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X-Com: Allegory for Adulthood

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I recently started watching *Scrubs* again, and as a “young professional,” it has started carrying a different meaning. It would be nice to be J.D., able to grow as a professional and cope with the pressures of adulthood with the support of my friends and the lessons of a mean-spirited but ultimately well-meaning mentor. Unfortunately, I live in the real world, and growing up is more like being constantly shot at by aliens. Life surprises you in difficult and often murderous ways, and oftentimes it’s less like J.D.’s idyllic narration, and more like a constant struggle against an unknown force. 2K’s 2012 remake of the 1994 strategy game series *XCOM* carries depressing parallels with trying to make it as a 20-something in the professional world. It’s full of uncertainty, difficult decisions, rotten luck, and is seemingly impossible.

*XCOM* is a turn-based tactics game in which you control a squad of soldiers and are charged with protecting humanity from an invading extraterrestrial threat. The full name of the game is *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, and it fits; as soon as you are accustomed to one type of enemy, another more terrifying and threatening unit shows up. You are woefully outnumbered and outgunned in virtually every mission, and even when you’re doing everything right, you might be losing. Kind of like growing up, right? In addition to the tactics-style missions, there is a resource-allocation aspect to the game. As you complete missions, you choose what dead alien bits to research in hopes of losing fewer soldiers in future missions. Even choosing the missions themselves carries consequences; alien abductions are going on everywhere at once, and while one country might offer precious engineers as a reward for your meager protection, the country you don’t pay attention pulls its funding and joins the mindless ranks of alien sympathizers. The lesson here? You can’t please everybody, and you have to look at the long-term benefit of every decision, even if it forces you to burn some bridges.

The most frustrating thing about starting the game is almost never being able to hit the little rotters that you’re shooting at. Additionally, rookies are prone to panic, which causes them to lose a turn, and may also cause them to run out of cover or shoot their own teammates. What’s the real-life parallel here? Well, *XCOM* is supposedly short for “Extraterrestrial Combat Unit.” This implies that these soldiers were handpicked and specially trained for killing aliens, and yet, they are very bad at it when you start. Compare these rookies to your run-of-the-mill bachelor’s degree holder. This piece of paper supposedly means you are ready to enter the workforce, prepared to take on the real world. And yet, at the first hint of the world fighting back, some folks just freak out.

As you slowly progress, spending your precious cash and recovered materials on what you hope are the best investments in the future, you eventually get weapons that can do more than dent your enemies, and armor that keeps your recruits from dying with one hit. Unfortunately, the hits keep on coming. If any soldiers take too much damage in one mission, they’re out of commission for a few days. So you shoot down an enemy craft, take out the survivors, and even take an alien captive for interrogation, but in the process, some of your best troops are put in the infirmary. Naturally, aliens immediately start terrorizing some major city, and the only combat-ready soldiers are a handful of rookies. This is how life just keeps on happening. Every success seems to pale in comparison to the next challenge. You got the job! Naturally, all of your major appliances break.

Even the individual enemies carry some metaphor for how difficult life can be once you’re out in the world. Fair warning, there are some *XCOM* spoilers ahead, so if you care about that sort of thing, just skip to the final paragraph.

Your first enemy is the Sectoid. It seems weak enough, but it has more resources than you, and two Sectoids can pair up to do some real harm. These are like those bottom-feeding coworkers — they know the system, and they know how to stay in it, to the detriment of what you are trying to accomplish. They may not be tough or competent, but they’re connected, and they’ve been around
long enough to know how to seriously hurt you when threatened. They'll catch your smallest mistake. You are better than them, but you still have to walk on eggshells around them because they’ll mess you up.

Next up is the Thin Man. Appropriately suited, these are the bureaucracy constantly throwing the wrench in your plans. They are terribly difficult to hit, generally prefer ambushing you at the end of missions, and often go into over-watch, which means they forego an action during their turn to shoot at you when you try to move. On top of that, they shoot poison with deadly accuracy, which can leave soldiers who barely survived a previous hit in a hopeless position. They are the parking ticket; the speed trap; the unexpected expense right after you paid the rent. They are every little officious thing that at best slows you down unnecessarily and at worst cripples you for not being prepared.

When you see Mutons, you know things are getting real. Mutons are basically your soldiers, but better. More health, bigger guns, better grenades, and if you haven’t been keeping up with the Joneses (pic of the aliens caption: meet the Jones family) you’re screwed. Mutons are better equipped than you, and they know it. They take full advantage of this, and have the ability to intimidate your troops in response to being fired at. The various Mutons represent your wealthy peers, and probably that guy I mentioned earlier who got the job because he was more qualified. They’re the experienced co-worker that puts you down when you’re doing well because they feel threatened.

Chrysalids are probably the enemy you’re least likely to be prepared for. They make their debut in the first terror mission, when you’re lucky if you’ve had the chance to upgrade anything. If you haven’t lost any soldiers yet, you probably will lose at least one to these. Kill it when it comes back as a zombie, because that is what’s coming next, and if you don’t, it turns into another Chrysalid. Chrysalids are death and disease. No matter how on top of it you’ve been, something like this is going to come out of the blue and knock you down a peg or two. Dealing with grief and health is always going to be a priority.

At the top of all this, the Ethereals are pulling the strings. These psychics can mind-control your soldiers, reflect their shots, and are always accompanied by a retinue of the best-equipped Muton Elites. In the final mission, you learn that these powerful beings are outcasts, who failed their attempt to transcend existence, or something. The short of it is that they conquered the other beings you’ve been fighting all this time to drain their psychic energy. Ethereals are the top-heavy managers and CEOs that have more power over your life and the lives of others than anyone should have.

So why carry on? Why fight this fight? Well, because you have to. You can’t just give up. And when you win, it feels so much more satisfying for the challenge of it. XCOM isn’t Nintendo hard, all about pattern recognition and lightning-fast reflexes; it requires you to learn from your failures in a different way, and accept that sometimes the dice turn up snake eyes. And the game, like life, never gets easier, you just get better at it, more prepared and more resilient. Sure, here is a clear turning point as far as having the resources you need. In the game, it’s probably around the point you get armor that lets you fly. In professional life, it’s probably around the point where you have a job with a salary and health benefits. You can still lose, though. You can have every single advantage and still choke. What ultimately wins you the game is the memory of how hard things were before you had all these advantages. The mindset keeps you from getting cocky, making stupid mistakes, and screwing up on spite of the advantages you’ve slowly accrued. Because of the cumulative nature of small victories, it’s easy to lose perspective and not fully realize what got us where we are. If we put as much caution in our latest missions as we did in our earliest, augmented by what we learned from our downfalls, we improve. While XCOM ultimately ends, it’s good to hold on to those lessons.