

XCOM: Enemy Unknown [game]

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XCOM: Enemy Unknown. Dev. Firaxis Games. Pub. 2K Games. Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360: 2012 / Mac OSX, iOS: 2013.

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“It was the beginning of the rout of civilization, the massacre of humanity.”

—*The War of the Worlds*, 1953, Dir. Byron Haskin

EVER SINCE H.G. WELL’S NOVEL *The War of the Worlds* (1898) the alien invasion has been a staple of science fiction. Thriving in the Cold War climate of the 1950s, many a Hollywood tale was spun around what Neil Badmington calls a “set of simple binary oppositions—above all, human versus inhuman, us versus them, and real versus fake” (3). At the opposite end of us humans feature the abominable aliens: “at once an enemy to be feared, hated, and destroyed” (ibid.). Witness the proto-typical invasion narrative: aliens come and want to conquer Earth, they seem to succeed, until in the end, humanity unites and some trait of ours brings the invaders to their knees, be it our sheer will to live, our emotions like love and kindness or simply a bacterium that the invaders could not survive.

In his book *Alien Chic*, Badmington points to the late 1970s with films like *Close Encounter of the Third Kind* (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 1977) and *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial* (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 1982) for a shift that began to replace our hatred for the alien with love. But, Badmington says, behind both alien hatred and alien love lies essentially the same dichotomy of “us” versus “them” and a reactionary impulse to ensure our humanist view and “reinscribe the border between the human and the extraterrestrial” (89). In 1993 then, when *The X-Files* first appeared on Fox television, Moulder’s love/hate-relation with the aliens seemed to capture the Zeitgeist of the 1990s with all the uncertainty of boundaries and identities. In this climate, the original video game series XCOM returned the invasion narrative with an obvious nod towards the 1950s and its simple dichotomies, the black and white hatred for all things alien. Originally named *UFO: Enemy Unknown*, the first game in the se-

ries in 1994 already established the thematic parameters that were kept alive throughout most of its installments and that can also be found in its latest, 2012/13 installment that loosely functions as a reboot of the series after more than ten years break since 2001¹: a group of hostile and extremely violent aliens attack Earth. Earth’s leaders gather in a secret meeting and establish the Extraterrestrial Combat-unit called X-COM in order to fight back. At first in secret, later in an all-out planetary war, the player needs to direct his troops in a turn-based tactical game against alien invaders while at the same time formulating a long-time strategy to enhance human technology, hinder enemy movement and gather intelligence on the aliens and their ultimate goal.

The 2012 installment, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* is a reboot, “recreat[ing] X-COM with our unique creative vision...true to the elements that made X-COM such a revered game while delivering an entirely new story,” as Steve Martin, president of developer Firaxis Games said in an interview with Game Informer (cit. in Biessener). What is remarkable in terms of science fiction studies is that the 2012 version blatantly returns to the tried and true elements of the 1994 versions’ dichotomies of “Us” versus “Them,” celebrating humanism as the ultimate boon against the aliens, which is very reminiscent of 1950s Hollywood narratives. As Badmington argues for the 1953 film *The War of the Worlds* (and other such alien invasions), “humans come together in order to fight for their future.... More precisely, the sudden invasion of the other brings human beings together, and this unity, this creation of an “Us” to resist the terrible “Them” is played out even at the level of filmic composition” (18). Of course, with a turn-based strategy game, we might need to adapt filmic composition and replace it with game mechanics, but the sentiment remains. One of the persistent goals of the game is to keep Earth’s population calm and controlled, reducing panic levels in all participating countries. The XCOM council and your troops, which are provided by this council, are multinational, comprised of sixteen nation states from all five continents. Should the level of panic in a given country

¹ After the original game (*UFO: Enemy Unknown*), all follow-ups were named X-COM with an added subtitle, such as *Apocalypse*, *Interceptor* or *Enforcer*. In total, the game spawned five sequels, with two more being cancelled in 2001 due to changing corporate ownership. The 2012 game was re-christened XCOM (without the hyphen) in order to emphasize the re-imagining and reboot of the series.

be too high at the end of a review period that country will leave the XCOM council. Should you lose half your council members, you become incapable of action and forfeit the war: the aliens win. Behind this is an obvious message embedded in the mechanics of the game simulation: “We” must stand united; otherwise, “They” will win. This is further reflected in the make-up of your team (uniting soldiers, technicians and scientists from all the council nations) and certain “terror-missions,” in which you need to rescue as many civilians as possible in countries with the most wide-spread panic. If you do not balance out resources and missions over all 16 nations you will not be able to succeed.

More interesting than the “tried and true” elements of old is the “entirely new story” that Martin promised gamers. First let me say, it is not so new, as most of the basic premises of an alien invasion and an anti-alien war council remain in place from 1994 to 2012. What is new is the motivation behind the invasion and the resolution of the game. Be forewarned, the next part of this review will spoil the ending for you. Whereas in the 1994 version, motivation was spotty at best and the aliens attacked from a base on Mars, directed by an alien “brain,” in the 2012 version the guiding force of the invasion—the alien race named Ethereals—actually provides a motivation not only for the several very different alien species encountered in the game but also for the invasion and its defeat by the XCOM team. During the missions it becomes clear that the invading force is very diverse, from the typical “Greys” of Roswell fame (here called Sectoids) to robotic and cyborg creations of all sorts. What unites them seems to be that they are directed via psionic powers wielded by the Ethereals. As a counter-measure, human scientists reverse engineer the alien technology and thus uncover more and more of their plot. The aliens abduct humans to experiment on them, especially trying to unlock some psychic ability. In the end, scientists succeed in creating a laboratory with an alien psi-field in order to “discover and develop the latent psionic abilities of our soldiers” as the game text claims. When an especially powerful psionic soldier (called the Volunteer) unlocks an Ethereal device, the “temple ship” (the headquarters of the invasion fleet) can be boarded and the final enemy confronted. At this moment in the game, the Volunteer remains in contact with the “Uber Ethereal” (the leader of the aliens), who then acknowledges that the motivation for the invasion lay with the creation of a powerful race of enslaved soldiers: “Long have we watched...and waited. So many promising subjects so many failed efforts. And now af-

ter untold trials, the New One emerges to face the rigors of our collective.... An enduring physical form paired with an equally adept mental capacity—the rarest of traits finally within our grasp.” All the other alien races are failed attempts at creating this race that according to the “Uber Ethereal” is needed to “bring about our redemption, and usher in our future.” In the end, though, the aliens did not succeed in “uplifting” the human race; rather, it came down to sheer human will paired with reverse engineered alien technology to unlock a potential that was part of human evolution all along.

The category of the posthuman, ideally positioned as a hybrid between “Us” and “Them,” which on the surface would have allowed for destabilizing the dichotomy of human versus inhuman, is reeled in by the game and appropriated for the humanist cause. Otherness is denied and the posthuman abilities are absorbed as human, a potential that naturally comes from within. The Volunteer leads the assault on the aliens, saving Earth in the most clichéd heroism possible by sacrificing himself for the greater good and the rescue of millions of lives. In this, the game once more returns to the dichotomies, appointing the alien as the ultimate Other that threatens humanity.

In a sense, then, the game caters to a longing for a simpler time. Its references are towards the Cold War, Roswell and the 1950s, and the clear-cut lines between good and evil and any complication of these concepts is diffused. It remains to be seen if this longing is just temporary nostalgia due to the current uncertainty of the status quo or if video games are to a certain degree displaying a reactionary trend, harking back to a fundamentally humanist dialectic. For what it is worth, a new XCOM title is due out at the end of this year and we will need to see how it deals with Otherness.

Works Cited

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