

ALIEN NATION

SAMPLE GAMING EXPERIENCE

After navigating to the *Alien Nation* website, you notice that the user interface is themed to that of an interplanetary space station where crews can operate a ship to their intended destination across the galaxy. Just like a typical commuter-driven interface, the website prompts you to purchase tickets for your journey.

You investigate ticketing options and select a time slot that works for you and up to four of your friends. The website then prompts you to choose if you would like to embark on a “saboteur's journey” (classic play) or a “collaborative journey” (recommended for teams with younger passengers). After reading that the “collaborative journey” plays more like a traditional escape room experience and the “saboteur's journey” offers a dramatic twist, you decide to purchase tickets for saboteur mode and look forward to what the twist could offer.

The website also provides some world-building material under the guise of informational tourism pamphlets. As you read, you realize that the in-game ecosystem hosts several unique alien species, each with their own special skills, and notice some article headlines regarding an uptick in galactic crime. Now that you have purchased your ticket, you are ready to embark on the journey.

When your ticketed time slot approaches, you and your friends head to *Alien Nation* curious and excited to see what is in store. Immediately upon entering you are transported into a chaotic but bustling loading bay. To your right, food and beverages are served on a conveyor belt-style bar; to your left, there are clothing racks with space-style clothing and merch. Immediately in front of you are “check-in” RFID stations and an info desk with customer service agents for those with questions or who need to purchase their time slot in person.

The walls are clad with ads for alien products and monitors displaying various degrees of information: “Flight Times” show the queues for which group will be in which play area and at what time, PSA warnings about “Space Parasite Activity” show that danger is in the red zone, and a “Galaxy’s Most Wanted” board shows photos of criminals on the lamb alongside a rank based on their “criminal activity level”. These photos show headshots of real players next to a series of in-game stats. You find that curious, but for now, you make your way toward the check-in stations.

You and your friends each commandeer a check-in screen where you choose your species and role. A short PSA plays to let you know that species and role selection is limited to one person in each species and role per crew:

“Galactic regulations require that all crews be staffed by one individual from each of the five primary member nations of the United Interplanetary Council, ensuring each crew has the diverse skill sets required to face the galaxy’s many unknown perils.”

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Reading about the different options, you determine that your alien species is the Wogpolli, a small frog-like creature who has the ability of “past sight.” For your role, you chose comms operator. With this combination, you will be in charge of making sure critical communication is issued to the appropriate team members as well as any outside parties. Additionally, with your special skill as a Wogpolli you will have the unique ability to intuit which member of your team has interacted with certain items in the game space before you found it. Lastly, you choose the name for your alien alias; you type in “Zorp.”

With the necessary information entered, the check-in machine issues you an RFID badge. If you had been here before, you would already have one of these; but this is your first time. You pin the badge on your shirt and begin your day as Zorp.

Since there are still 20 minutes before your crew’s departure time, you and your friends sit at the cafeteria bar for refreshments, discuss each person’s selected role, and continue to take in the theming. You notice that the bar operates via a conveyor belt. While the area closest to you is a classic high-top bar for eating and drinking, the inner rim of the bar is a rotating belt where food and drink orders are circulated. Each order has a number assigned to it which corresponds with the numbered seat position you are in. You are in seat 10 and order your sodas on a small screen propped up on the bar in front of you. You tap your credit card to pay. Shortly, a space soda with a ‘10’ marker on it makes its way toward you on the belt.

After a few minutes pass, you see the “flight times” screen has updated to show that your team’s flight will be taking off in 10 minutes from sector 1. You and your team finish your drinks and head to sector 1.

When the experience begins, your group enters a small metal-clad “pre-flight” entry bay. Nothing seems out of the ordinary until you notice your reflection in the darkened window ahead of you is that of your alien counterpart, Zorp. The reflection even moves when you move.

Suddenly, an unassuming industrial monitor on the wall ahead of you powers on. To your delight, a cute emoji face animates on the screen and introduces herself as a “Basic Emoticon-Type Infobot”; but she prefers to be called BETI for short. BETI extracts from the wall and moves her head around to get a look at the crew before issuing basic safety precautions such as what to do in an emergency. She also reminds you that, while tactile interaction with the ship is encouraged, destruction of the ship’s property and physical altercations are prohibited. Lastly, BETI mentions that space crime is at an all-time high and that she is thankful to see such an accomplished crew taking command of the ship today.

The gates to the main bridge open and your team files in. The main bridge is set up with a half circle of interactive stations across from a large cockpit window. You notice BETI is stationed on the main bridge as well, in a front and center position near the window. She urges everyone to find their appropriate stations. You make your way to the console marked “Comms” while the rest of your team finds their own station.

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BETI fires up the ship and the front window shows the team is now soaring through the galaxy. BETI urges everyone to relax and enjoy the view. But as she is wrapping up her takeoff procedure, smoke fills the front window, and the room shakes. Alarms blare as out the windows you see the ship hurtle to a planet's surface. The haptics in your seat rumble as the ship crashes to the ground. BETI looks concerned and starts to verbally run through all the procedures she has been programmed to check before takeoff. After determining that all her tests came back sufficient for takeoff, she scans the crew for any suspicious diagnostics.

BETI looks disappointed. She didn't realize you were all organic life forms. The last team before this was all robotic beings, and they were so much less of a liability. She explains that given this ENTIRE team has organic brains, the team is susceptible to being invaded by mind-controlling space parasites. And, unfortunately, her scan has revealed that there is a space parasite present within the ship; meaning, someone on the team has already been infected.

You and your friends side-eye each other. BETI interrupts the suspicious glances to mention that the infected personnel won't know they are infected. They will simply be manipulated to work against the rest of the team's interests until they successfully take over the entire ship or are found out and eliminated.

Time is now of the essence--the ship is marooned on a hostile planet while the parasite multiplies inside its current host. If the team cannot correctly identify the saboteur in the next 45 minutes, the parasites will be strong enough to spread to everyone onboard. BETI kindly offers to set a timer, and instructs that the crew must do what they can to search out the parasite's identity while also completing necessary repairs to the ship. After 40 minutes have elapsed she will call everyone back to their stations so the crew can vote on who needs to be... "eliminated" via the ship's laser beams. The ship's emergency system has generated a list of crucial tasks for each team member that is available at their role-specific station. BETI instructs that each role-specific screen will auto-lock once each player's RFID pin is not detected within short range of its individual station.

Several doors surrounding the main bridge open, revealing a handful of additional rooms to explore. The team quickly evaluates their tasks and disperses. As the Comms operator, you see your first task is to "repair the communication array on the bridge and send a distress signal." You rush through the various instrument panels around the bridge and find a puzzle of broken wires that must be paired and plugged in according to instructions. The instructions are listed on a small placard above the array but seem to be in an alien language. You deduce that the alien language is a pattern of hieroglyphics similar to the logos above a variety of colored buttons on the other side of the room.

You grab your nearby friend and tell them to read which color corresponds with which hieroglyph. They do so and you can correctly identify which colored wires need to go into which plugs. The puzzle buzzes and the communication array appears to be powered up. You notice a nob which reads "distress signal activation."

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You turn the nob all the way to 10 and a small red light turns on. You turn to head back to your task list and your friend asks you if you are through with the communication station. You tell them you are and continue on your way.

Your next task is to download and decode a diagnostic report from the ship's mainframe. You make your way into Engineering and start to parse a series of codes using a decoder glass you found nearby. Once you complete the decoding puzzle, you go back into the ship's main bridge. BETI mentions that she finds it interesting how you're focusing on a new task when the first task still isn't finished. You tell her that you did finish the first task, but then she points out the distress signal knob is turned down to zero.

You wonder out loud if your friend who was near the communication array could have turned the distress signal down. Maybe they have the parasite. Your friend walks into the room and points out that the distress signal needed to be turned off to prevent a group of nearby space pirates from finding you. You say that a parasite would probably not want us to send a distress signal, so maybe that's a lie. A third friend nearby mentions that if you were the one with the parasite, that's exactly what a guilty person would say. BETI interrupts to remind you all that time is ticking down while you chat. Everyone disperses again.

You run to the galley to patch a breach in the hull which is done by compiling a physical set of Tetris-style puzzle pieces. Upon completion, you are called to help your friend vent CO2 from the ship by instructing them to hit a series of buttons either faster or slower based on the pulse of the ship's ventilation system as shown on a screen above your friend's head.

As the CO2 puzzle finishes, all the electricity on the ship abruptly winks out. You feel the temperature drop as you rush back to the Bridge to find that only BETI, linked to the essential life support systems, remains active. She says that she fears the parasitic crew member onboard was able to cut the power flow from the ship's reactor core by accessing it via the breach in the galley's hull. You just fixed the breach in the galley's hull! Your friend points out that you were just seen near the hull breach in the galley. You insist that you were in fact fixing the hull and not infiltrating the power, but your friends don't look convinced.

Suddenly the Comms station screen glows in the relative darkness of the powered down ship. BETI chirps that the emergency backup battery for the Comms station was her idea, and that she's glad she has such good ideas. You as the Comms director must look through the night-vision view of the ship's Reactor to direct your teammates to the core's deconstructed pieces and assemble them back together. Your fellow crewmates will be in darkness, so it is up to you to tell them where to look, how to move and what to assemble.

Your team members run off, but as they leave, you overhear one friend saying, "I don't know if we can trust them to do this, they seem like a parasite brain to me." You only take minor offense to that and successfully guide your team into re-assembling the reactor core to restore power to the ship.

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It seems like public opinion has swayed towards you being the saboteur, but you know that someone has been undoing all of your tasks so far and you are pretty sure you aren't the guilty party. Remembering your gift of past-sight, you run over to the previous puzzles you'd completed and tap them with your badge. Back at your Comms screen on the Bridge, the computer informs you that at each of these places, the last person to interact with them was the same friend. You now feel pretty confident this friend is the saboteur.

40 minutes is now up, and BETI calls the team to assemble at their stations to vote on who they think the parasite-infected saboteur is. You confidently state that your gift of past-sight has allowed you to determine your one friend was at the galley hull before the reactor was compromised. Unfortunately, to the rest of your friends that sounds like you are trying to deflect the blame from yourself. Each person votes at their station... BETI announces that you have been accused of being the saboteur. As you protest, multiple red lasers zero in on you. With a flash of light and a zapping sound, BETI says that you have been eliminated. Your organic form has been sterilized of all space worms and will crumble to dust after you leave the gravitational chamber of the ship. "Sorry about that!"

BETI announces that she will do another diagnostic sweep of the room to make sure the parasite has been eliminated. She does so, and disappointedly tells the team that they have zapped an innocent crewmember. Unfortunately, the parasite has had 40 minutes to multiply and is now gleefully settling down into everyone else's brains. While the team was able to get the ship back into working order, the parasites will now simply have an operational vehicle to do their bidding as they multiply throughout the rest of the galaxy.

"You fixed the ship! Yay! But you failed to identify the saboteur, zapping an innocent crewmate in the process. Now the parasite has erupted from its initial host and spread to the rest of you and is using your newly fixed ship to spread itself across the galaxy. Congrats on sealing the doom of intelligent life everywhere!"

The front window of the ship is populated with HUD graphics detailing the team's stats, including how many puzzles were successfully solved and in how much time. A callout congratulates your friend in the Pilot role for calculating the ship's course in the day's record time. Still, an overall score shows that the group as a whole received one out of three stars for fixing the ship but not finding the correct saboteur.

As you exit back to the lobby some of your friends check out the merch stands, and you notice that on the "Galaxy's Most Wanted" board there is a new mugshot, that of your friend who you had suspected of being the parasite. Looks like they're still at large. You vow to avenge yourself when the group gets together to play again.