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PREY Review

He who dies last

You play as offspring of the privileged class Morgan Yu. Your brother has secured you a prestigious job on the space station Talos I. However — wouldn't you know it — the Typhon (the aliens for which the space station is a containment facility) escape, and it soon turns out that your privilege might be he who dies last. With *Prey*, the developer Arkane Studios set out to deliver a sci-fi title which relies on the stealth aspect familiar from the studio's previous successful *Dishonored* franchise. It combines secrecy with RPG elements and whimsical features, like the possibility to engineer useful objects from spare parts found on the station. The graphic and sound design are outstanding and manage to create a captivating atmosphere. However, if you're not completely fascinated by the story, after the initial excitement, the stealthy actions begin to feel very repetitive. The game loses pace, and at times the missions seem unnecessarily prolonged.



Hero-style is impossible

The title's lead designer, Ricardo Bare, adores the gameplay [1], saying that "tons of solutions are possible." He appears to try to convey that a player has various possibilities to accomplish an objective. That raised my hopes, because it sounded a lot like the title accommodates different play styles. After watching the trailer, I was even more excited about having the choice to sneak when I felt mellow and play recklessly confrontational when I felt rowdy. The trailer, however, oversells the fast-paced action. Early on in the game, I realized that taking enemies head-on in action, hero-style, is impossible with the few weapon choices you have. For almost the whole game the weapons remain weak, and ammunition is sparse. Being stealthy feels like a burden at times: you just want to get objectives done. Thus, you speed through the hallways, but then you suddenly need to hide behind a crate and wait minutes for an enemy to make their round and walk past you.

Even if I accepted a stealth-heavy playstyle, the mentioned "tons of solutions," I didn't see. Sometimes there were arguably two, but most often, clearly only one. I remember having to access a space shuttle, and the only way to get to it was over a platform which I needed to extend. I did not have to apply my ingenuity, but had to take one particular developer-intended path. I also felt that the choice was not between different ways to accomplish certain objectives, but in which order. You can evade an opponent on your path, but eventually, you will have to deal with them on the way back. Most of the time, your tasks follow the same structure: you have to go from A to C, and at B I will encounter a Typhon, fire, or electric shock hazard, which, if rushed through, will most likely kill you.

During long stretches of time, you have to explore, read, and search through things in a repetitive manner to piece together where you have to go. These activities are interesting when you begin your session. However, if you receive a new mission after playing for three hours, you fear that it might mean looking through offices and trashcans for another forty-five minutes. You acquiesce and move through the station, evading an array of alien enemies. Sadly, areas where you manage to vanquish Typhons don't remain clean: the aliens respawn. Furthermore, some of the vicious critters are Mimics, which can morph into everyday objects to deceive you. Because of this, the game has you on edge, suspecting every item you see to be a transformed alien. After a while, this becomes a nuisance. At some point, I just wanted stuff to attack me so I could fight it and didn't have to check every object in the room to see whether it might be a Mimic.



Jack of all trades

Despite the lack of a fast pace, which the quests could sometimes use, *Prey* makes up with playful elements found outside of missions. First of all, any item that you find — even a used orange peel — can be put into a Recycler and broken down into resources. You then put the resources into a Fabricator and, with the right fabrication plan, produce weapons or useful items.

One of the things you can create are Neuromods, futuristic devices which enhance your human abilities. Here, the title's role-playing component comes in. You can improve your skills in the field of technology, engineering, or combat. Faced with this possibility for the first time, I compulsively wanted to enhance all abilities in all areas at once — get some OP for my M.Y. However, it quickly became apparent that Morgan Yu ought to focus on one field of expertise, instead of doing a little bit of everything, but mastering none.

After you find a Psychoscope, you can scan Typhons and enhance your character with the abilities that you copy from the aliens. If you choose to do so, you may gain the capacity to morph into objects like the Mimics do. If you change into a small object, you can get through tight crevices, or you can morph into a fire-resistant object to pass flames. This feature seems genuinely novel and makes for an interesting game concept that adds some variety to the gameplay.

Some of the missions lead you outside the station and into space. The game designers

realistically represent the conditions of zero gravity and vacuum. You need to be aware of inertia, which keeps you moving in one direction unless you execute a counter movement — remember Newton from physics class? Another commitment to realism, which science fiction often neglects, is that while floating outside of the station you barely hear sounds from your shots because they happen in the vacuum of space. The slight muffled sound you do hear is due to the vibrations of the weapon propagating through your arm over your shoulder and neck into your ear. I truly appreciate details like this.

A game element I found implemented rather clumsily, though, was the hacking of electronic devices and locks. In mini-game style, you move a cursor through a maze. It was hard for me to see what that would stand for in reality. In contrast, the intricacies of the game show when fabricating objects or deciding Neuromod allocation.



A beautiful, cold, and unmerciful world

The background music adapts to changing situations, like the presence of danger, or when Morgan learns an important piece of information. It has an eerie tune which complements the visual atmosphere on the ship with its dried up corpses and general chaos. The high quality of the soundtrack is not in the least thanks to the contribution of the veteran composer Mick Gordon, who created the soundtrack for Doom.

I was not very fond of the whalepunk art style of Arkane Studio's titles from the *Dishonored* franchise. What a pleasant surprise to see that *Prey* takes an entirely different

artistic approach. In the title's storyline, JFK was never shot, and the Americans and Soviets collaborated in confining an alien threat to a jointly run station in Moon's orbit. Accordingly, Talos I exhibits a fusion of design elements encountered in the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the first half of the 20th century. There are art deco elements mixed with retro-futurism in the office interiors, in the lobby, and in the swanky executive quarters. Contrast this with references to Soviet brutalist elements in the research and technical facilities, where you find massive, stern structures, like giant gas exhausts.

Prey succeeds with atmosphere. You get a sense of bizarre serenity when you stand in the lobby looking out through the giant panoramic windows and contemplate your lot in this mess. Due to the station's rotation around the Moon, patterns of shadows shift soothingly over you, jumping from surface to surface. Morgan's loneliness suddenly becomes touching. You are one of the few survivors, all isolated from one another, each terribly anxious. You don't know who you can trust, and your enemies are extremely powerful. Furthermore, you risk being ambushed wherever you go. It is a beautiful, cold, and unmerciful world where you have become prey.

[1] Gamasutra. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/297288/Designing_Preys_scifi_space_station_to_be_like_a_megadungeon.php

The verdict 8/10

When considering to buy the title, it is important to keep in mind that the trailer is far more action-packed than the actual game. As I surveyed the streams on Twitch, I noticed a lot of streamers commenting on this and disliking it. The game is slow paced, and you cannot storm ahead with blazing guns. Satisfied seemed those streamers who filled the slow parts of the game with their one-man-show commentary and trivia about their lives. It's hard to decide whether players misunderstood Arkane's intent with the game or whether Arkane misunderstood gamers' wishes to leave the stealth in *Dishonored* and get rough-and-tumble with this new title. The strong RPG aspect makes *Prey* attractive. It's the new spice in an otherwise familiar concept. Along with the beautiful graphics and a masterfully composed soundtrack, the title captures the player's imagination with a compelling storyline on par with a Hollywood blockbuster.