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MOTHER KNOWS BEST

In space, only the GM can hear you scream

Words by **Christopher John Eggett** | Images courtesy of **Free League**

The other members of the crew had descended into the dark and cavernous belly of the ship, hoping to find the captain of our original vessel. Here, in the medical bay, something very unfriendly has emerged from an NPC. Recklessly, a member of the crew attempted to kick it hard. This was the same character who had injected herself with what she assumed would be some kind of inoculation. She managed to snatch it from the hands of the scientist, but injected it into the wrong part of her body. Its effectiveness will be unknown without ocular application. In the end, this wouldn't matter. The company man with a gun standing behind her fancied taking a shot at the newly emerged horror. He's not got a great aim. He misses it, and in the process, shoots her in the back.

This isn't the way I expected the first character to die in my playthrough of *Alien RPG*'s standalone cinematic scenario, *Chariot of the Gods*, but it speaks to the breadth and depth of death options in the new game from Free League Publishing. The Swedish developers of *Mutant: Year Zero* and *Tales from the Loop* have taken on the tense space horror of the *Alien* franchise and found so many wonderful ways for us to die on the outer edges of the cosmos. I spoke to Tomas Härenstam, the co-founder and CEO of Free League, who directed and designed the rules for *Alien RPG*, about how the publisher made the vast and threatening universe of Alien into a place where people would want to have adventures.

"Really, what we wanted to do with this RPG is two things. First off, to give a really cinematic experience of playing in an RPG of an *Alien* movie. To get that sense of space horror – mainly from the first *Alien* movie – in the scenarios and also in the mechanics. And the second objective of the game is to give players a chance to really dive into the Alien universe," says Härenstam, alluding to the two game modes which come packed in with the roleplaying game. The latter is the traditional campaign mode of the game, designed for longer play, and giving players the chance to get into the nitty-gritty of life out in the frontiers. The first is the brutal, quick, and deadly cinematic mode. These are 'one-shot' scenarios which are designed to be played out over a few sessions at most, and contain dramatic elements that wouldn't work in the longer campaign mode, like player death.

APPROACHING HORROR

Once you're over the initial excitement of the very idea of an Alien roleplaying game at all, there comes the question of how it could be implemented. It's almost an impossible brief – creating a sci-fi horror scenario where the most famous antagonist in the universe is an unstoppable killing machine, a pure expression of primal terror. What attracts so many to the *Alien* films, especially the first, is the sense of the sublime in the horrors that are being faced. The feeling of godless insignificance of human actions, and existence, when faced with something that represents a fundamental and awesome threat. While in many RPGs there is conflict, there's often a good chance of the protagonists surviving – the 'overcoming the monster' narrative is so well trod that we now often expect to overcome the monster. Here we're not often afforded quite so much leeway. And with multiple storytellers, how can a game approach this kind of horror collaboratively?

"That was the big question," says Härenstam, "Horror in RPGs is always quite tricky because horror is such a visceral emotion. In an RPG that can be hard to get across. And before you can get the actual horror, you have the tension building." Free League approached this problem by including swathes of accessible direction within the book, as well as baking in the required 'stages of horror' for effective terror into the mechanics of the game. The guidance for the 'Games Mother' (a very good, if obvious pun on the name given to the central onboard computers of many ships) includes developing a sense of tension. It encourages those running the game to take time building up the threat of the things in the shadows. The environmental details are also all there to offer the haunted house sense creaking and groaning hallways. Debris strewn medical rooms, and personal quarters all but destroyed in a long-forgotten incident. ▶

STAGE IV:
SCOUT

STAGE V:
SOLDIER

STAGE VI:
QUEEN
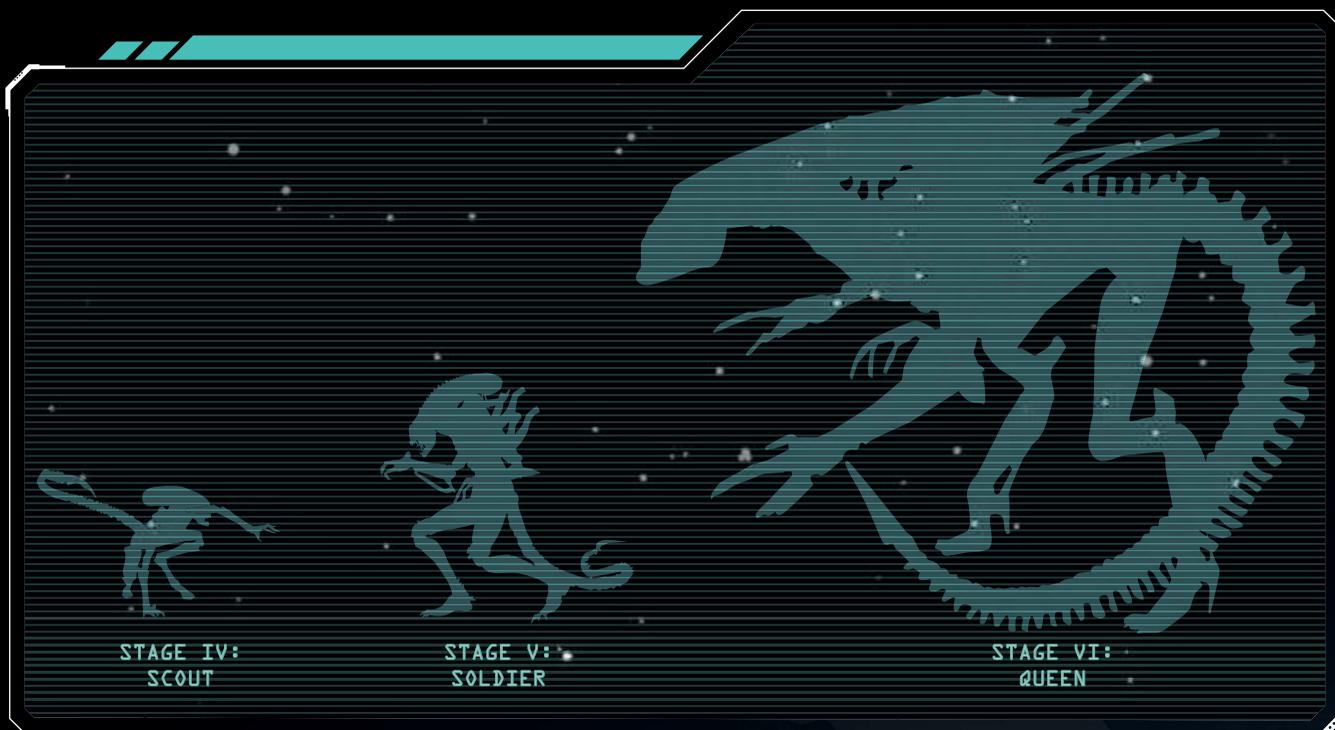
And in that, it's also about a sensory experience. The world of *Alien RPG* is dangerous, and not only because of what we do know, but because of what we can't quite make out in the darkness. Hearing a hiss of an airlock somewhere nearby when everyone is accounted for, or of what sounds like footsteps in the shadows or in the walls can trigger all kinds of low-level tension for players. There is scope too, to create a misunderstanding of something in the dark as threat – believing your eyes is the best you can do, and that only goes so far. The ships and systems themselves are also obscuring for player characters. A GM can easily have something reported from the ships systems designed to throw players off, or to alert them to the potential of a threat approaching somewhere in the ship.

And this brings us on to body horror. It wouldn't be *Alien* without the plastic reality of scrungy things bursting forth from NPCs. Härenstam defers to Andrew E. C. Gaska, the writer of the *Chariot of the Gods* cinematic scenario on this aspect. Gaska created much of the setting work for the game, and as such, conjured a great deal of the physical reality players face. In these scenarios there are a number of powerful descriptions for GMs to use that provoke visceral reactions from players.

Often these disgusting events happen to NPCs, which is a helpful part of the cinematic mode for GMs, as it's not always going to be easy to find the right tone. "Running scenarios with body horror elements can easily tip over and become too much. You kind of have to hit the right note. I think that can be a challenge. But a fun one." Says Härenstam. Getting this tone right is important because they are often the pay-off of longer-term environmental threats. If the whole game is about building tension to the point of conflict and drama, then overdoing these moments of nastiness could leave things falling flat. Helpfully there is a mechanic built into the game to ensure tension is always being built upon.

"So, it's this kind of increasing tension that will eventually explode in one way or the other," says Härenstam "It's a key thing in the game mechanics themselves. You get these stress dice, which will actually make you more effective. They will help you to an extent – but then if you get too many of them, they will trigger panic effects." The stress and panic system is one of the most important tweaks to Free Leagues own Year Zero system. This system is one of dice pools. You gain dice for your relevant skills, attributes and gear and generally you want to roll sixes. In *Alien RPG* a stressful situation will

give you stress dice to roll as well – this works the same way as the other dice for rolling success but rolling a one triggers a panic effect.

"The more stress you have, the more effective you become. But you also increase the chance of rolling ones, which can trigger panic," says Härenstam, "so that's the trade off." This functions with the push mechanic too. If you fail a roll in *Alien RPG* you can always reroll once, but you will add a stress dice to your dice pool. Players have to ask themselves whether they really want to push the dice roll – is it really worth it? With that, there's a risk-reward in every dice roll. Panic can cause knock-on effects for players and their party. These effects can range from developing a nervous twitch that increases the stress levels of nearby player characters, through to freezing in place, going berserk or even turning catatonic. On top of this, rolling too much panic can give you permanent psychological damage in campaign play. "If you suffer really extreme stress effects, you can get permanent psychological damage. That's true. But then this doesn't happen too quickly, but it can happen," says Härenstam.

The effects of stress are one of the background threats, like the rest of the environment. The ships that most of the action takes place on are

clunky, huge beasts. Oil refineries moving through space like slowly drifting trash. They are brutal machines made for utility that our human characters rattle around within, and yet, being in the bellies of these beasts feels like home in comparison with the gaping emptiness of space. That emptiness that you and your crew are floating in dangerous, and your ships comparatively fragile. As such, exploring the rotten space hulks between the stars is exactly as dangerous as you would expect it to be.

"There's more general dangers like blowing a hole in the hull that will decompress an entire section of the ship," says Härenstam, "and that's something that we felt needed to be a part of the game. *Alien* is semi-hard sci-fi I guess, so it's not super realistic in every detail – but we did still feel that space and being on a spaceship needs to feel dangerous in itself. Like radioactivity or a vacuum, there is just a danger to being in space." This makes any actions you take while playing the game seem more threatening and your life more precarious. Your resources are limited too. Not only in the obvious, such as ammunition, but also in the amount of air in your tank – a danger compounded by the fact that when you remove your helmet in an unknown ship full of alien eggs, you don't know what you'll breathe in.

"I think what can really work is when you suffer both [the xenomorph and environmental threats] at the same time. Maybe you start off with facing a xenomorph, and then, something happens that also decompresses part of the ship. Or the other way around; you're out space walking to fix a damaged engine and then something happens with the xenomorph." says Härenstam "you can get that doubling effect that can be really troubling for players and a lot of fun."

With the whole environment against you as well as occasionally being hunted, games of *Alien RPG* can quickly spiral out of control. "I think the difference may be that even though the vacuum and these [environmental threats] are very dangerous, they're kind of dangerous in a way that you can know. At least you have an idea of how it works. Whereas, the xenomorphs are much more unpredictable," says Härenstam. In this there is a statement about how the whole of *Alien RPG* relies on characters taking calculated risks based on information that's obscured from them, whether that's by the dark shadows of a groaning hull or the sometimes unreliable readouts of machines.

When we do come face to face with an Xenomorph, seeing and understanding it more doesn't necessarily make for a better chance of survival. There are no smart choices in that moment. Meeting with an alien doesn't always spell death, but it is unpredictable. "The xenomorphs, the way they attack and the damage they do, that all depends on these signature attacks that are randomized," says Härenstam "which means you're never really sure what they will do. It's never going to be that the xenomorph is just going to do another attack, just like the one they did the round before. And you just know what's going to happen." Theses signature attacks are right out of the films, from tail spikes and head bites to the facehugger's extremely evocative 'The Final Embrace' – which is exactly what you think it is.

THIS TIME IT'S WAR

All of this is to say, you're going to die, a lot. At least in cinematic mode. Yet character death in an RPG doesn't always fit well with the level of investment players may have in their characters.

"That's such a big thing in many games, how to handle character death," says Härenstam, citing the various games from Free League where characters cannot die, such as *Tales from the*

Loop. "But in *Alien*, just to sort of get the sense of the movies. I mean, characters must be able to die and they should die quite a lot. In cinematic mode you should be really lucky if you actually make it through alive. Just like in the alien movie, most of the crew, they will die along the way and you have to have that sense here as well."

This is certainly true of my experience in cinematic mode. The players I was 'mothering' through the experience didn't last all that long. They'd split up and ended up in a stressful situation where they made some poor choices and bad rolls. It wasn't a problem though, eliminated players don't stay out for long.

"The cinematic scenarios usually have a number of NPCs that are easily transformed into player characters. You can actually pick up another character and play to finish the scenario, and not have to leave the game," explains Härenstam. There's something videogamey about the way that death is treated in this mode. Insert another coin, and pick up where you left off in another body with new agendas and allegiances. It's great. And, what's more, it's an important and satisfying part of play. "That felt like an important thing to do. The player death is much more part of cinematic play. And those are only meant to last one to three sessions, ▶

probably not more than that. And they are one-shots. So you're not meant to continue playing with these characters."

The deaths you experience, because there is a chance to rejoin later actually feel like a satisfying end to some of your characters. This is in part because of the conflicts you're experiencing while playing, and also because of the speed of play. Cinematic mode is rapid, like returning to a facehugger that you've left in the kennels for a week while you were on holiday. Each scenario takes place over three acts, with a rising tension throughout each. What's more is that each pre-generated character has their own secret agenda dealt out by the GM which changes with each act. This allows for very natural play, and a cranking up of the tension when it's needed.

"In the final act things really start to unravel," says Härenstam, "the idea is that it's fine for characters to die because that's just part of the finale. It's part of the climax of this scenario." In the final stages, these scenarios can be high-conflict free-for-alls that see nearly every aspect of a story resolved, even if that means in a very permanent way for your character "If your character dies, that can be as rewarding in a sense as him or her living on. That's part of the philosophy."

A LONG LIFE ON THE FRONTIER

Game mothers have a lot to do in cinematic play, simply because there is so much going on. While often a roleplaying game is deeply collaborative, here there is a sense of interruption from the GM. It's less that the GM is railroading the story and more that they're encouraged to throw spanners in the air-vents to keep the players on their toes. Campaign play on the other hand is designed to be much more

of a slow burn, with a more traditional give and take between players and their GM.

For those that have only seen the films, they may be unaware of the extended *Alien* universe of comic books and videogames. This universe is only hinted at in the main line of *Alien* films. "It's not very clear what's actually canonical" says Härenstam, talking about building this world. This fact has been turned to Free League's advantage in the RPG, where the wildest excesses of the films can be ignored (think *Alien vs Predator*, some of the *Prometheus* silliness,

> ## Characters must be able to die and they should die quite a lot

Resurrection) and the conflict comes from more human aspects of the setting. In many ways the book ties up some of the loose ends that the canon of the films had left sprayed about like so much acidic xenomorph blood.

"The whole game is set shortly after *Aliens* – the second movie – where there's an escalating conflict between the different colonies of this universe. This is a sort of 'wild west' situation where there are different powers; corporations, but also governments and colonies," says Härenstam "there's an increasing amount of conflict between them. In the campaign mode you really are free to explore these conflicts using

that big star map that we have. You can explore the current situation as you see fit, whether you're a colonial marine, an explorer or a space trucker or something else entirely."

The game is set in a specific year, 2183, around four years after the events of *Aliens*. The potential for world building is huge. Small directions to the GM for building worlds in solar systems like "Human presence in a star system will be established on the most lucrative planet, not the most Earth-like," tell you a lot about how this setting remains hostile, but in a much more human way.

For players in this mode, there's likely to be a lot less death, at least, when it comes to player characters. The xenomorph is used differently here, and GMs are advised not to use them all the time. That's one of the reasons that a full range of xenomorph types have been included, allowing for a variance of threat level – and the amount of conflict from the second most dangerous creatures in the *Alien* universe, humans.

"The core system is the same, but a campaign mode doesn't necessarily involve *as* lethal threats. It can, I mean you can run into the worst kinds of horrors – but you can also play missions that don't involve xenomorphs at all." Explains Härenstam, admitting what we might have suspected, "You cannot have xenomorphs in every single planet you go to. I mean, they can, but it will just get, you know, boring." Instead, to keep interest up, they should be teased off-screen, be an adjacent part of the story that gets slowly revealed.

And this is a key challenge facing the team at Free League. How to make an *Alien* game that can be played as a campaign? After all, once you have seen an xenomorph, it can't just go back into its box, egg, or chest. But that's the

beauty of it really. Players are tempted into imagining the worst during campaign play because of knowledge outside of what their characters know. While character knowledge of an xenomorph can take away or soften the feeling of danger if used repeatedly, the lingering threat of knowledge only held by the player can play a part in keeping longer campaigns full of fear.

"It's actually a double-edged sword in a way," says Härenstam, "because also having that knowledge can also increase tension. You don't know exactly what's going to happen, but you know, it's going to be bad because you've seen the movies."

This is balanced with the use of downtime, a mysterious art in the world of roleplaying games. "You'll need to find some downtime between the intense action sequences because

you need to relieve the stress and lose those stress dice" says Härenstam. Here, the benefit of reducing your stress dice gives an obvious place to settle between high intensity action that is really desired by players, mechanically. There's a narrative appeal which is also important to the genre, "downtime gives that kind of ebb and flow between horror or action. Downtime with some banter and that – you have to have that, even in cinematic scenarios. In campaign of course you can have longer periods of downtime."

Downtime in campaigns brings us on to the next expansions and cinematic scenarios, both of which are already in the works for *Alien RPG*. The first major supplement to the game covers colonial marines – and includes systems for dealing with downtime, although, it is stressed, that this isn't an update to the core rules, simply a way of adding additional systems into the game.

This expansion is being worked on by Härenstam along with Gaska and Paul Elliot (*HOSTILE*) and promises more lore, gear and to be an "open campaign." This is a sandbox style campaign that provides a plot and a narrative, but with massive scope to deviate from the main through-line of the story. In addition, Gaska is creating a cinematic scenario that in some way follows on from *Chariot of the Gods* – although of course, not with any of the characters from that scenario, for very obvious 'third act' reasons.

We'll have to wait until August 2020 next year to find out more about the fresh horrors waiting for us beyond the Outer Veil. Until then we'll have to settle with making our way through space, and trying not to think about that sound coming from the vents. ◭

ALIEN: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME

The Terror of the Deep (Space)

Designer: Free League

392+ | **15+** | **£39**

There are plenty of horror games on the market, but few manage to tap into the unsettling, bone-gnawing terror that Alien: The Roleplaying game can conjure up with just a few well-chosen descriptions and careless dice rolls.

From an initial movie about a bunch of space-truckers and their run-in with a single monster through to the expanded timeline of *Prometheus*, the *Alien* universe has always revolved around fear of the unknown; the fear, appropriately enough, of the alien. This isn't the easiest thing to capture at the tabletop, but with a few clever decisions and a stark focus on cranking up the tension the *Alien RPG* does everything it can to summon up feelings of dread, whether you're in a darkened kitchen or a crowded convention hall.

This is achieved with a core ruleset based on the same, simple system used by several other games developed by Free League, including *Tales from the Loop* and *Forbidden Lands*. Skills and stats add dice to a pool, and when you want to try something risky you throw them all and try to get sixes. If you get at least one you succeed, whether that means sneaking past a handful of egg-sacs without rupturing them or clobbering a merc over the head with a wrench.

The biggest twist that *Alien* adds to the system is one that ties the rules neatly into the idea of rising, creeping horror. As characters press themselves or watch their friends be torn apart by monsters,

they accumulate an extra pool of stress dice. These dice can generate successes just like their skills and stats – adrenaline pushing them to new heights – but if they roll poorly the terror can overwhelm their character, causing them to freeze, empty their entire magazine or run into the open.

It's a neat little addition to the rules that does a wonderful job of raising the tension, and not just in-game either. Passing checks with just your basic dice pool can be tough, so you're encouraged to push for re-rolls and stress dice right from the start of the adventure, but in the back of everyone's mind lingers the knowledge of what that stress can cause when the real dangers appear.

This isn't the only twist to *Alien*, however. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the game is that it's actually two games in a single book. Kind of.

One of these is a fairly conventional sci-fi RPG designed for campaigns that might run for weeks or months at a time. The other – known as 'cinematic mode' – is specially built for one-off scenarios. You aren't really expected to ever run a second game using the same characters, because most of them are probably going to be dead.

The rules don't really change between the two, but while campaign mode is where the meat of the details and character options lie, cinematic mode is where strengths of *Alien* shine their brightest. It's here that the terror is at its most accessible, the rules at the slickest and the tone at its darkest.

Some of this can be attributed to the punishing, lethal nature of the pre-written cinematic scenarios, but a lot of the sleek efficiency comes from the careful decision of which rules and ideas to cut out. There's no character creation, no umm-ing and ahh-ing over weapon loadouts and no need to fiddle about with any systems that don't relate directly to the situation at hand. You just turn up, roll your dice and pray that you survive the night.

Of course, this ease of play is balanced out by the sky-high stakes when a campaign game eventually stumbles into a truly deadly threat, but the crew probably won't be facing these every week. For every tense showdown with monstrous aliens, you can probably expect a couple run-ins with pushy Colonial Marines or some corporate drones, and while these can still be fun they aren't exactly the reason why most of us pick up an *Alien* game.

When you're in one-shot cinematic mode, *Alien* is an incredible game. If you have just one night to play and are after some seriously scary roleplaying, it's one of the best choices out there. Campaign mode has the potential to eclipse even this, but if you go down this road you'll need to accept that between the peaks of an excellent horror game lie a few sessions of merely okay sci-fi adventure. ◭

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

An incredible horror experience that absolutely excels at one-shot scenarios.