

PC GAMER



Subscriber Edition ▶ £5.99
▶ August 2011 ▶ Issue 229
www.pcgamer.com

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"I've been stealing from **Aliens** my entire career. Now I get to make the game"

RELEASE
SPRING
2012

One of gaming's great inspirations is coming to PC. Lock and load: it's **ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES**. By Graham Smith

Half-Life's headcrabs. The burly, bantering marines of *Gears of War*. The demons popping out of the walls in *Doom 3*. The turret defence section of *Half-Life 2*. Chitinous aliens from *StarCraft's Zerg* to *Warhammer's* Tyranids. The art design in any game to feature a space station or off-world research facility. Videogames have been inspired by *Alien* and its more adventurous sequel for 20 years, ever since a generation of boys heard Hudson say "Game over, man! Game over," and realised they'd discovered the two things worth building their lives around.

Randy Pitchford and Brian Martell were two of those boys, and grew up to be the founders of Gearbox Software. "I've been stealing from this franchise my entire career," says Randy. "It's a dream to be able to work in the legitimate canon."

After years of playing *Aliens* by proxy, it's time to forget about imitation. It's time to forget about those battles with *Predator*. *Aliens: Colonial Marines* is about putting you in

the role of those iconic soldiers, welding the doors shut, and firing in short, controlled bursts against xenomorphs coming outta the goddamned walls.

And if that seems like a lot of *Aliens* references for a single sentence, you should see the game.

Crash landing

My presentation begins with brief flashes of the game's early scenes. I'm shown vast spaceships, and catch a glimpse of the names on the sides: the *Sulaco*, from the second movie, and a new one: the *Sephora*. On board one of these ships we see people in cryo-sleep, when an evacuation alarm sounds. Marines sprint through hallways, there's a hull breach and stuff being sucked out of a hangar, then the ship crashes into the surface of a planet in a huge blast of white.

The planet is LV-426, a dead rock first seen in the original *Alien*, and home to Hadley's Hope, the terraforming colony in *Aliens*. A few months have passed since the atmospheric processing planet detonated in thermonuclear fury at the

end of that film. "People who were there within 40 clicks... they're not there any more," says Randy. "There's a lot of wreckage, a lot is melted."

Hadley's Hope was far enough from the explosion to survive – just. The marines have crashed nearby, surrounded by debris and pounded by rain. The place looks like Chelmsford on a Wednesday.

A marine's tracker beeps. Inevitably, the aliens survived the blast too.

Beepbeepbeep. It has taken only a few seconds for the aliens to find the marines. It's only a few more before they're surrounded, running for their lives. A xenomorph latches onto Winters, the player character. Its face in his, they share an intimate moment before it's shaken off. The chase continues.

As the squad finds a path through the debris, a new alien-type charges at them: a kind of rhino-xenomorph, with a large, armoured forehead.

As scary as the films were, they only had to keep up the shocks for a few hours. This rhino-morph is one answer to the problem of keeping a game interesting over six to twelve hours. ▶

"Remember, short, controlled – on Jesus."



never saw in any film. Things that you'll be able to explore yourself."

Mead isn't the only person Gearbox have spoken to, as Randy recounts, "Brian had a meeting – this was long before we talked to Fox or Sega about anything –" he turns to Brian, smiling – "and I hate you, because he came back from the meeting afterwards and said, 'Hey, guess where I just was.'" He was talking to Ridley Scott.

Pitchford has become the public face of Gearbox, and he's always gregarious and quotable in presentations and interviews, but it's clear that *Aliens: Colonial Marines* is especially close to the heart of the company's other, less visible founder, Brian Martell.

"Well, we were talking about a couple of different things," Brian says of the Ridley Scott meeting, "and one of the things we were getting into was Alien, and he brought out the

storyboards. He does all the sketches and storyboards himself, so it was really cool to sit there and he could sort of walk us through why he had made these decisions." It was a fortuitous coincidence when, years later, Sega raised the possibility of an *Aliens* game to the team.

Some Hope

Their commitment to authenticity has paid off. As the marines explore Hadley's Hope, it feels like the movies. The marines move through dank, claustrophobic, metal-panelled corridors, and labs with facehuggers in jars and steam seeping from ominous vents in the ceilings and walls. Gearbox's engineers have built a new renderer to show all this at its creepiest, dynamically lit best.

But their dedication to recreating the environments extends beyond just

mood. Remember when Bishop was skewered and torn in half? You'll find his white smear still there on the hangar floor. Pitchford confirmed Bishop actor Lance Henriksen's involvement too, so it shouldn't be all we see of the android.

Their dedication extends even to the marines you'll fight beside. Gearbox have contracted Bradley Thompson and David Weddle, two senior writers on the recent *Battlestar Galactica*, to craft dialogue that will sit comfortably alongside the iconic banter of James Cameron's marines. What little we hear of it is suitably surly. After the crash at the start of the presentation, the marines moan – "I'm crapping bones over here" – and check the player character is still alive. "Winters, talk to me. How many fingers am I holding up?" From my first-person perspective, Winters raises one middle finger in ▶

ALIEN 3



2179 August 8
An egg left by the Alien Queen hatches and impregnates Ripley. A fire breaks out on the Sulaco.

2179 August 9
Ripley's escape pod crashes on Fury 161, a prison planet. Newt and Hicks die in the crash, rendering Aliens pointless.

2179 August 12
Ripley throws himself into a furnace to stop Weyland Yutani finally getting their hands on an alien sample.

COLONIAL MARINES

2179 October
Marines aboard the Sephora arrive at LV-426 to investigate what happened to Hicks' marines. The game begins.

2179 October
The player and his fellow marines discover the Sulaco in orbit and go aboard to investigate. All hell breaks loose.

ALIEN: RESURRECTION



ERROR:
There was no Alien: Resurrection.



Getting to drive this would be awesome.

response. I guess that's not really dialogue, but you get the idea.

Most crucially, the faithful recreation extends to the player's options. Those aliens are still hanging against the blast door, and it's not going to be long before they get in. Luckily, there are a lot of other marines here – five just in the room we're in now.

"Player 2 has joined the game" flashes at the top of the screen. Now there's six. The drop-in/drop-out co-op doesn't change the game enormously – Gearbox don't want to prevent you from having the full experience in singleplayer – but it sure doesn't hurt to have an extra gun.

Any Aliens fan knows that the first thing you do in a situation like this is lay down some turrets to establish a perimeter, so that's what the marines do. For his part, Winters places a turret in a tight corridor and gets behind it. A few moments later, xenomorphs start pouring down the other end, crawling on the floor, the ceiling, the walls, and leaping between them. Their movement isn't scripted, but AI.

The turret tears through them, the chitinous bodies tumble to the ground. The assault doesn't stop. The xenomorphs keep coming until the marine alongside

"Emergency lighting paints everything red, marines are getting shredded in every room"

Winters is grabbed and dragged into a vent. Then it all goes dark – the aliens killed the power. Everyone falls frantically back, emergency lighting painting everything red and marines getting shredded in every room.

This is the core Aliens experience: you and a team of marines holed up in a bad place, with dozens of xenomorphs crawling in, and if you're lucky you're quickly killed. But *Colonial Marines* isn't all like that. Gearbox want to include moments that feel more like the tense horror of the first film, with you on your own, being hunted.

Alien language

"We've come up with language to define some of the tools we use for pacing," says Randy. "Gauntlet Run: this is about getting from point A to point B and everything's going to be thrown in your way around you." Like when that rhino-morph was chasing Winters. "Last

Stand: this is when you're in a defined area and we're going to be pouring in aliens from all directions. That's a pacing moment

that can feel sometimes like *Left 4 Dead* or some of those great moments from *Half-Life 2* where you're setting a turret here and setting a turret there. These are really interesting when you add co-op into the mix."

These terms are helping Gearbox craft an experience that should be "at times a tactical shooter, at times survival horror, at times adventure and exploration," according to Pitchford.

To aid the player's progress through each area, everything that colonial marines do in the films should be available to the player. For starters, you'll be able to hack terminals, and open doors to new areas of the levels. For seconds, when the action does turn way up to eleven, you'll have the ability to not just place turrets, but to weld shut entrances and exits.

"If you think about the tools that are in the films, game mechanics are going to apply to all of those tools," says Randy. "We want to offer new things, but they have to feel like they fit and are natural and are right. So there are those new things, consistent with the way that the world works."

That ability to weld doors would come in handy right about now. Winters has found another brief safe haven, a hangar bay with functioning lights and a small squad of marines inside. My eyes are drawn immediately





to one of those marines at the back of the room: he's riding inside a yellow cargo-loader exosuit.

A door at the back of the hangar peels open and more xenomorphs start pouring through. There are dozens on the floor and walls, and more falling down from the ceiling. It's hectic, and Winters and other marines are tearing them apart with shotguns and machineguns and the flamethrower-armed exosuit. As some small measure of relief, there seems to be little or no acid spillage when the xenos die.

It's looking like the marines are going to hold the position, when an enormous new alien bursts through the ranks. It must be 20 or 30 feet tall, larger even than an alien queen. It knocks the cargo-loader aside like it's nothing, picks up a marine and tears him in half, and then picks up Winters. As its chittering teeth rush towards us, the screen goes black. The presentation is over.

What I was shown was a thin slice of the full game - *Colonial Marines* won't be released until spring next year, and Gearbox are wary of showing too much too soon. But Aliens fans should be relieved that in lieu of another movie ever getting the green light, it is developers as committed to the legacy of the films as Pitchford and Martell who are continuing the Aliens story. ■

CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE A few examples of Aliens' impact on games

