"GAME OVER, MAN. GAME OVER": UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITATIONS OF EGO-CENTRIC VIDEOGAME DESIGN AND ANALYSIS THROUGH ADAPTATIONS OF *ALIEN*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Ridley Scott's 1977 film *Alien* and James Cameron's 1986 sequel *Aliens* have had a massive and lingering impact on the development of 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, ranging from Midway's *Xenophobe* (1980) to the ill-fated *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (Gearbox 2013). Official adaptations or extensions of the film franchise include beat-em-ups, arcade shooters, and first-person titles. Action genres dominate the videogame reception of the film series.

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, 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), videogames have drawn a very selective set of inspirations from the *Alien* series. Videogames are bedazzled by the colonial marines and their impressive military hardware, yet remain largely disinterested in the gender politics or critiques of technological corporate culture that film theorists have long noted as being so prevalent to the films (Creed, 1986).

That videogames borrow so selectively and narrowly from *Alien* is particularly puzzling when one considers that the protagonist of the films is, after all, not a macho space marine but the engineer Ellen Ripley. Sigourney Weaver's performances are integral to the popular reception of the films, and it is remarkable that such a renowned character so

often cedes her central role to a parade of forgettable (and typically male) space marines in videogame adaptations. In this article we ask why this is the case, and in doing so interrogate the normatively masculinist tropes and ludic structures of blockbuster videogames as a form of what Weise and Jenkins identify as 'ego-centric' design that focuses on player empowerment. This dynamic commonly narrows the thematic and critical scope of videogames to physical prowess and spatial mastery. Videogame adaptations of the *Alien* franchise provide a fruitful case study through the way they historically sideline the strong thematic resonances (and female characters) of the films in favor of gung-ho marines and powerful weaponry.

However, it is the exception to the rule found in the recent *Alien: Isolation* that proves the most enticing case study. *Alien: Isolation* powerfully rejects paradigms that see players as exceptional and privileged components of the game system, instead placing them at the whim of both game and alien in a literal convergence of the alien creature's mix of organic and mechanical-metallic motifs. Just as *Alien* presents a "pessimistic vision of humanity dominated by a technological empire" (Dinello 2013, 193), in this article we demonstrate how *Alien: Isolation* places players in an environment saturated with this pessimism to interrogate the normative masculinity and pervasive techno-fetishism of blockbuster videogames that hinder the critical and thematic power of so many other adaptations of the franchise, as well as film-to-videogame adaptations more broadly.

Drawing on theoretical concepts from film and game studies, the paper will analyze how *Alien: Isolation* revivifies critical tropes from the film series not only at the levels of plot, characterization and art, but also through game, A.I. and level design. Most crucially, *Isolation* also revives these tropes through its situating of the player in the game system as other than the most privileged agent. Where most *Alien* videogame adaptations, such as the critical and commercial failure of *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (Gearbox 2013) emphasize the ego-centric design and player-empowered focus of the first-person shooter, *Isolation* emphasizes players' *lack* of power and the techno-alien creature's relative indomitable invincibility. In this paper, *Alien: Isolation* will serve as an exemplary case for theorizing the remediation of the *Alien* series from film to game and, further, as a significant intervention into the ego-centric conventions of the blockbuster videogame space.

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