

MicroProse X-COM Alliance Development Q&A

Q. How much did past X-COM titles influence the development of Alliance?

A. X-COM Alliance is being developed with all previous X-COM titles in mind, particularly the first in the series, UFO Defense / Enemy Unknown. The classic gameplay formula from the original set the path for all the X-COM's that followed, and it would be both wrong and foolish to completely disregard what's been done and has been proven to work. Plus, it doesn't hurt that we're all huge fans of the series! Obviously Alliance won't have $\frac{3}{4}$ isometric turn-based gameplay, but we've taken all the elements from the original that are applicable to a first person game and put them into Alliance. We want to please the X-COM fans of course, but also fans of first-person-shooters and of games in general!

Q. How big is the team that is working on Alliance and what is the dynamic like?

A. The X-COM Alliance team is large, comprised of about 25 or so individuals, nearly all industry veterans. Any work with the Unreal engine requires a substantial amount of art support, and over half the team is made up of artists with different specialties and disciplines; CG movies, modeling, animating, texture creation, etc. We've also got a rock solid programming team that have been working hard to add to and modify the Unreal engine, shaping it into what's needed for Alliance to work (such as adding in our own Skeletal Animation system, implementing a stateless AI system, etc.). In addition to a Lead Designer, we've followed the Half-Life team's lead in creating an internal design group (or "Cabal" as they put it), allowing any and all team members interested to contribute their thoughts and collaborate on the game's many design elements. This method has worked out remarkably well, and it shows in the game.

Q. What are some of the modifications you've made to the Unreal engine that will be revealed in gameplay?

A. Two of the major systems we've created for Alliance are for character animation and AI. Our animations are based on motion-captured skeletal models, so we can independently control the legs, arms, head and torso to combine animations and make characters do several things at once. The AI system is completely different than in Quake or Unreal, in that all "behaviors" in a character are always active--there are no simple "states" like most games use, because living beings don't do just one thing at a time. Depending on what parts of the body are available, the AI may have the arms do one thing such as reload the weapon, while the legs run to catch up with the leader, while the head looks around for enemies. Because the skeletal system smoothly blends everything together, the AI characters are able to do very complex tasks that look very lifelike and help make the game more immersive. We've also implemented an advanced system for teaching the AI characters about their environment. They understand the rooms and know where the weak areas are, or where the enemy will likely be hiding. They also know all the advanced combat maneuvers like flanking and surrounding, ambushing, cornering and cover fire. But the aliens don't exist just to fight you--after all, you are sneaking into their base or their homes, and they may not be expecting you. They have jobs and tasks to perform throughout the levels, so it is possible to sneak around and even follow them or watch them at work. If they do see you, though, or they find somebody you killed or hear you in the next room, they will sound the alarm and you will be in trouble. The Aliens also have a lot of curiosity about your technology. If they like one of your weapons, they might try to steal it from you, or they'll stun and drag off one of your teammates to dissect in their laboratory (unless you can find where they took him and rescue him first!). This way they can discover your weaknesses and what kinds of weapons you are vulnerable to, or they can modify your weapons to use against you. Of course, you can do the same to them.