

feature

Aliens: Colonial Marines



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hunt

22 years after it was released, our favourite sci-fi film finally gets the game it deserves with **Aliens: Colonial Marines**



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Aliens: Colonial Marines

Well armed
Offensive capabilities include a Gatling gun and six types of missile. Just in case.

Room for a small one?

The Dropship's hold can carry 10 passengers plus the M17 armoured personnel carrier.

The dropship

Also called the UH-4, Chryseus, this is an orbit-to-surface transport. In the Aliens movie the USG Sulaco carries two, so if one is lost the other can be flown by remote control to rescue stranded marines from a planet's surface.

are about to face an enemy which they're entirely unprepared for.

Absolute badass!

Whereas the Ridley Scott original was essentially a haunted house film but set in space, James Cameron's follow-up is a full-blown war movie. Specifically, a Vietnam war movie, only with the xenomorphs subbing in for the Viet Cong. And from the visual style to the frantic action, it's almost impossible to overstate just how influential Aliens has been on videogames. Not just HR Giger's iconic creatures, traces of whose nightmarishly sexualised design are still everywhere, but the marines themselves.

surprising, because when you watch Aliens it's impossible not to start dreaming about how cool it would be to play.

Of course there have been plenty of Alien games (see below), and EA even got so far as showing a playable Colonial Marines game on PS2 in 2001, but the truth is that, until now, the technology hasn't been there to really bring that world, and those characters, to life. Which brings us to Dallas, Texas, and Gearbox Software – the developer best known for the Brothers In Arms WW2 series, and now busy trying to make its dream game come true on PS3.

The signs are good. Entering Gearbox's offices is like walking into a fanboy's bedroom, only with much more expensive furniture. Alien concept art plasters the walls, models litter desks and the boardroom is home to a huge xenomorph figure. Members of development team even show ▶

Dev talk

"We're tapping into the western, sci-fi, but at the same time we want players to experience places they've never gone before. There will be a wide variety of locations, all of which will remain true to what you've come to expect from Aliens." Brian Marshall, Producer, Gearbox

Alright, sweethearts, what are you waiting for? Breakfast in bed? Another glorious day in the Corps! A day in the Marine Corps is like a day on the farm. Every meal's a banquet! Every paycheck a fortune! Every formation a parade! I LOVE the corps! Hell, so do we sarge. Because for anyone even vaguely into sci-fi, to see Aliens in the late '80s was to enter into a lifelong obsession with the Colonial Marines. In the movie, the man extolling the virtues of service is Sergeant Apone, who sucks on a fat cigar as he moves among his only just defrosted troops, most of whom are too busy cussing to pay much attention.

"It's impossible to overstate the influence of Aliens."

The Marines capture the imagination because they seem so plausible. Just as the original Alien showed the tedium of a career as an interstellar haulier [the crew of the Nostromo are essentially a bunch of slobby truckers before everything goes chestbuster-shaped], so the sequel paints a portrait of the American military in space as the same cocksure bullies we recognise today, but with much better guns. It's only the viewer and Ripley who are acutely aware that these loudmouth grunts

Lines of their dialogue have been lifted verbatim by innumerable shooters. The mighty Call Of Duty 4 includes a number of references, not least when one soldier reaches for his shotgun and says "I like to keep this for close encounters", a direct homage to Aliens' Corporal Hicks. And then there's the hardware: the Pulse Rifle with its ammo counter, the Dropship and the APC, the steadicam rig-harnessed Smart Guns carried by Drake and Vasquez... all have been ripped off mercilessly. But that's hardly

Alien Legacy

Alien (1980, Atari)

The first game came out 20 years ago. A time when high-tech meant wood-effect flesh. It was essentially Pac-Man, only with facehugger eggs for pills and xenomorphs for ghosts. Safe to say the bar was set low.



Aliens: The Videogame

(1988, Commodore/Amiga)

Small talk, right, shoot sassy alien, watch it drip like a wet fanny. That's the game. The only thing less interesting was watching it fall to load from cassette.



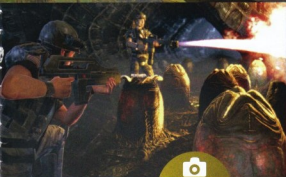
Aliens (1993, Arcade)

Classic scrolling shooter, this was a far stab at doing the movie justice as Lieutenant Ripley and Corporal Hicks roamed a series of familiar environments battling up with flamethrowers and Pulse Rifles.





The sinister Weyland-Yutani Corporation use their interest in deep space mining as a cover for alien research.



Aliens use the air ducts to travel around and launch surprise attacks.

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**EXCLUSIVE
SHOTS**
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The insistent ping of the motion tracker will make siege moments like this unbearable.

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Aliens: Colonial Marines

"That's inside the room!"

The key to defeating the aliens is limiting their attack routes. If one gets among your squad it's game over man. Game over.



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Squeeze the trigger

The rifle uses 160mm electrically triggered armour piercing caseless rounds. It can fire in four-round bursts, semi-automatic or – panic! – full-auto.

Big thing

Blowing up the trigger, each rifle carries an underbarrel M203 30mm side action grenade launcher.

The M41 Pulse Rifle

Designed by director James Cameron, working models were built from WW2 Thompson SMGs – to provide the huge muzzle flash – while shotgun parts formed the grenade launcher.

us their replica of the film's iconic motion tracker, with a pride in their eyes usually only reserved for sons that are good enough at football to interest scouts. There's even a rumour that Gearbox, Colonial Marines' developer, has a working pulse rifle stashed in their offices. The fact that this ludicrous piece of info generates a momentary surge of excitement simply underscores the fact that even 22 years after its cinema release, Aliens has lost none of its draw.

Rather than remaking the movie, Gearbox is harvesting all of Aliens' major elements to create a new story – a spiritual successor that centres on a new squad of Colonial Marines. So androids, exploding stomachs and the sinister Weyland-Yutani Corporation will all make appearances. Gearbox is coy about specific plot details, but it does follow the events of Aliens. Sci-fi writers Bradley Thomas and David Weddle are working on the script, a duo whose most notable recent work has been for the ace but awesomely bleak Battletear Galactica television series. You'll get to play as a number of different characters within the squad, enabling you to experience the horror from every possible perspective. We're predicting the usual tough but beautiful

"The plot follows on after the events of Aliens."

Shooting Aliens at this range should drench you in lethal acid blood, although Gearbox is still fine-tuning the effect.

girl, noble hero, a Private Hudson-style coward/maniac and someone with a secret to be part of that line-up. But with the aliens crawling around, allegiances could be fragile – when a chestbuster could well be napping inside your mate's guts, paranoia is likely to be a problem.

Game time

Sweep And Clear was our first taste of life as a Colonial Marine. It's a simple mission to explore the abandoned Sulaco spaceship used to transport the Colonial Marines to the doomed terraforming colony LV-426 in Aliens. The HUD is minimal, with only a Pulse Rifle bobbing in front of your face. Moving through corridors, the squad's heavy footsteps echo loudly. The ship feels instantly familiar, right down to the sterile glow of the blue lighting. The design team went to Syd Mead, who produced the concept art for Aliens, for details on previously unseen areas of the ship. The only difference from the movie is that the Sulaco now shows the scars of its previous adventures. Slowly edging through the quiet rooms reveals the burnt hyper sleep chamber, complete with



Alien Legacy

Alien 3 (1992, SNES/Mega Drive) Alien 3, the movie, was a return to the low tech, weapons-free scares of the original film, featuring a lone alien. The game ditched all that and let Ripley go postal with a range of guns against an army of E.T.s.



Alien Vs Predator (1994, Jaguar) Shooter that enabled you to play as alien, predator or marine, each with unique skills. The marine accused computers, the alien used air ducts and the predator could cloak. Best game on the doomed console.



Alien Trilogy (1995, PlayStation) Marking the movie series' PlayStation debut this Doom clone loosely followed all three films. Despite poor level design and a thin story it went through with its great looks and strong action.





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Aliens: Colonial Marines

charred pods, and evidence of Ripley's climatic battle with the alien queen. Looking up shows an alien egg lodged in the ceiling space. Whipping out a motion tracker – and keeping our pistol ready in the other hand – we move towards a rack of lockers as the tracker picks up movement. Its insistent metallic ping is immediately recognisable and makes your heart rate kick up a notch, just as the screen fades to black.

If we were feeling cheated it didn't last long. It's straight on to the next mission,

the screen with  and . It feels far less intrusive than similar events in *God Of War* or *Resident Evil 4*, although it takes a little getting used to.

The grand finale of our hands-on, a level called Make A Stand, is a classic tense siege situation. The squad moves through dark and narrow corridors to arrive in an empty garage area. It's a murky stop-off with the sound of rain hammering the windows nibbling away at already frayed nerves. The aim in this section is just to survive, using

and moving like gravity-defying velociraptors. Pulse Rifles flash, exoskeletons explode and it looks like we might stand a chance. Then someone cries out. "They're under the floor!"

One thing currently conspicuous by its absence is blood. One of the xenomorphs' most charming features is its acid blood, which has posed some real problems for the game designers. It will affect gameplay, causing damage and scarring the environment, but it won't necessarily dissolve everything. So it won't be something the player has to worry about constantly. It'll be no fun for anyone if the floor dissolves underneath your feet the first time you cap an alien. Rest assured, there will be plenty of blood (human and xenomorph) in the finished game, but Gearbox is still working on it. Let's face it: you can't have chestbusters birthing without a lot of internal organ salsa.

"Rest assured, there will be acid blood in the game."

Close Encounters. *Aliens* is as much about horror as it is sci-fi, and we're about to get a massive dose of the former as we encounter a psychotic xenomorph for the first time. These confrontations are tightly scripted events that appear at set points in the game. As we're busy hacking into a keypad the view is suddenly violently flipped. It only takes a glimpse of a black claw to realise we're being dragged into an airshaft by an alien, and it doesn't take a spoon. As we wrestle with the angry ET, its black skin slick in the fluorescent lighting, bright colours flash at the edges of the screen. These correspond to the face buttons on the pad, demanding rapid reaction-testing interaction without filling

the environment to fend off an overpowering wave of alien attacks. You're working against the clock as time ticks down to the aliens' arrival. The trick is to scan the environment and figure out what you can use. Doors can be welded shut, bomb traps attached to oxygen tanks, and automated sentry turrets (yes!) carefully placed or assigned to squad mates. Get it right and you can funnel the aliens into the room in an orderly queue, upping your chances of picking them off. Get it wrong and they're all over the room like Satan's own wallpaper. It's a tense, claustrophobic feeling preparing for the assault, and that's without seeing any aliens. When they arrive, Spilling from the one remaining open door, hissing

All aboard

It's Kyle Davies, Gearbox's lead programmer, who announces that *Aliens* will include four-player co-op. "The goal is to have as much as possible, and hopefully the whole thing will be playable with your squad of four guys. Any of whom can be AI or human controlled." When games like *Army Of Two* are selling themselves on two-player co-op, Gearbox is integrating four-player co-op into what's already looking like a strong single-player experience. Hunting an alien queen can only be bettered if your mates are the ones watching your back.

The APC

The M557 armoured personnel carrier is an armed response vehicle and mobile command unit with a tactical operations centre to collect all the marines' video feeds.

Serret syndrome

The M557 carries twin 20mm Gatling guns and a foldaway turret to improve mobility in limited spaces.

Thick skinned

Although lightweight the APC is heavily armoured, making titanium plates with polymer means. The crew are protected from small arms fire, light armour-piercing rounds, lasers and land mines.

Alien Legacy

Alien Resurrection

2002, PlayStation
A genuinely scary game, this FPS used sound effects from the film to terrifying effect as you battled the most convincing aliens yet. Married only by extreme difficulty



Aliens Unleashed

2000, mobile phone
This reaction-feeding, battle-matching mini-adventure hooked you with taking out mass-made synthetic aliens that have run amok in a military base. No one can hear you scream? Stand near a window and see if you get a better signal.



Aliens: Extinction

2006, Arcade
Returning to the second movie this arcade shooter let you (like on the extraterrestrial) massacre with a huge plastic Pulse Rifle to fully live out your Colonial Marine fantasies.





One shot, one kill

With fast and agile aliens attacking in big numbers you'll have to conserve ammo. Panicky spray-and-pray tactics will only get you killed.



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Aliens: Colonial Marines



■ Screenshot of the month by a distance. "It looks like a..." "Yes. "With a..." "We know."


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"The team devoured every piece of source material."

Gearbox certainly has a pedigree when it comes to squad-based shooters. It also does the Brothers In Arms WW2 series, and it's not hard to transfer the experience earned there to Colonial Marines. The weapons might be more hardcore, but the essence of working as a team remains the same. Each member of your squad will have different skills, such as hacking, welding and explosives, and it'll be up to you to make the most of them. Commanding the team will be simple, a case of directing squad members where you want them to go or asking them to follow you.

The team has applied the same obsessive research it used on Brothers In Arms to

Aliens, as well. They couldn't visit locations or speak to veterans, of course, but they could devour every single piece of source material available. "I started by reading everything I could, every script, every comic book, trying to know everything I could about it, including the stuff that's not part of the main canon or the main storyline," explains Brian Martel, creative director. But that was just the first step; Gearbox also contacted Fox to get access to all the production stills, props, sound archives and extra footage they could. The design team even examined the old movie stock to make sure they could replicate the exact colour palette and film grain in the final game.

That level of detail permeates every pixel of the game, and along with the four-player co-op it looks like Gearbox is very much on the right track. We never did get to see that Pulse Rifle, but if they haven't got one there's a good chance someone at Gearbox is trying to build one, even if it's just to make sure they've got that hollow, metallic 'BRRRRRTT!' just right. And with a pressure-free non-specific 2009 release date, Gearbox can give this spiritual successor to James Cameron's masterpiece the time and attention it deserves. More than two decades since we first saw Aliens, this really feels like it – the game we've been staying frosty for ever since.



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Follow the leader

While squad controls are simple you'll still need to use a little brain power if you don't want to see your brave boys torn to shreds in front of your eyes.

