

Planet Alpha

How beautiful does a game have to be for nothing else to matter? *Planet Alpha* fills your eyes with colourful spectacle – shifting clouds of pink smoke; overlaid tiers of exotic flora and fauna; rock formations that calcify Mega Drive-era low-poly shapes into abstract art – but does significantly less to entice your thumbs. Its alien world is navigated through platforming, physics puzzling and the occasional stealth sequence. Ultimately, though, whatever the nature of the challenge, every interaction is a puzzle. You arrive at a new obstacle and, through a mix of intuition and trial-and-error, learn its rules.

The game conveys these rules, like the rest of its mechanics and story, entirely visually. This lends an appropriately alien feel to proceedings, but sadly communication can swiftly break down. Dying repeatedly as you try to establish the behavioural patterns of a new creature is infuriating. Equally frustrating is accidentally fudging your way to a solution without having the chance to properly metabolise the puzzle.

When everything works, however, it can be spectacular. The core mechanics – jump, drag blocks around, crouch to avoid enemy vision cones – never really evolve, but are decent building blocks. Luring an

Your astronaut moves through the foreground, his eyes always forward, apparently unfazed by the earth-shattering events. He might be closest to the screen, but he's undeniably a background character in a grander story

Developer Planet Alpha
Publisher Team17
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now



AREAS OF INFLUENCE

Planet Alpha's alien world feels remarkably fresh, but it's constructed from familiar elements. The blocky pastels and open skies recall *Rime* and *The Witness*. Outside of games, there are flashes of French Impressionist painters such as Monet and French comics artist Moebius, while the enemy robot and rocketships are lifted straight out of '50s American sci-fi like *Forbidden Planet*. There's some remarkable alchemy at work, fusing these disparate elements into a single, mostly coherent aesthetic.

enemy into the waiting jaws of a larger creature, or careening through the carefully-crafted environments make for some dazzling set pieces.

Many highlights come courtesy of the game's other big idea: the ability to spool through its day-night cycle, pushing the sun across the sky and behind the horizon. Some plants only bloom at dawn or dusk, providing cover to hide in or a platform to bounce off. Less intuitively, floating rocks move back and forth depending on the time of day, providing new platforms.

It's a marvel that every environment looks equally good by starlight or sunshine, and this is just one of the many ways *Planet Alpha* expands its palette. In dark caverns, your way is illuminated only by the fibre-optic tendrils of a jellyfish-like creature, or your spindly form is silhouetted against Saul Bass blocks of colour.

It's like moving through a book of concept art, and while that might invite the question of why *Planet Alpha* needs to be played rather than watched, there is something about being inside these visuals. The simple tasks – jump, drag, hide – create a sort of meditative state, where the bare bones of the game itself don't matter and your eyes are free to drink in its sumptuous world. Counterintuitive puzzles aside, that's a sensation worth chasing.

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