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ALIENS

COLONIAL MARINES

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EXCLUSIVE
GOD OF WAR
CHAINS OF OLYMPUS
REVIEW
PG. 104

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ISSUE 179

US \$5.99 | EUR €5.99 | UK £3.99



MARCH 2008

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC
> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO
4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, XBOX
LIVE, OR PC INTERNET)
> PUBLISHER SEGA
> DEVELOPER GEARBOX SOFTWARE
> RELEASE 2009

PEACE
THROUGH
SUPERIOR
FIREPOWER

ALIENS

COLONIAL MARINES

Ripley is dead. None of the soldiers dispatched from the military ship *Sulaco* survived the infestation of the colony Hadley's Hope. The details of their doomed struggle against a predatory alien species on the moon LV-426 are unknown. In the absence of firsthand accounts, only one clue remains to illuminate the unexplained disappearance of Hicks, Vasquez, Hudson, and the rest of the squad. That clue is the *Sulaco* itself, which has been found floating through space, the hypersleep pods ejected after an apparent fire in the chamber. The ship does not respond to any communications. Sent in to investigate the disappearance, a new squad of colonial marines is about to stumble upon the horror Lieutenant Ellen Ripley sacrificed herself to destroy: ruthlessly adaptable creatures bred as weapons and created for war. Hundreds of them.



“A few years ago, we made of list of a lot projects that we would really like to work on. At the top of my list was Aliens.”

Brian Martel, creative director



The gaming industry has a love affair with space marines. As one of the most recognizable and popular archetypes in entertainment, these futuristic super-soldiers defend humanity with a mix of heavy weaponry and advanced technology, and they are always just a dropship away from the unknown. The space marine mythos is the centerpiece of some of gaming's greatest success stories — *Doom*, *StarCraft*, and *Halo* all use the concept to pit players against an alien menace. The elements these games share, from the standard-issue pulse rifle to the corridors of a derelict freighter, are not due to coincidence. They all draw from the same source material: *Aliens*, the movie that set the precedent for an entire genre.

Taking inspiration from Robert Heinlein's novel *Starship Troopers*, James Cameron's *Aliens* took the notion of soldiers-in-space and created the visual and thematic conventions that instantly became the standard for military science fiction — a standard that remains intact today. But if *Aliens* is the progenitor of this incredibly fertile brand of fiction, then why has it been eight years since a true *Alien* game was released on home consoles? Conceptually similar titles (like *Gears of War* and *Mass Effect*) enjoy praise while the *Alien* franchise lies dormant...but not for much longer. Thanks to a passionate team at Dallas-based Gearbox Software, gamers will have a chance to experience space marines in their native habitat: the *Aliens* fiction.

“A few years ago, we made of list of a lot projects that we would really like to work on,”

recalls creative director Brian Martel. “At the top of my list was *Aliens*.” Art director Brian Cozzens adds, “We’re finally at the point where the game can be made in a similar blockbuster style as the movie was — and be a legitimate treatment, not a watered-down version.” The game is called *Aliens* for a reason; its look, feel, action, and characters are based on the film *Aliens*, not the franchise as a whole. With the numerous technological and graphical possibilities afforded by current consoles, Gearbox believes it is finally possible to translate all of the film's signature elements into authentic and exciting gameplay.

Put briefly, *Aliens* is about a small group of archetypal characters, a moderate arsenal of weapons, and a lot of aliens. Addressing the first point, *Aliens: Colonial Marines* will be a first-person shooter with mechanics that stress working together as a unit. The story begins with four Colonial Marines (currently named Winter, Bella, O’Neal, and Monday) sent in to investigate the Suloco, the ship Ripley escaped in at the end of *Aliens*. Unlike many FPS titles, there is not one central hero character — the role is shared among the whole squad. The game reinforces that notion by assigning the player to control a set marine for a particular mission; in the single-player campaign, you will have the chance to experience everyone's perspective.

All of the Colonial Marines have considerable combat potential, but their abilities vary depending on specialization and equipment. Marines can carry four weapons — a primary gun, a secondary one, grenades, and a sidearm. The primary weapons, like smart guns and

pulse rifles, are essentially how the team at Gearbox is representing a character's class. A squad member who carries the massive smart gun is the one you count on for firepower, while the riflemen will probably be more versatile. Since certain weapons are tied to a character's role (and personality), you'll stick with them for the duration of your time controlling a particular marine. “We wish to remain authentic to true soldiers, so characters generally do not drop or pick up weapons,” explains lead designer Keith Schuler. “That is one of the reasons we switch between characters during the game — to keep our soldiers realistic, but still give the player access to different weaponry throughout the game.”

The secondary weapons will vary and be customized according to the character, like Hicks' shotgun in *Aliens*. Grenades are pretty self-explanatory, and the sidearms are small one-handed weapons that characters can use for defense while using another item, like the motion tracker. To further differentiate the characters, each one will also carry a special item that can interact with allies or the environment. For instance, the hacking tool will allow you to open sealed doors, the torch can weld things shut, and allies using a medical kit can revive you as well as neutralize the inevitable acid burns.

Regardless of which squad member you're controlling, you will have access to the abilities of your entire team. You may be placed in the shoes of just one marine, but the game allows

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■ In the pipe, five by five, Aliens: Colonial Marines uses the original dropship, not a re-imagined knock-off like those featured in other space shooters



■ Even though Ripley's sleeping chamber was jettisoned, there are others aboard the Suloco that your team will explore



■ There will be some driving segments, but the gameplay is focused primarily on squad shooting



CONCEPT TO REALITY

In the history of licensed video games, there have been many attempts to expand the universe of a particular franchise by introducing new settings. In *Aliens*, players will definitely see things that weren't in the films, but Gearbox's approach lends an unusual credibility to these departures. For instance, the team is cooperating with the original conceptual designer for the *Suloco*, Syd Mead, to ensure that everything is perfectly in line. For instance, the Colonial Marines' exploration of the *Suloco* will take them into unseen parts of the ship, so Mead created art to represent how those areas would have looked had they been in the film. This level of consistency and detail is just part of the team's commitment to authenticity. As you can see in these comparison shots, the areas that overlap between the film and the game will be recreated with impressive accuracy. The team even contacted Kodak about the movie's film stock to get the details on each color channel to work into the shader.



■ In-Game



■ Movie

■ Since your view is undisturbed by any sort of HUD, you will be able to fully appreciate terrifying moments like this



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you to issue commands to your individual squad-mates. In addition to handling basic move and attack orders, you can give context-sensitive commands by targeting specific parts of your surroundings, such as hacking doors, sealing air vents, and setting up gun turrets.

You won't be dictating your squad's actions with the level of specificity of *Rainbow Six Vegas*, but the tactical element still plays a large role in combat. After all, we all know what happens to the marine who just runs into a hive with guns blazing. Aliens are nearly perfect hunters, and that requires a more measured approach, which also serves to highlight the horror and suspense elements prevalent in the film. Your foes will rarely just come barreling at you, and they never stay back and fire from behind cover. "There's a problem with aliens — they don't have a lot of distance weapons," observes Martel. Aliens hide in air ducts, above pipes in the ceiling, and under the grating on the floor, just waiting for the moment to strike. In the game, they will use the environment to their full advantage.

As a result, players may have to reevaluate the standard squad shooter approach. Position, firepower, and cooperation take precedence over finding cover in *Aliens*. One member will probably be holding the classic motion tracker (which emits the signature tapping sound pulled straight from the Fox archives), because even if you can't see the aliens it doesn't mean they aren't there. Another marine might be up front with a flamethrower, ready to stem a tide of xenomorphs, while the other two could guard the flanks with iconic pulse rifles. Holding this position, you could make it through a darkened corridor unscathed...or you might hear a rapid tapping noise

as a swarm of blue dots appears on the tracker. At that point, you'd better stay alert and dig in for a rough fight on all fronts.

This atmosphere of tension and isolation is an important part of *Aliens*, and thankfully, you don't need to take on the threat alone. Gearbox is committed to making players feel like an integral part of a functioning unit, and part of that is offering support for four-player co-op in the campaign. You can delve into world with up to three friends at your side, uncovering the mystery and horror together. Even better, it will allow for a combination of split-screen and online play; two players can share one screen in offline co-op, or you can go online to fill the vacancies. Players can easily drop into and out of a game at will, and the AI will handle all marines that aren't player-controlled.

Being able to coordinate your assaults with other humans will help keep you alive, but you won't always be in a position to use conventional tactics. There will be plenty of corridor firefights, but at certain points you will need to make a stand — find a somewhat defensible position and use it to keep a flood of aliens at bay. These sequences are designed to be reminiscent of a scene in the director's cut of *Aliens* that depicts the marines setting up defenses and securing their location.

For example, you might find yourself in a hangar bay with only two exits and hostiles on all sides. Before you are completely overwhelmed, you will have a few precious seconds to increase your odds of survival.

You may send one team member to reactivate a gun turret in the corner, order another to close the metal shielding over the windows, and personally seal one of the doors yourself. Then the onslaught begins, and you and your team will have to fight back a stream of aliens while securing the remaining entry points in the room, like ventilation shafts and maintenance hatches. Once all breaches are contained, the aliens eventually relent, and you are free to continue your mission.

Though these tense situations will undoubtedly be gratifying in single-player, just imagine the heightened thrill of coordinating your survival in four-player co-op. Instead of ordering the AI around, you can work together to identify the problem areas. The development team is currently even toying with the idea of making it possible (though difficult) for a well-organized team to neutralize all liabilities in an environment before a single alien manages to break through. That feat would require an observant and fast-acting team familiar with their abilities both as individuals and as a unit.

Though your allies will have different capabilities according to specialization





■ If you are grabbed by a facehugger, you will have react quickly using the close encounter mechanics to avoid death



(and who is controlling them), they are more than just sets of abilities and weapons. The characters' personalities will provide a more immediate and entertaining way to get to know them. In *Aliens*, some of the most memorable moments come from Hudson's panicked screams or Apone's cigar-chomping attitude, and Gearbox is working hard to ensure that the characters in the game are just as likeable and easy to connect with. "That's something people forget: The characters do matter," emphasizes Martel. "Everybody thinks 'Oh, they're going to be fodder,' but if you don't care about them, they're pointless."

One major step toward making gamers care about these marines is Gearbox's collaboration with *Battlestar Galactica* writers Bradley Thompson and David Weddle, an experienced sci-fi writing duo that has infused the popular show with complex characters, political intrigue, and cool dialogue.

Not only does Thompson and Weddle's involvement mean that we'll be treated to plenty of clever mission banter, but it also indicates that the story of *Aliens* will go far beyond the adrift *Sulaco*. A force of

opposing human enemies (your team is comprised of United States Colonial Marines) are also interested in harnessing the aliens as biological weapons, and you'll have to deal with them. Fans of the original *Alien* will also be pleased to know that players may finally learn more about the enigmatic species referred to as "the Space Jockey," an extraterrestrial creature who sat dead in a chair aboard the crashed *Derelect*, the ship where the current alien threat seems to have originated. We know that your team will be sent on a

mission back to LV-426 to investigate the *Derelect*, but how all the events will tie together – and where they will lead – is still a mystery.

As much fun as it will be to watch the characters develop and guide them through the campaign, the co-op feature poses a unique problem to the development of the game's story. A static group of four members runs counter to the goal of staying true to the *Aliens* film. That storyline saw the deaths of fan-favorite characters like Hudson and Vasquez, and your group shouldn't be any safer, even if your best friends are controlling them.

"We have squadmates that need to survive, basically, until we kill them in the story," laughs Schuler. This could throw a wrench in the workings of your group, especially if it leaves a fourth player without a marine to control. Gearbox is aware of the difficulties this presents, but hasn't quite settled on the best way to resolve the situation. "We are going to make the absolute best co-op game we can make to the extent that it doesn't interfere with the best single-player game we can make," states lead programmer Kyle

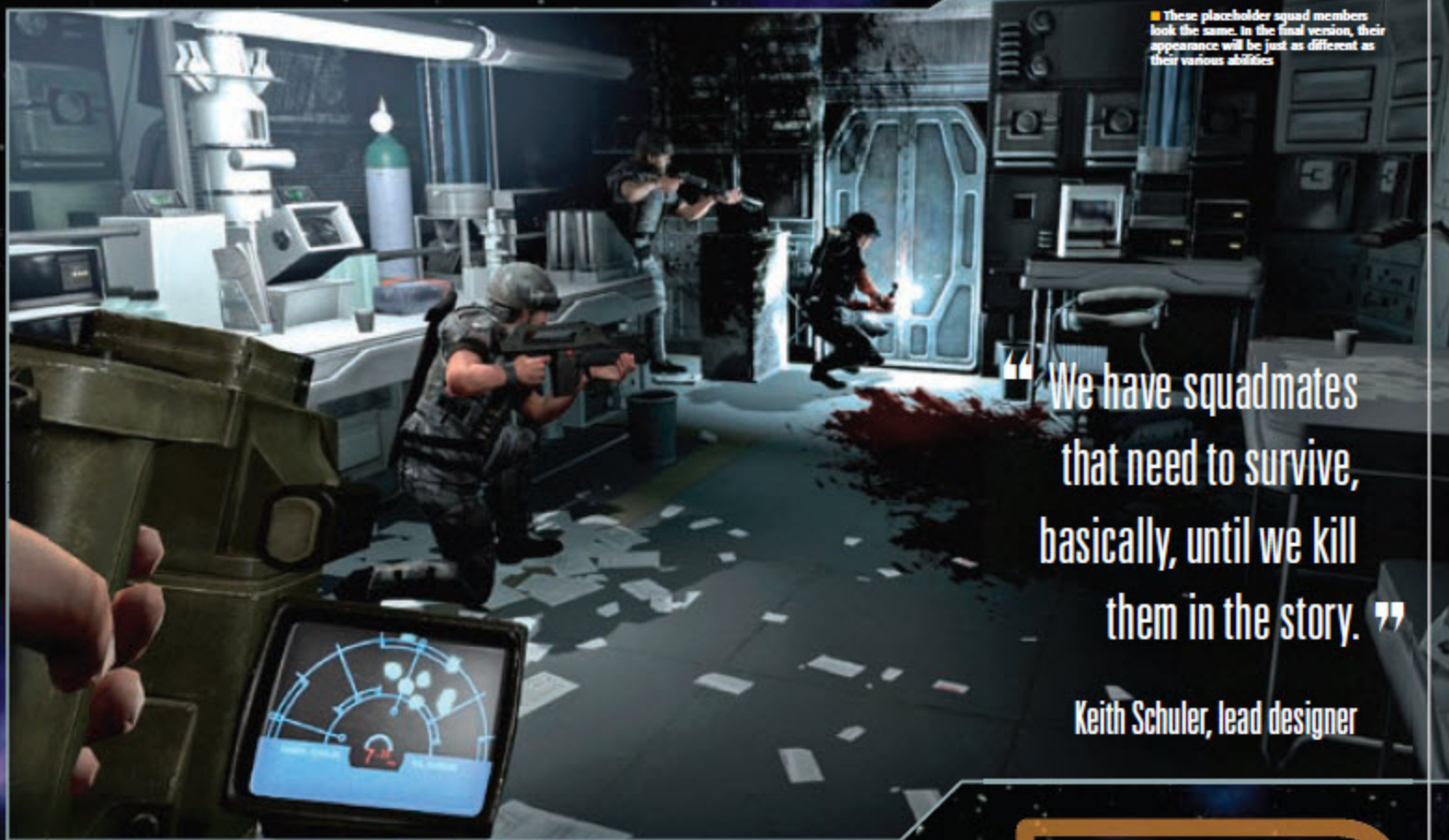
Davis diplomatically. "Obviously, there are some things we can't do if there are always four people alive, but there are ways around that situation. We are going to find them, because it's our job to."

Though one of the hallmarks of the *Alien* franchise, character death is not something that will occur constantly. The development team hopes that the writing and gameplay will help players bond with each of the squad members, so when (and if) someone's time comes, it contributes to the tension and plot of the game. Ideally, players will develop an emotional attachment to all of the main characters. If not, there may be a different kind of mourning. "Even if the player doesn't grieve for the character, they'll at least feel some kind of loss," says Schuler. "Like, 'Aw, man! That was the guy with the awesome smart gun!'" At least some good will come of it all; the scenes where you lose your comrades are sure to be gruesomely entertaining because, as Schuler wryly puts it, "Aliens are kind of deadly."

Previously, technological limitations kept *Alien* titles from truly capturing the terrifying nature of H.R. Giger's creations. After all, when a xenomorph is simply standing in front of your character and repeatedly playing the claw-swipe animation, it doesn't convey the creature's lethal agility or the dread intensity of being hunted. "If you're laying down fire and the aliens are just there in your face, it just isn't much fun," observes Martel. Those days are over.

It makes sense to shoot at aliens when they are at a distance, but considering their acid blood, spiked tails, and second mouths, confronting them in melee range is a deadly proposition. In order to communicate the sheer power and ferocity of the xenomorphs, the team is implementing a mechanic it is calling "close encounters." These are scripted

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■ These placeholder squad members look the same. In the final version, their appearance will be just as different as their various abilities

"We have squadmates that need to survive, basically, until we kill them in the story."

Keith Schuler, lead designer



■ Using a turret to mow down xenomorphs is a good way to avoid being splashed by acid blood

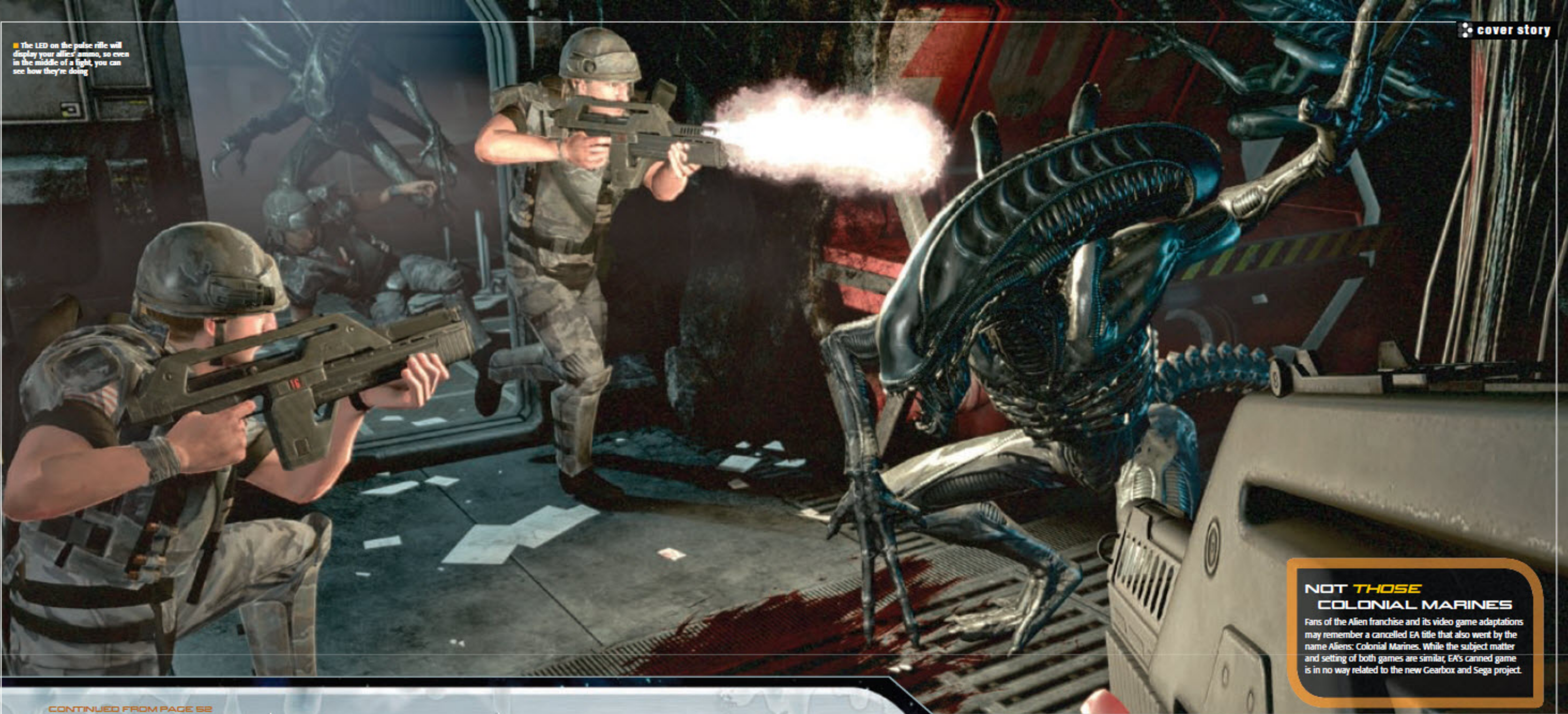
ONLINE BUG HUNT

Aliens will have multiplayer capabilities in addition to the four-player cooperative mode. Beyond that, no specifics have been confirmed. However, we couldn't help but overhear several team members discussing their fondness for *Quake II's* Gloom mod. That particular mod has an *Aliens* flavor, with humans fighting spiders in upgrade-driven combat, and we would definitely be excited if something similar were to find its way into *Aliens*' online multiplayer.



■ The *Quake II* Gloom mod

■ The LED on the pulse rifle will display your allies' ammo, so even in the middle of a fight, you can see how they're doing



NOT THOSE COLONIAL MARINES

Fans of the Alien franchise and its video game adaptations may remember a cancelled EA title that also went by the name *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. While the subject matter and setting of both games are similar, EA's canned game is in no way related to the new Gearbox and Sega project.

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sequences that allow players to witness an alien that the regular gameplay wouldn't otherwise accommodate.

Similar in concept to the button-press minigames popularized by *God of War*, close encounters will differ in execution. For example, one close encounter we witnessed from a first-person perspective was the player character getting grabbed by an alien from above, and then dragged through a vertical ventilation shaft. After firing a few rounds from his pulse rifle, the marine briefly scared off the creature, then he began to kick out a nearby grate to escape. After getting halfway out, there was a tug at his leg, and he was pulled back inside the vent, frantically shooting and pleading for rescue.

"Close encounters are almost unlimited in their ability to let us do what we want to do," elaborates Schuler.

"Aliens can interact with the world — it isn't just a bunch of button presses until it's over. The alien could leap back onto a cabinet, or another one of your squadmates. He could leap back and through a duct and out of sight."

Since these sequences are intended to be a cinematic way to showcase the aliens and their tactics, it doesn't do much good if a big button prompt pops up in the middle of the screen. The marine's actions described in the ventilation shaft example are initiated by the player by responding to less intrusive instructions. A subtle flash of green on the right side of the screen tells you to move the analog stick in that direction, whereas one in the upper-left corner could be a prompt to pull the left trigger. By briefly abandoning the game's usual control scheme, close encounters make it possible for the

team to create those one-of-a-kind combat situations that capture the flavor of the most iconic moments in *Aliens*. "If we were to recreate the power-loader battle against the queen, that would be a close encounter," Schuler concludes.

The xenomorphs are among the most recognizable monsters in cinema, and it should be exciting to see them using the same tactics that they do in the films. Unfortunately, no matter how bloodthirsty and fearsome they are, it's hard to deny that the aliens don't have much variety among their ranks. This is a problem that has plagued Alien games since the beginning: what can players fight besides face-huggers, xenomorphs, and (at the end) a queen?

Since the aliens' form adapts to the DNA of its host,

there are many other possibilities for enemy types. Even so, fans needn't worry about fighting a menagerie of improbable beasts or incarnations that don't fit with the tone of the franchise. "There won't be porcupine aliens shooting spines at you," Martel assures us. "It can't be goofy or stupid." It could be cool to see a new alien silhouette creeping out from the shadows, but behavior and attack patterns will ultimately do much more to differentiate the enemies than appearance.

"You have the original alien from *Alien*, and we sort of think of him as the smart one, as a scout. He'll hide and ambush people," explains Martel. "Then there's the warrior

alien, which we see in *Aliens*, which is going to be the one that rushes you and comes out in volume." In addition, the team is experimenting with new designs that add variety to the universe without being inconsistent, like a drone alien with a carapace especially suited for transporting eggs. The exact role they play in combat, as well as other potential xenomorph forms, are still a topic of discussion.

Some aspects of the vision for *Aliens* are still falling into place. Since gamers shouldn't expect to see the game until the first half of 2009, there is still plenty of time for the dedicated team to experiment with things like enemy design and how to handle the challenge of face-huggers.

There is one thing that has been set in stone since day one, though: a commitment to faithfully capturing the look and feel of the best and most popular film in the Alien series. If things go according to plan, Gearbox's foray into this classic franchise will finally see it elevated to the level of other high-profile titles in the genre it created. "It's the granddaddy of all military sci-fi," Martel states. "With next-gen technology, we can finally do it justice. We can really make the aliens look scary, we can make the setting freaky, and we can create characters the player cares about." With all of those areas under control, what more could fans want? That's it. Game over, man. ■ ■ ■