

As *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* turns 10, let's appreciate its hissing cockroaches

Early in the coronavirus pandemic, during the ambient dread of New York's locked-down spring, I realized that I couldn't put words in a coherent order. I built virtual spaces instead. That's how I fell in love with the cockroaches from one of my favorite horror games.

I'm talking about *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, an adventure gaming masterpiece that turns 10 years old today. Frictional Games' *Amnesia* is a Lovecraftian tale that puts players at the mercy of enemies they can't fight in a world full of vivid, eerie grotesquerie. Its protagonist, Daniel, wakes up in a Prussian castle with no memory and a letter, written by himself, demanding he kill the estate's master Alexander. He ventures deeper and deeper into the castle, pursued by howling flesh-monsters and troubled by emerging memories of his past. He (and the player) stay alive by blocking doors, hiding in closets, and simply running away.

'Amnesia' has an unabashed dedication to scares
Amnesia helped establish a whole subgenre of super-vulnerable survival horror, and it has several worthy successors, including *Resident Evil VII* and Frictional's own *Soma*. But while these games are plenty creepy, *Amnesia* still has an unparalleled and unabashed dedication to scares. It's full of familiar tricks that nonetheless make you jump constantly: snarling creatures that appear at a moment's notice, a sanity system that torments you with phantom noises, and haunted house touches like banging doors and howling winds. Its

freakout-inducing gameplay basically launched the career of the world's biggest YouTube star. And the cockroaches? Let me explain.

Amnesia's cockroaches are, at first glance, weirdly big but fairly unremarkable video game critters. They scurry endlessly around rooms with aimless determination, ricocheting off walls like slow-moving billiards. If your character walks close to them, though, they hiss at you aggressively. In other words, this clammy 19th century European castle is somehow specifically infested with a species of giant insect from the tropical jungles of Madagascar.

This fact has been noted with some confusion by *Amnesia* fans. "Did Alexander just happen to go on a trip to Madagascar, look at these and say 'Aw, hell yes! I totally want a breeding pair of those!'" asked one baffled TVTropes poster. Another speculated that Daniel, an archaeologist, had visited the island and been so badly traumatized by the roaches that he started hallucinating them. (In the context of the story, this is not actually far-fetched, and one hallucination effect involves smaller roaches crawling over the camera.)

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I only really noticed the hissing earlier this year when I picked up *Amnesia* again during the pandemic – partly to play and partly to build with. The game has a full-featured yet surprisingly beginner-friendly level editor; alongside many horror mods, it was used to prototype the exploration game *Gone Home*. I spent a lot of my pre-pandemic free time writing fiction and text games, but stuck in my Brooklyn apartment, where hospitals were beginning to fill up and sirens screamed at all hours, I couldn't keep a line of thought steady for long enough. What I *could* do, it turned out, was obsessively design my own monster-filled castle wing.

Modding a game like *Amnesia* puts its horror elements in a very

different light. It grants you control over something terrifying. You can open the game's maps to pick your fears apart and reconstruct them, learning how to guide monsters or trigger a jump-scare. When you're playing your own map, the game is no longer your adversary – every involuntary flinch at a distant scream is a sign that you've captured a little of the system's power.

I developed a weird affection for the creatures of my castle. *Amnesia's* monsters are pure body horror: mutilated, mindless humanoids with gaping jaws that hang like stretched-out rubber to their chests. But it became my job to coax them into appearing at the right time and following players without getting lost, like teaching a giant, murderous child to walk. If I see a real cockroach I will pace my apartment swearing quietly for several minutes, convinced it's the vanguard of an infestation. In *Amnesia*, a giant hissing roach was my go-to trick for making even the most nonsensically inhospitable architecture feel lived-in.

Horror games are little vessels of contained fear

This affection is, of course, just a twist on why many people like horror games in the first place. They're little vessels of safely contained fear in a world full of unpredictable awfulness. And *Amnesia* particularly lends itself to this kind of comfort. The game is built around unnerving cosmic horror, but its period setting and Lovecraft-inspired fantasy premise don't hit as close to home as *Soma* – which grants a horrifying fate to a modern-day protagonist and a hauntingly grim future for everyone. It's a relief to slip into a world where evil manifests as a creeping shadow of doom or a decadent aristocrat who can ultimately be defeated. Players eventually discover that Daniel has done terrible things, but he spends the game searching for redemption.

Seriously, though. Why the hissing?

That spring, after Frictional announced a new *Amnesia* game for

release in late 2020, I asked the studio's creative director, Thomas Grip, this question. His answer was immediate.

"Because that's spooky! Hissing cockroaches are the worst cockroaches," he told me. (Grip has never seen a hissing cockroach in real life, but he "would probably be terrified.")

That's not the only reason the roaches exist. Frictional originally planned for the castle to be full of spiders. The team couldn't get them to skitter along the walls, though, so they switched to something that looked better floorbound. "We didn't need to animate them at least. There's always some sort of lazy explanation for everything we've done," Grip added.

But ultimately, *Amnesia's* Prussian castle is full of Madagascar hissing cockroaches because it's a simple, elegant way to creep out players just a little more. That's the guiding ethos that made *Amnesia* so good, and I'm still discovering pieces of it a decade later.

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