Should the Monster Play Fair?: Reception of AI in Alien: Isolation

Jaroslav Švelch
University of Bergen
Fosswinckelsgate 6
Bergen
+420773988425
jaroslav@svelch.com

Keywords
AI, artificial intelligence, game reception, ludic sublime, hermeneutics, discussion forum, theorycraft, theorycrafting, qualitative research

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although AI (artificial intelligence) is one of the most important avenues of game technology research (Martin 2018; Yannakakis and Togelius 2018), it has not attracted much attention in the humanities and social scientific branches of game studies, save for a few exceptions (Fizek 2018; Mateas 2003). Drawing from the material gathered for an ongoing research on video game monsters (Švelch 2018), I will address this gap by analyzing the example of Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014). Alien: Isolation was promoted as a stealth game with one major enemy – an indestructible, AI-driven Alien inspired by the one in the 1979 Ridley Scott film. This monster scours the abandoned space station and is a near-constant threat to the player character, Amanda Ripley. It was advertised as an intelligent, fierce, and unpredictable enemy that would create terror and anxiety without pre-scripted “jump scares”. As it was revealed by the developers two years after the game’s release (in the summer of 2016), the game’s relatively sophisticated AI consists of two modules. The micro-level module drives the creature’s behavior based on its sensory reception, and switches between behaviors based on the perceived situation. These behaviors are pre-defined but gradually unlocked in the course of the game to create the illusion that the Alien is learning. The Alien will, for example, start peeking into lockers if the player repeatedly uses these as hiding spots. The second, macro-level module (also called Director) monitors the player’s situation and maintains gameplay tension. When the tension is evaluated as low, the Director sends the Alien towards the player. As the AI consultant Tommy Thompson has put it, the Alien is thus endowed with “two brains, one that always knows where you are and gives hints to the second that controls the body.” (Thompson 2017)

However, this information was not available to players at the time of the game’s release. As Arsenault and Perron have outlined in their “magic cycle” model of gameplay, players gain understanding of the game’s underlying systems as they progress in the game, but their mental model of those systems does not fully correspond to systems’ software implementation (Arsenault and Perron 2009). Nevertheless, players come up with theories and hypotheses, which they share, discuss, and evaluate. This game offers a particularly interesting case study of reception of game AI, because the AI is fairly complex, and because the Alien creature is under significant scrutiny from the players.

The research question driving this paper is: How is the Alien AI understood and evaluated by the players? I am conducting a qualitative analysis of the game’s reception, drawing primarily from discussion forum data from the period before the
disclosure of AI routines. I am looking at three sites of online discussion dedicated to *Alien: Isolation*: (1) the game’s forum on Steam (the forum with the largest number of searchable contributions on the game), (2) the *Alien: Isolation* forum at AVPGalaxy (a website for the fans of the Alien and Predator franchises), and (3) a massive thread at the RPGCodex forum, which hosted an in-depth discussion about the game’s AI, referenced at the other forums. I have collected around 120 threads discussing the Alien AI. I am excerpting these threads and will code and analyze the excerpts using the methods of thematic analysis (Ayres 2008) and analytic induction (Preissle 2008).

A preliminary analysis shows that the game’s AI was a subject of heated debates. Players soon discovered that the Alien seemed to “know” the location of the player character and tended to wander around her. At least two major player theories emerged to explain how this was done: the *tether* theory, which postulated that the Alien was connected to Ripley with an imaginary tether, and the *teleport* theory, according to which the Alien periodically teleported to her location. We now know that neither of these theories is correct. However, their effects were criticized as “unfair” to the player. The discussions of fairness broke the players into roughly two camps. The first group, which could be called “simulationists,” argue that the Alien should be an autonomous entity that is continuously simulated and that can be always accounted for. Any teleporting and tethering is therefore “unfair.” They generally welcome the Alien’s unscripted nature, but expect the monster to behave consistently, so that they can develop efficient strategies to overcome the game’s challenges. In this regard, they are similar to *theorycrafters*, who aim to optimize their play (Paul 2011). The second group, “experientalists”, assign primary importance to the player experience. They dismiss the question of unfairness, arguing that the main character (as well as her mother Ellen Ripley in the 1979 film) is not experiencing a situation that is “fair” or “comfortable”. They see the Alien as a “sublime” monster (Asma 2012, Švelch 2018) that is a part of the game’s “ludic sublime” (Vella 2015), and whose behavior should not be fully dissected. One player, for example, notes that the Alien’s mind is an “unknowable thing with its own motives, alien logic, and quirks.”

These findings highlight an important paradox surrounding AI in games. On the one hand, players welcome a degree of unpredictability and variation. On the other hand, many expect to be able to completely account for and understand the behavior of enemies and non-player characters – even if they are science-fiction monsters.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


