the above analysis reveals how the balancing of nostalgic and uncanny aesthetics as observed in *Alien: Isolation* can be linked to survival horror more generally, it is also important that we consider that this is a loving and rigorous remediation of an existing, period

work. The hyperreality of *Alien: Isolation* is not unique in this sense, and we could relate the simulation of *Alien* in *Alien: Isolation* to other games that seek to remake, reboot or otherwise extend an existing work. In this final section I aim to explore how this simulation generates a virtual world that is not only nostalgic, but also uncanny.

As discussed earlier, close study of Cobb's original concept art afforded the developer some freedom to extend the world of *Alien* in line with an established, period style. The result is an expansive game environment that is primarily built around one central reference: the Nostromo starship of *Alien*. Sevastopol is a nostalgic restoration of the Nostromo so accurate that even fine details such as the design of files and folders scattered on desks serve as memorative signs for *Alien*. The corridors, vents and rooms of Sevastopol are strangely reminiscent of the Nostromo, and first-person representation within this space can feel cathartic for fans of the series. However, the saturation and nature of references can lead to ambiguities that ultimately result in Vidler's 'slippage between waking and dreaming' (1992: 11).

In some instances, these ambiguities emerge when the game moves beyond a historical representation of *Alien* towards a broader, nostalgic pastiche of the film series. In the top row of Figure 3 we see two such examples of this in the form of production design Easter Eggs. First, the inclusion of James Cameron (director of *Aliens*) as a photograph in a magazine, and second, a paper unicorn that serves as a reference to director Ridley Scott's classic sci-fi film, *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982). These references are evidently placed for the fans, but their presence brings into question the authenticity of *Alien: Isolation* within the *Alien* storyworld. Fittingly, the unicorn serves the same purpose in *Alien: Isolation* as it does in *Blade Runner*. In both instances the unicorn asks us to question what is and is not real. In *Alien: Isolation*,

the unicorn indicates that Sevastopol is a hyperreality: a simulation of fan (both players' and developers') memories of *Alien*, rather than a direct video game sequel to the original film.



**Figure 3:** Screenshots captured from *Alien: Isolation* (various missions).

Arguably, the hyperreality of *Alien: Isolation* is all the more evident when direct references to *Alien* are presented. In the bottom row of Figure 3 we see two examples of *Alien* references that can have an unsettling effect. In the bottom left screenshot we see the iconic drinking bird that famously appeared in *Alien*. In the bottom right screenshot, we see Sevastopol's computer, Apollo, which is in effect a recreation of the Nostromo's central computer, MUTHUR. While the drinking bird was subtly included in *Alien 3* as a nod to the first film, the bird features more prominently within *Alien: Isolation*'s production design. On the one hand, the inclusion of the bird helps to ground the game in the story world of the film and serves as a nostalgic wink to the fans. On the other hand, the obvious staging and the repetition of the bird can feel like a more forceful and knowing reference, adding to the sense that this is a simulation of a culturally remembered space. Similarly, the encounter with Apollo can feel

both nostalgic and unsettling. As one of the most memorable locations aboard the *Nostromo*, few scenes in *Alien: Isolation* transport the player into the film as successfully as the interaction with Apollo. The appeal of this small environment is so strong that an entire mission (Mission 23 – Get to Apollo Core) is dedicated to the build-up. From the start of the mission, astute fans will recognize that they are on their way to a recreation of the MU-TH-UR set. In consequence the entire mission can feel like an extended queue at a virtual theme park, where the payoff is a MU-TH-UR simulator ride. The overall experience is one of uncanny simulation, both in terms of the queue-like mission and the virtual set that is simultaneously MU-TH-UR from *Alien* and Apollo in the narrative of *Alien: Isolation*.

The idea of *Alien: Isolation* as an *Alien* simulator is perhaps most strongly felt in Mission 9 – Beacon. While most of the game's environments can be regarded as nostalgic tributes to the *Nostromo*, this mission turns its attention to the other major set from *Alien*: the derelict ship where the crew make their gruesome first contact with the Xenomorph species. This is the environment from the original film that is the most visually unsettling. The derelict itself is an uncanny, womb-like structure. The *Nostromo* crew enter through a ribbed passageway, are confronted with the corpse of the Space Jockey, and ultimately encounter the alien eggs and face huggers, one of which impregnates crewmember Kane.

Mission 9 is the only instance where a set from *Alien* is directly recreated in the game (see Figure 4). The manner in which the player visits this set is particularly interesting, as it occurs not only through flashback but also through the eyes of another character (salvage vessel captain Henry Marlow). We can read from this that the mission itself is, in effect, a memory. In a game that purposefully targets fan memories of the film, it is noteworthy that the only *Alien* set to be rebuilt for *Alien: Isolation* is encountered through a virtual act of remembrance. Here we see Boym's reflective nostalgia at work. By temporarily switching to



take control of Marlow rather than Ripley, this reads as a pause for reflection that is shared by both the developers and the players, united in their nostalgia for and memory of the most iconic *Alien* set.

As shown in Figure 4, Marlow's encounter with the derelict is an almost exact repetition of what is depicted in the film. The combination of reflection and repetition supports a dual aesthetic of nostalgia and the uncanny in this mission. This is perhaps *Alien*'s most familiar environment, wherein lies the nostalgia. But while this set was astonishingly uncanny when it first appeared on film, in *Alien: Isolation* the uncanny nature of the derelict stems more from our unfamiliar perspective. We have observed on film what happened to Kane and the crew of the *Nostromo* when they explored the derelict, but in taking control of Marlow we experience the horror from a first-person view. Furthermore, we are compelled to explore the ship, examine the Space Jockey, and descend towards the alien nest. We can neither refuse to enter the derelict nor turn back, unless we simply choose to end the game at this point. We might close our eyes or look away when watching the scene in the film, but *Alien: Isolation* forces us into a performance that is simultaneously nostalgic and uncanny.



**Figure 4:** Screenshots captured from *Alien: Isolation* (Mission 9: Beacon).

As a simulation, then, *Alien: Isolation* presents a second level of interaction between nostalgic and uncanny aesthetics that we can consider more broadly for video game design. This is perhaps of most immediate relevance to games that fall within the horror and sci-fi genres, given the desire to produce uncanny effects within these games. But there is also a need to consider the fragility of these uncanny effects: drawing player attention too closely to the active simulation of an existing work risks disrupting suspension of disbelief. *Alien: Isolation* provides an informative example of how production and gameplay design can mitigate the risks of an overly uncanny simulation. It primarily achieves this by identifying the most iconic events, sets and props from the original and related works, and then designing spaces and levels that facilitate player remembrance from an unfamiliar but nostalgically satisfying perspective. In short, it seeks to place the player directly into roles and scenarios that they are familiar with, but have never directly experienced. More broadly, an Easter Egg style approach to nostalgic referencing can be used to create a hyperreal simulation that

rewards fan curiosity, knowledge and exploration. These nods to fans can momentarily suspend disbelief and draw attention to the artifice of the game, which we can link to Vidler's slippage between waking and dream. But over saturation and blatant placement of these references in the environment can terminally disrupt player acceptance of the game world.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to examine the intersection between the nostalgic and the uncanny in the production design of *Alien: Isolation*, with a view towards understanding how these related aesthetic qualities can be successfully deployed and experienced within game worlds. In the above sections I have presented a close reading of this game that has revealed a number of situations in which the player experience of nostalgia and the uncanny can be observed, including examples of where these qualities interact.

As a case study of one video game, it is clear that many of these examples will be specific curiosities of *Alien: Isolation*. However, I have also sought to stress the value of production and level design that is sensitive to player nostalgia and the generation of uncanny effects. By drawing primarily on the work of Vidler – which is particularly attuned to the design of uncanny environments – this article offers a tentative conceptual framework for both the analysis and design of game worlds that are invested in both the presentation of familiar spaces (from personal or cultural memory) and in the facilitation of uncanny player experiences.

This is generally applicable to the horror genre of games, where the desire to create effective uncanny scenarios can be supported by the presentation of familiar settings. As a warm and deeply emotive form of familiarity, the creation of spaces that evoke different forms of

nostalgia can provide a strong basis for uncanny slippages. Players can be provoked to reflect on memories (whether they be personal, as in images of the childhood home, or cultural, as in the authentic reconstruction of a cinematic space) through encounters with familiar environments, which can subsequently shift into unfamiliar and unsettling territory. This establishment of a player reflection on a conceptual ‘home’ within a horror setting relates to Vidler’s linkage of nostalgia to the uncanny, and the ‘perpetual exchange between the homely and the unhomely, the imperceptible sliding of coziness into dread’ (1992: 57). While it is difficult to imagine any coziness in *Alien: Isolation*, the above discussion has shown how strong feelings of player nostalgia can be associated with many of the sets and scenarios of the game, and that this nostalgia feeds into uncanny experiences that are distinct from the horror depicted on-screen and unique to the video game form.

More specifically, we can also consider the value of the above discussion to the design and study of video games that fit the mould of franchise continuation, remediation, remake, remaster, or reboot. In all of these instances, we can infer that a video game would be starting from a position of, at the very least, audience familiarity with the existing or source work. However, it is likely that these video games would have some form of established fan base, with a deeper familiarity and knowledge of the source material or franchise. Where the source material has heritage – as with *Alien: Isolation* and other games based on long-running film, television, or comic series, but also with well-established video game series such as *Silent Hill* or *Resident Evil* – we can extend this to consider that the new video game would invoke some degree of fan nostalgia. As has been shown with this case study, the nostalgia that can be exhibited by a video game sequel to a period work can lead to spatiotemporal and hyperreal uncanny effects. Key examples from this analysis include the temporal disorientation of outmoded technology (a particular issue that will be faced by sci-fi games that seek to utilize period visions of the future for nostalgic purposes and/or continuity), the

recreation of familiar sets viewed from new and unsettling perspectives, and the presentation of references that acknowledge past works but threaten player suspension of disbelief.

From the outset, it was clear that *Alien: Isolation* was a prime example of a game that would be invested in both fan nostalgia and uncanny representations. As creative lead Alistair Hope summarises, ‘this is a game set in the future, but baked in the past. It is a place that we can really relate to, but it’s also a world where technology won’t save you’ (CBS Interactive Inc. 2014). This statement makes plain the developer’s intended dichotomy of nostalgia and the uncanny in *Alien: Isolation*. On closer examination, this article has shown that these are not distinct categories, but are instead qualities that are best considered opposite ends of a continuum from homeliness to unhomeliness, from familiar to unfamiliar, and from fondness to dread. Through the use of spatiotemporal disorientation and a blurring of the lines between the real and unreal, the production and level design of *Alien: Isolation* facilitates player experiences that exist along this continuum. Future design and research work could consider how this continuum would be applicable to the survival horror genre generally, and also the development of remediations, remakes and reboots that are concerned with revisiting treasured worlds.

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