

# Alien Syndrome: A Glance into Americana

How does *Alien Syndrome* fit into the context of 1980s American society?

## Historical Context

Similarly to many other games in the 1980s, *Alien Syndrome* follows a general theme of either fighting aliens, or saving innocent humans from enemy aliens; more importantly, the 1980s saw a boom in space-related video games. Instant classic video game series such as *Space Invaders* and *Galactic Saga* as well as iconic movie series such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* were all extremely popular during the 1980s as a direct effect from contemporary social influences. Besides being the peak of the “space race” between the United States and the USSR, the 1980s saw NASA launch its space shuttle program; Columbia—NASA’s first space shuttle—was so successful, it “gained worldwide attention and intersected with 1980s pop culture” in the form of music, movies, and even television shows on MTV (NASA). This shift in American culture is directly reflected in the creation and styling of *Alien Syndrome*. Tying in the concept of intergalactic interactions with the sense of “otherness” as discussed by Patricia Monk in *Alien Theory*, (which separates aliens from human society and makes them an easy villain for any narrative from videogames to novels) *Alien Syndrome*’s argument directly reflects the contemporary historical context by promoting American space culture as well as perpetuating the archetypal theme of humans combating enemy aliens (Monk xiv).



Space shuttle Columbia sitting on its launch pad. (NASA)



The first view the game provided to users.

## Mechanics of Play: Cabinet vs PC

Having had the opportunity to experience *Alien Syndrome* both on a gaming cabinet interface as well as on a laptop, we were able to observe distinct differences in the gameplay. Playing with the cabinet’s joystick and single fire button offered a more authentic 1980s feel, and more correctly fit the style of gaming the developers of the game intended for gamers to experience. On the other hand, playing on the computer proved to be much more difficult, not just from a speed perspective, but also given that the controls were not well adapted to the game.



Gameplay from cabinet.



Gameplay from PC.

Shortly after the original release of the game, multiple versions of *Alien Syndrome* were released for home personal computers like the Atari ST. A distinct sequel was released for the Sega Game Gear in 1992, and the story took place five years after the original game did (“*Alien Syndrome*”). Another version, released in 2007 for the Wii and PSP, is a RPG run-and-gun game that takes place twenty years after the original (“*Alien Syndrome (2007)*”). Given that the game was largely influenced by the movie *Alien*, the game was a factor in the production of its sequel *Aliens*. The same American cultural themes evoked in the 1980s version of the game were reiterated.

## Legacy



*Alien Syndrome (2007)*.



*Alien Syndrome (1992)*.

## Player Characters and User Interactions

Beginning the game, the user isn’t given much of a background of the characters or storyline. The two main protagonists, Mary and Ricky, are given the task of rescuing their “comrades” from ships that have been infested with aliens in a maze-like narrative and gaming structure. The game developers strategically limited this background information in order to create everyman characters that players could easily identify with. Both characters are undeniably stereotypical in that they are both Caucasian and have typical Anglo-Saxon names.

Even the aliens in *Alien Syndrome* follow archetypal themes based on two limitations; scientific knowledge in the 1980s and the “constraints of a highly conventionalized genre” (Monk 215). Two of the main types of aliens in literature are the bug-eyed monster (BEM) and the humanoid (Monk 216). In *Alien Syndrome*, the user interacts with BEM’s during Level Three (the standard monsters and the boss), as well as humanoid aliens in Round Two—which may be inspired by those in the *Alien* film (“*Alien Syndrome*”).



Player selection screen at the beginning of the game



Examples of aliens and bosses faced in *Alien Syndrome*

## Works Cited

- Alien Syndrome*. Sega, 1987. Digital file.  
"Alien Syndrome." *StrategyWiki*. N.p., 1 Apr. 2015. Web. 22 Oct. 2015. <[http://strategywiki.org/wiki/Alien\\_Syndrome/Walkthrough](http://strategywiki.org/wiki/Alien_Syndrome/Walkthrough)>.  
*Alien Syndrome (2007)*. *Cubed3*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. <[http://Alien\\_Syndrome\\_\(Wii\):\\_News,\\_Reviews,\\_Videos\\_&\\_Screens](http://Alien_Syndrome_(Wii):_News,_Reviews,_Videos_&_Screens)>.  
"Alien Syndrome (2007)." *StrategyWiki*. N.p., 23 June 2012. Web. 22 Oct. 2015. <[http://strategywiki.org/wiki/Alien\\_Syndrome\\_\(2007\)](http://strategywiki.org/wiki/Alien_Syndrome_(2007))>.  
Flame Background. *Flickr*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. <[https://www.flickr.com/groups/creative\\_commons\\_free\\_pictures/pool/](https://www.flickr.com/groups/creative_commons_free_pictures/pool/)>.  
Lethbridge, Simon. "Alien Syndrome." *Obsolete Gamer*. N.p., 21 Sept. 2012. Web. 22 Oct. 2015. <<http://obsoletegamer.com/alien-syndrome-2/>>.  
Monk, Patricia. *Alien Theory: The Alien as Archetype in the Science Fiction Short Story*. N.p.: Scarecrow, 2006. Print.  
NASA. Space shuttle Columbia sits on Launch Pad 39A on March 5, 1981, before its maiden flight on STS-1. 5 Mar. 1981. *NASA*. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. <<http://www.nasa.gov/centers/kennedy/about/history/timeline/80s-decade.html>>.  
Procyon. *Alien Syndrome* boss battle screenshot. *StrategyWiki*. N.p., 21 Mar. 2015. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. <[http://strategywiki.org/wiki/File:Alien\\_Syndrome\\_boss\\_R3.png](http://strategywiki.org/wiki/File:Alien_Syndrome_boss_R3.png)>.  
---. *Alien Syndrome* home conversion screenshot (1992 Game Gear version). *StrategyWiki*. N.p., 31 Mar. 2015. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. <[http://strategywiki.org/wiki/File:Alien\\_Syndrome\\_GG\\_screen.png](http://strategywiki.org/wiki/File:Alien_Syndrome_GG_screen.png)>.  
---. Round Three Alien. *StrategyWiki*. N.p., 21 Mar. 2015. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. <[http://strategywiki.org/wiki/File:Alien\\_Syndrome\\_enemy\\_R3.png](http://strategywiki.org/wiki/File:Alien_Syndrome_enemy_R3.png)>.  
---. Round Two Red Variety Alien. *StrategyWiki*. N.p., 21 Mar. 2015. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. <[http://strategywiki.org/wiki/File:Alien\\_Syndrome\\_enemy\\_R2\\_red.png](http://strategywiki.org/wiki/File:Alien_Syndrome_enemy_R2_red.png)>.  
Ryba, Jeanne, ed. "1980s: All Eyes Focus on Space Shuttle." *NASA*. N.p., 29 June 2012. Web. 23 Oct. 2015. <<http://www.nasa.gov/centers/kennedy/about/history/timeline/80s-decade.html>>.