

Maybe there's a more tactful way to palm off an advance, Jacob?



SURVIVAL
HORROR

The Callisto Protocol

Take a walk down some of the moodiest corridors

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL begins like all good prison films, with a mood of unbearable doom. Workingman pilot Jacob Lee has crash-landed on the dead moon of Callisto after his cargo ship is boarded by a notorious terrorist group. Someone else has died a bizarrely gruesome death during the crash, and we are given plenty of opportunity to study this misfortune. Lee is arrested and it's made clear that he has a life spent in the moon's Black Iron prison to look forward to. But almost immediately, the prison falls foul of some mysterious disaster that turns its inhabitants into crazed mutants.

What better way to set the tone of a relentlessly gory survival horror game than with a disaster, an injustice, and then the abrupt invasion of some walking pus buckets? *The Callisto Protocol* isn't subtle about dropping you into a place of dread. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this dread is strangely comforting to players of this determinedly nasty horror game. The stakes are clear: Lee, played with action-hero stoicism by Josh Duhamel, is in deep do-do and must dig himself out of it. Perhaps we'll learn a bit about that terrorist group. Inevitably, some subplots will creep in, and we'll meet some characters who keep us company.

The Callisto Protocol wastes no time cementing the terror of its setting. Now, we just need to walk in a straight line for 15 hours and butcher our way through it.

We're not joking when we say that *The Callisto Protocol* is a comforting videogame, albeit on the far end of the same axis occupied by, say, *Dragon Quest*. Familiarity is the comforting factor, and *The Callisto Protocol* is a consistent big-budget joyride. The indie horror scene has potent psychological discomfort covered (see *Visage*, *Signalis*), and is also the natural home of grindhouse schlock (see *Murder House* and countless PS1-era throwbacks). The big-budget horror game, in the *Resident Evil* sense, or most saliently in the *Dead Space* sense, is about roaming moody corridors and regularly getting the life frightened out of you.

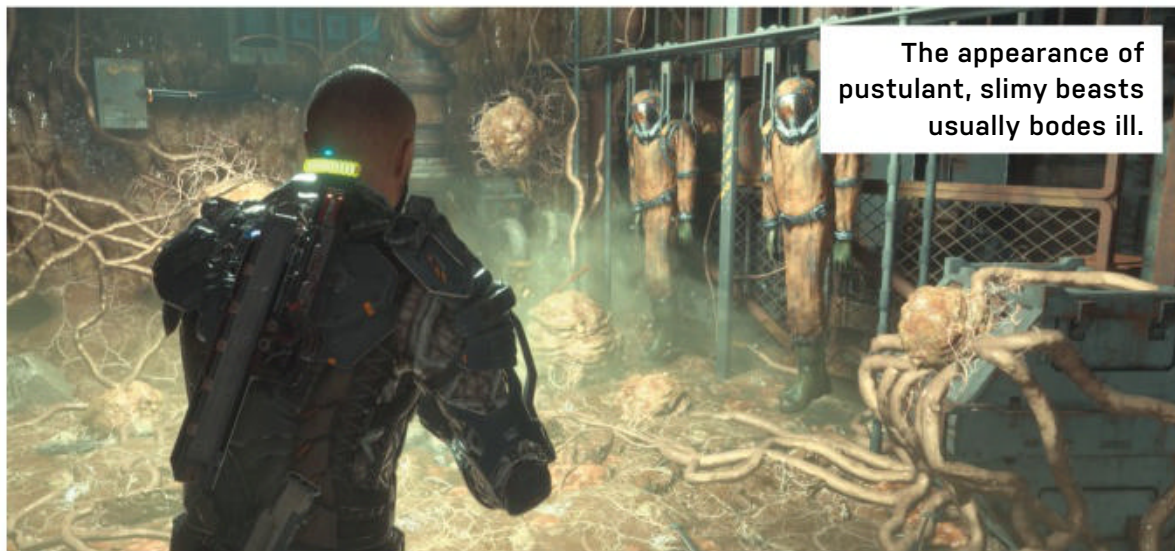
And, boy, does *The Callisto Protocol* have creepy corridors. The opening hours have all the usual varieties covered: claustrophobic engine rooms with burst valves gushing, access halls, maintenance rooms, aged steel, echoing

vents, flickering holographic terminals, and subterranean crawl spaces full of pustulent slimy growth. The middle and late hours have a lot of that stuff, though some areas sprawl a little too much, and by the game's end, there are some surprising deviations from the 'grim dark corridor' format. Is this *Dead Space 4*? Or the *Dead Space 3* that many think should have been? Pretty much both.

These environments are the most obvious source of that weird comforting sense because, in its opening hours, the feeling when playing *The Callisto Protocol* is very much like that of *Dead Space*. There's the same pristine user interface, the same lumbering, over-the-shoulder control of an emphatically beefy man, and the same freedom to foot-stomp corpses into pools of masticated pudding.

The director of *The Callisto Protocol* is Glen Schofield, who also directed the first *Dead Space*, and he has recreated that game's fine balance of 'powerful and yet vulnerable'.





The appearance of pustulant, slimy beasts usually bodes ill.



There are some lovely environments, but still usually only one path.



You'll see a fair amount of blood during *The Callisto Protocol*.



There are some beautiful hallways. Actually, it's almost all hallways.

We can't fault Schofield for returning to a tried and tested formula. We are fond of the way Lee has the turning circle of a kid's toy tractor, and that no matter how feeble an enemy appears you will absolutely not succeed in melee stun locking them, forcing you to use the somewhat unwieldy left and right dodge system. Why doesn't Lee go full-pelt beast mode like his foes? Why does he move with the burly grace of a slow-mo televised fast bowler? Why does he keep putting his baton away, and why does he retrieve it so slowly? Because this is a horror videogame and so for no better reason than that.

Lee has a glowing green bar on the back of his head that shows his health, and a blue one that indicates whether his 'GRP' has overheated. The GRP is *The Callisto Protocol's* answer to *Control's* levitate or *Half-Life 2's* gravity gun, and it's great fun. In a game full of spongy baddies, this weapon lets you pick most of them up and toss them off platforms and into chasms, or more frequently, into wall-mounted spikes—the moon colony has an alarming amount of these. Or, you can pick up nearby explosives and toss them at your foes, which is less fun, but more sensible because picking up objects uses less energy than levitating mutants.

GRP energy is finite, but like the ammo reserves for *Callisto's* five ranged weapons (all standard fare, with hard-hitting upgrade paths), we never found ourselves desperately wanting for resources on medium difficulty. You can turn to selling

ammunition and occasionally health to level up your abilities at the regular 3D printer workstations. Once you realize how useful the GRP is, you may want to focus on that, though you may eventually decide to invest more into the regular weapons, as the GRP is useless during some of the more torturous late-game fights. You won't fill all upgrade paths in a single playthrough though, so it's worth investing early in your preferred method of death-doling.

Mutants can be carved up limb-by-limb, less as a matter of tactical precision than as a way to keep the carnage fresh, and your GRP can become so powerful that simply throwing them—not even at spikes—will make those limbs go flying. You may not find any of the warted, veined, saliva-abundant baddies especially scary if you have played a lot of horror games with enemies just like these, but there are a few loathsome predators that were the exception. It's not the appearance of these more fearsome mutants that's threatening, but how they move around the environments. There's also the ever-lingering threat that if you don't shoot the emerging tentacles off a mutant they will morph into something more formidable.

This is a rollercoaster of a game and riddled with cinematic videogame clichés—you will navigate a crumbling structure that starts to collapse as you cross it. You'll need to power on a generator by finding three breakers that are located in dangerous locations.

You'll need to survive a certain amount of time locked in a claustrophobic space as baddies attack you. And naturally, there is more to what's going on than the narrative précis provided above suggests. In many ways, *The Callisto Protocol* feels like a new, albeit well-qualified studio, singing to the crowd: "We can make the kind of games we know you really want." And we, the crowd—most of us anyway—will sing back: "Yes, you can, keep on going."

A big part of us wants a blockbuster horror game to go off the rails a bit, in a way a lot of people hoped Hideo Kojima would with *Silent Hills*. But it's hard to fault *The Callisto Protocol* for nailing (or GRPping to a row of wall-mounted spikes) exactly what it sets out to achieve—engaging, linear sci-fi survival horror that spins a deepening dystopian yarn around dozens of stressful encounters. In other words, for the abundant masochists among us: comfort food for weirdos, or *Wario Dragon Quest*. —SHAUN PRESCOTT

VERDICT
8

The Callisto Protocol

DEAD SPACE Atmospheric; beautiful; creatively fun weapons.

SPACED OUT Repetitive corridors; unimaginative enemies; structurally nothing new.

RECOMMENDED SPECS CPU, i7-8700 / Ryzen 5 3600. RAM, 16GB. GPU, GTX 1070 / RX 5700.

\$60, <https://callisto.sds.com/>, M-rated

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