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ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES AND THE RESURRECTION OF SCI-FI'S DEADLIEST HORROR

Gearbox's FPS is the archetypal passion project, arriving in late 2012 after nearly six years in the making. On p42, we look at how the studio's doing justice to its landmark cinematic inspirations

INSIDE QUANTIC DREAM'S NEXT-GEN PS3 TECH

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An acid trip whose power endures 26 years later

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According to the aggregated wisdom of the world's movie reviewers (thank you, Metacritic), James Cameron's 1986 production, Aliens, is the best movie in the long-running Alien franchise, which continues to be expanded upon today through original director Ridley Scott's upcoming Prometheus. That even a brace of mediocre series entries and some Predator-featuring spin-offs can't dilute the affection with which the early films are held is testament to the power of the imagery and characterisation in the Giger-designed creatures and the crews standing off against them. In space, only the original Star Wars trilogy holds a more precious place in fans' hearts, and it's no coincidence that it too has been explored in videogame form so often since the early '80s. But the Alien series, and Aliens in particular, is in many ways much better suited to such treatment, which is why Gearbox's interpretation has been followed by fans so keenly since its announcement way back in 2006.

Given the experience today's dev teams have with the hardware at their disposal, there's no reason for a new Alien-inspired game to look anything but supremely authentic, using cutting-edge lighting techniques to recreate those foreboding tones, and complex AI to deliver the last word in extraterrestrial killing machines. In terms of taking us where we've always wanted to be – alongside those sneering, sometimes snivelling marines, picking through ruined enemy carcass and scanning environments for that telltale acid burn – which game is better placed than *Aliens: Colonial Marines*? Its movie-studio-endorsed setting and premise, following on from the events of Aliens, feeds its potential no end, since Cameron's film has done so much to inspire elements of so many memorable interactive experiences, not least Bungie's epic *Halo* series. Fortunately, as we discover during our visit to Gearbox, no one is more aware of the potential of the IP than the people responsible for this outing, with their distinctive no-HUD approach to presentation and dedication to co-op support that aims to capture the thick flavour of the quintessential bug hunt. Our report from the studio begins on p42.

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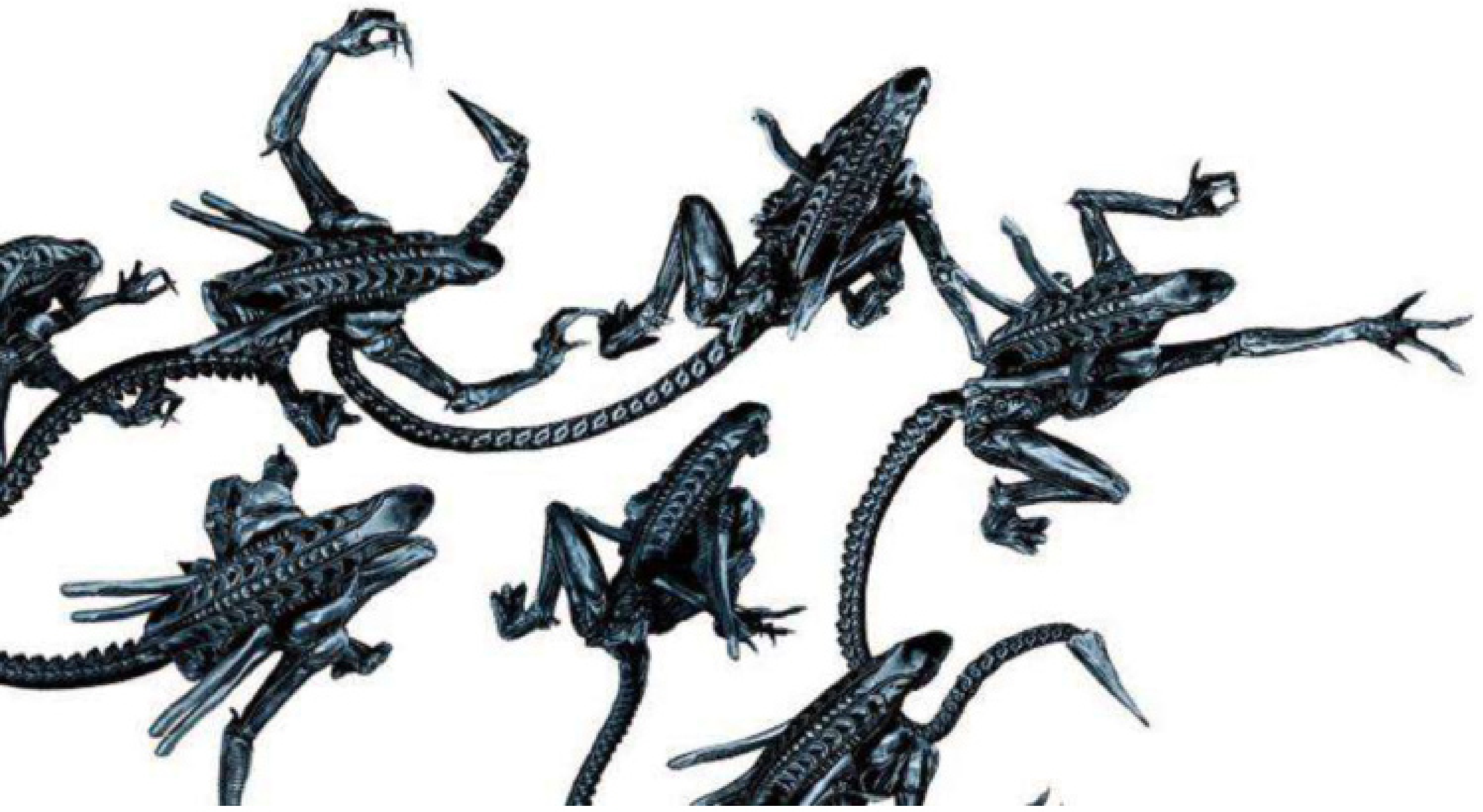

HYPE

ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

Gearbox's official semi-sequel to Aliens emerges from the shadows

Publisher	Sega
Developer	Gearbox Software, TimeGate Studios
Format	360, PC, PS3, Wii U
Origin	US
Release	Autumn

Randy Pitchford, Gearbox's CEO, says that his team has optimised the xenomorphs' AI and animations for fluidity: "They're coming in and out of the woodwork – er, the steelwork, I guess"

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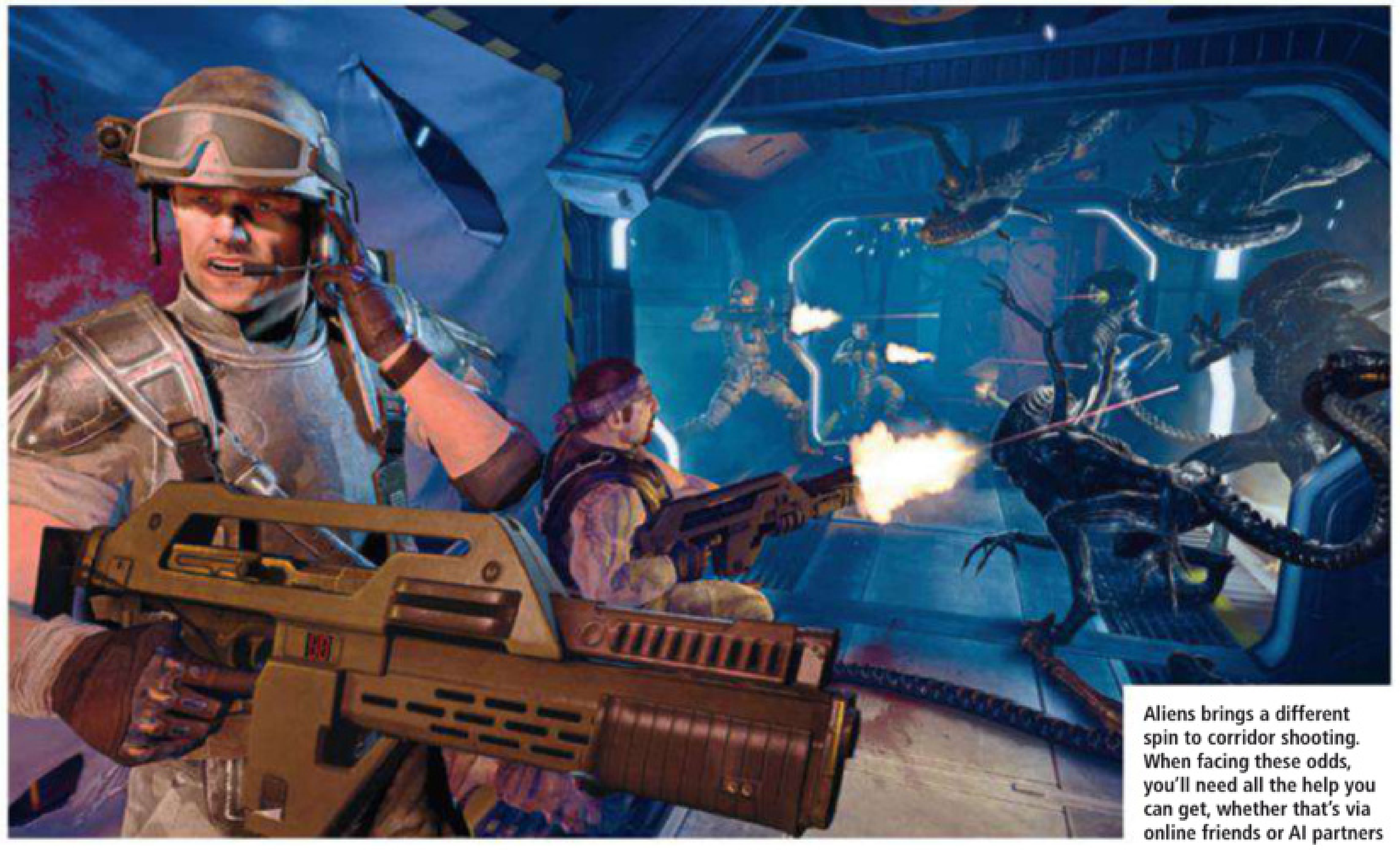
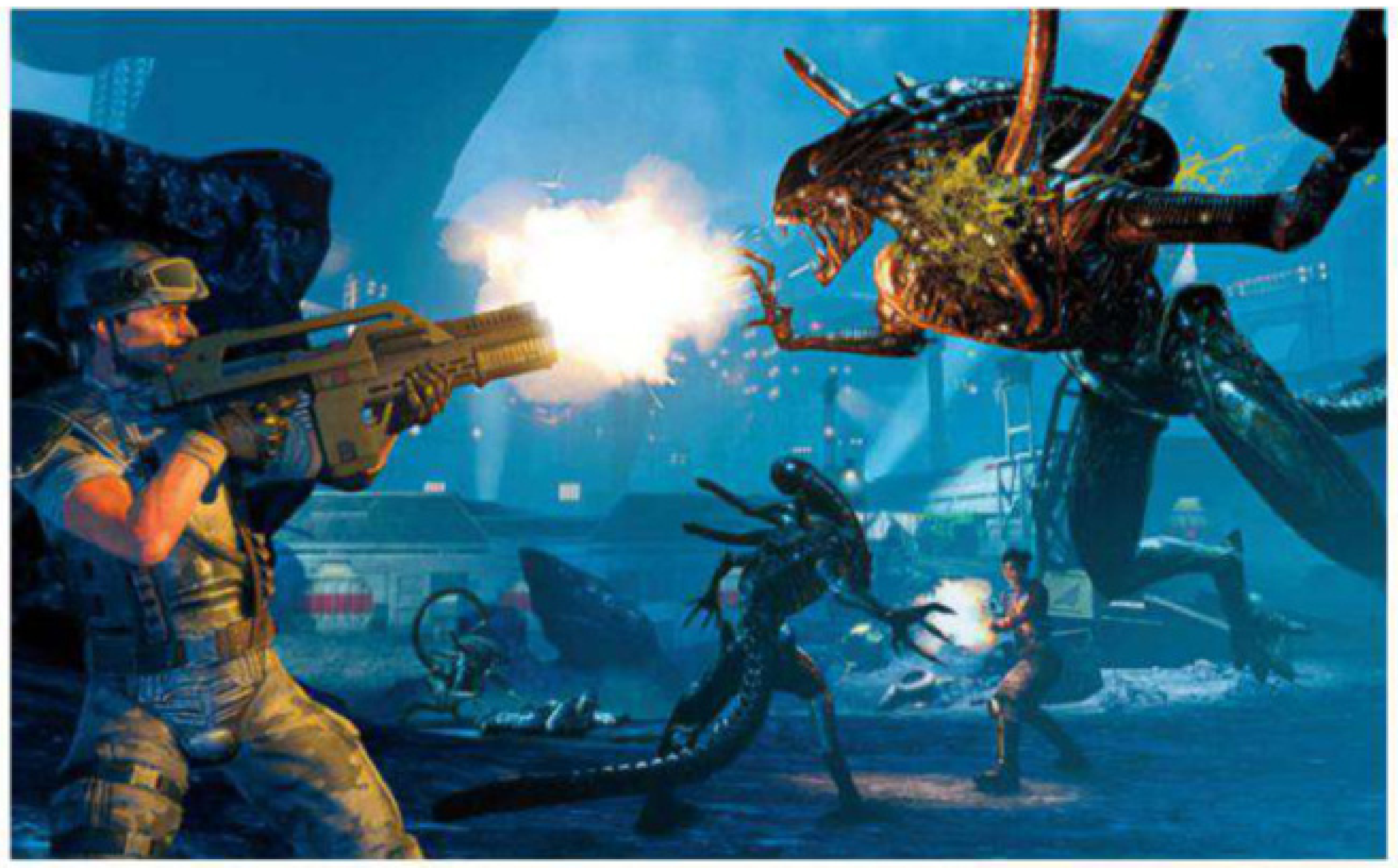
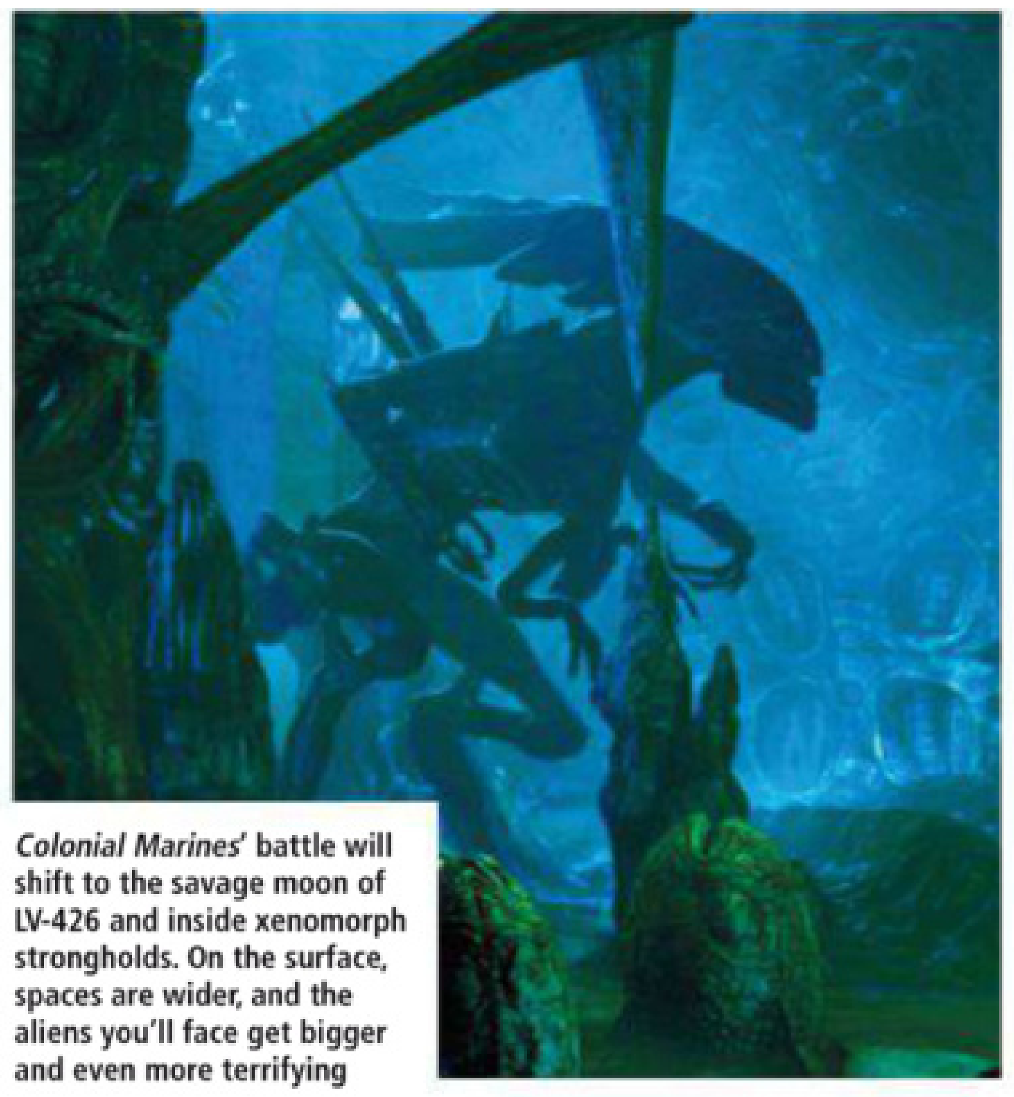
ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES



BELOW **Later levels will lead player to familiar Aliens locales, such as the Hadley's Hope colony – although from the look of it, all of the hope has been terraformed away**

Aliens brings a different spin to corridor shooting. When facing these odds, you'll need all the help you can get, whether that's via online friends or AI partners





***Colonial Marines'* battle will shift to the savage moon of LV-426 and inside xenomorph strongholds. On the surface, spaces are wider, and the aliens you'll face get bigger and even more terrifying**

No self-respecting long-running game studio would think of furnishing a lobby without wall-mounted glass display cases. Gearbox Software, just down the road from Dallas, Texas, has plenty to showcase, having ported versions of *Halo* and *007: Nightfire*, and created original IP such as *Brothers In Arms* and *Borderlands*. But one of the Gearbox lobby's cases is curious, because it's dedicated to an unfinished game. The case for *Aliens: Colonial Marines* contains action figures of the iconic xenomorphs, sure to traumatise any child on Christmas morning, along with the first draft of *Colonial Marines'* script and a magazine feature about the game. The latter two items date from 2008.

Yet Gearbox seems eager to replace these ageing icons of a game announced all the way back in 2006, and just upstairs from this lobby is a playable version of *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. It's here that the game's creators finally pull back the long-standing veil of secrecy surrounding the title, although the first pronouncement about this squad-based firstperson shooter isn't exactly a shock.

"Everybody dies," says **John Mulkey**, design director on *Colonial Marines*. "There's a long list of people who are sacrificed along the way in this adventure." This proclamation isn't much of a spoiler if you're a fan of the franchise, but its simple brutality speaks volumes about the authenticity Gearbox wants to deliver for series diehards.

Gearbox has landed the honour of creating official Alien canon. The deaths in question wouldn't have been the sign-off point for its licensing deal with 20th Century Fox, but considering the game picks up where 1986's Aliens left off in cinemas, it's fair to assume things have only got worse since the USS Sulaco's ill-fated last crew members made it to their escape pod.

Indeed, *Colonial Marines'* campaign opens on a skybridge between a carrier ship and the Sulaco, where you, as a marine named Winter, have been sent 17 weeks after the events of Aliens to respond to a distress signal. The ship had been reported destroyed, "and yet it's on the other side of that door in orbit over LV-426", your commanding officer states over the radio, referencing the colonised moon setting of Aliens, a place well known to series fans. The skybridge is rocked by an explosion, and after scrambling to get inside, a soldier greets you with grim news as he tends to fallen comrades: "They tore right through us."

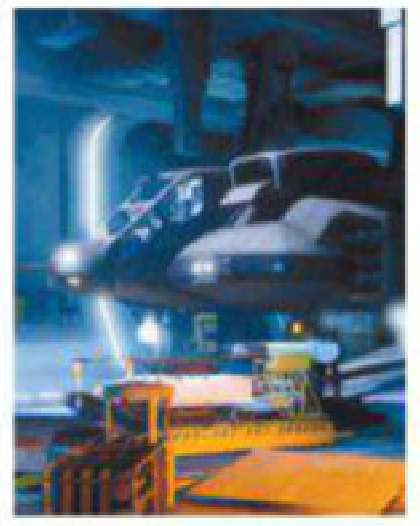
From there, the first steps within *Colonial Marines'* battered carrier are as haunting as they are familiar. Dislodged cryo tubes might be a welcome sight, but perhaps not the nearby torso ripped in half, nor the slashed wires and conspicuous holes in floors and ceilings. After blowtorching your way through a sealed door, the depths of the Sulaco appear, although they're smothered in alien goo and vines. "God, no, no," Winter whispers between heavy breaths after he sees a body left for dead in the wall grime, while another marine screams for help. This poor soldier is trapped in repulsive alien muck, begging to be cut out, and written on his shirt is a rather ominous phrase: 'Tag, you're it!'

As if on cue, an alien darts about nearby, moving too quickly to hit and appearing at every possible angle. It's at this point that players can pull out a motion tracker to keep tabs on the organic killing machine. Your marine needs at least one free hand to pull the tracker up, and since the game doesn't use an onscreen HUD to display health, map or ammo counts, the tracker's implementation creates a conundrum for players.

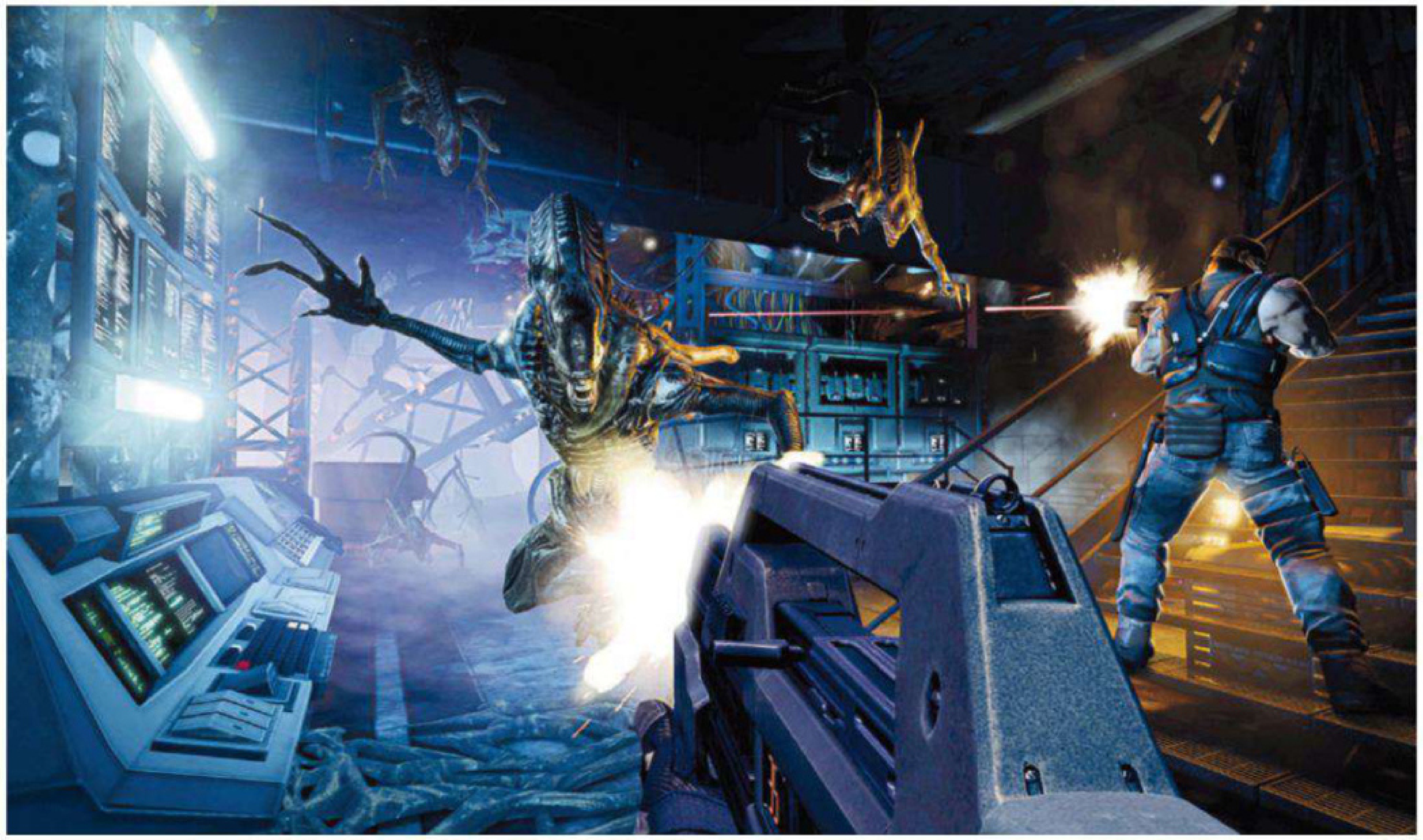
"With the motion tracker and that trade-off, the goal there, the fantasy, is to be one of the colonial marines, right?" says **Randy Pitchford**, president and CEO of Gearbox. "When we're playing a videogame, we like the HUD stuff, and we like getting a lot of feedback and information. But it occurred to us, if we're going to truly get that fantasy, that feeling of being a colonial marine, then we have to have, as a component of it, a trade-off of some of our priorities."

So while players will hear a loud beep when anything moves nearby, they'll have to pick between a larger gun or a better tactical understanding of the play space. Unless, that is, players team up in co-op. Every mission can be played by up to four people, and ➜

Draft dodger



The original script was crafted by TV scribes David Weddle and Bradley Thompson. So how come they're no longer credited with the story? "[Gearbox] let them forge out in their own direction and [saw] what they came back with," says lead writer **Mikey Neumann**. "In the end, there were some really interesting ideas for us to play with, but it wasn't conducive to an interactive medium." Neumann, who wrote for *Brothers in Arms*, describes a plot that should sound familiar to fans – particularly the part about the evil Weyland-Yutani corporation butting in. "This is the sequel fans have waited over 20 years for," he says.



Iteration on the lighting engine has been key for delivering the horror of the Aliens franchise. "We need to have that play of shadows, play of light," says design director John Mulkey

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Screenshot gallery

ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

players can apparently drop in and out of friends' games as they please.

After wasting the errant alien and freeing the trapped, nameless marine, Winter disobeys an order to return, instead venturing farther through the Sulaco's corridors and confronting larger waves of baddies. Though the xenomorphs don't appear in *Doom*-like numbers in this opening level, Gearbox has made the most of their flexible skeletons. They'll pop out of tiny nooks and crannies before either slithering along the ceilings or rearing back to full, terrifying height. The studio's also promised dynamic AI to deliver varied combat every time, which should help to pay off on the sense of threat of the setting and those spine-chilling silhouettes.

On the way to a recognisable recreation of the hangar from the films, the marines walk past a series of friendly sentry turrets, then pick up auto-aiming 'smart' guns that lay waste to a frightening number of foes before returning to the skybridge. There, the marine you rescued pays off on his foreboding shirt: he falls to his knees as an alien bursts out of his chest, and blows himself up. This forces Winter to retreat, crawling back on to the Sulaco. The death won't be the game's last.

From the sound of it, *Colonial Marines* will have Winter traversing plenty of familiar territory, whether pressing farther into the Sulaco, landing on the more open spaces of LV-426 or climbing into alien fortifications. The game certainly looks the part, as Gearbox has made the most of archival access, courtesy of original film designer Syd Mead, to flesh out content and present some that never appeared in the films. Gearbox also says it went to great lengths to build a new, dynamic lighting system within the Unreal Engine 3 framework. "We need to have that play of shadows, play of light," Mulkey says. "Xenos like to hide in the shadows."

We're not able to take a crack at the game's multiplayer modes, but the default option described by the producers will pit aliens against marines in team combat. Although Gearbox compares the mode to 2010's *Aliens Vs Predator*, it sounds more like *Left 4 Dead*, as the human side's firepower faces off against aliens' heightened senses, manoeuvrability and melee attacks. Gearbox says that we can expect accumulation and challenges through both the single- and multiplayer modes, and the points players earn can be spent to unlock weapons, gear, alien classes and more. In fact, points earned in each mode may be spent on the other.

Public demos of the game have hinted at gear such as the flamethrower and iconic power loader suits. Beyond that, Gearbox is remaining coy on the exact nature of *Colonial Marines's* firepower, but has said that we can expect "the classic arsenal from the film".

The short demo assuages our basest fears about the game's delays, comparing well to Aliens in both look and acid-splattered combat. But we see only one brief level, and it's obvious that Gearbox wants to keep a lid on any major surprises that may be in store.

> ***The studio has promised dynamic AI to deliver varied combat every time***

Perhaps campaign co-op will open up more customisation options, and we hope that the xenomorphs prove as horrifying to deal with as Gearbox promises – having to tensely watch the angles to survive has the potential to deliver plenty of the series' signature thrills. And hopefully the script will embrace the cocky, character-driven writing that made the films so likeable; the sequences we've seen don't feature much beyond one-liners.

Ultimately, the game will live and die by its devotion to its decades-old source material. Positioned in the tight timeframe between Aliens and Alien 3, *Colonial Marines* is set to unveil a few surprising xenomorph types and more detailed takes on the films' set-pieces. Between videogames that have done Alien-style combat to death and modern films, such as Attack The Block, that have reimagined the terror of an alien invasion, Gearbox will need all the firepower it can muster to convince us that its space marines are, as Private First Class Hudson bragged so long ago, still the "ultimate badasses". No doubt it will come out fighting on Sega's heavyweight stand at E3 in June. ■

Q&A

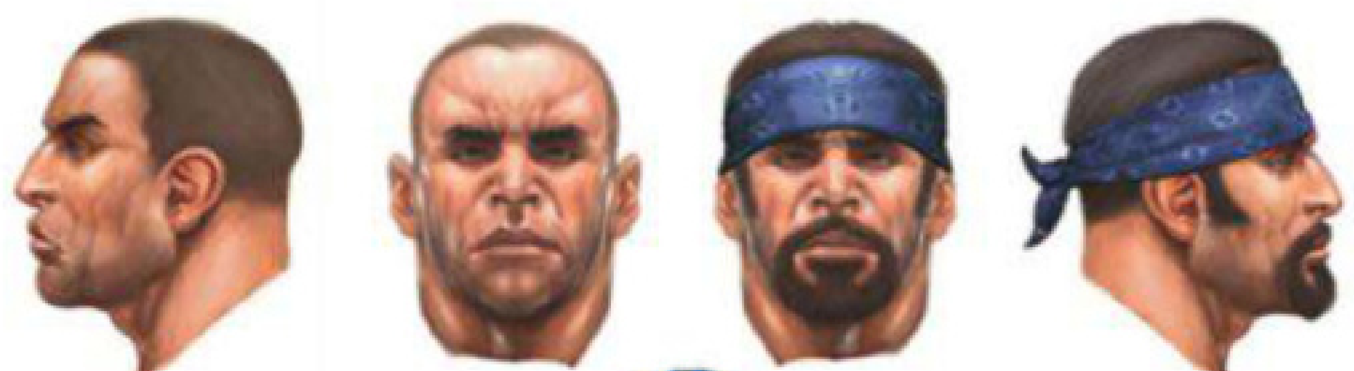
John Mulkey

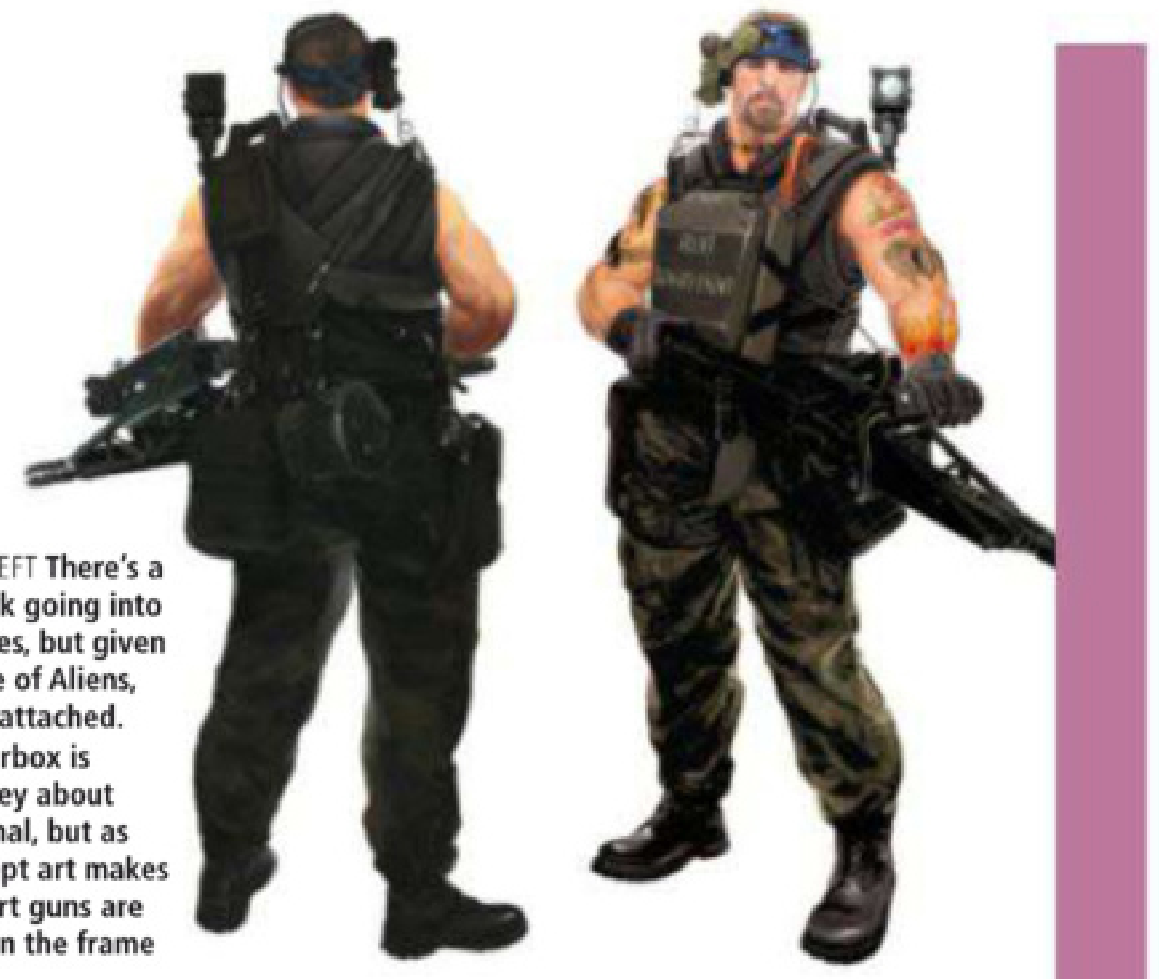
Design director, Gearbox

What was important in crafting co-op gameplay that feels true to the franchise?
The aliens, by nature, the way that they work [is] they hunt you. They're predators and stalkers. We have the great mechanic of the motion tracker, so in our game the core gameplay loop is that you have to be aware of where the incoming attacks are coming in, or else it's really your ass. These guys are brutal when they get to you. It's serious. You'll want to be tracking targets, trying to nail targets at distances as they're closing in on you and not let them get to you. They're gonna come at you from a lot of different directions. In a co-op situation, it's great. You can do the whole back-to-back, covering each other thing, and you can have one guy focused on keeping the tracker up, calling out targets… That's one example.

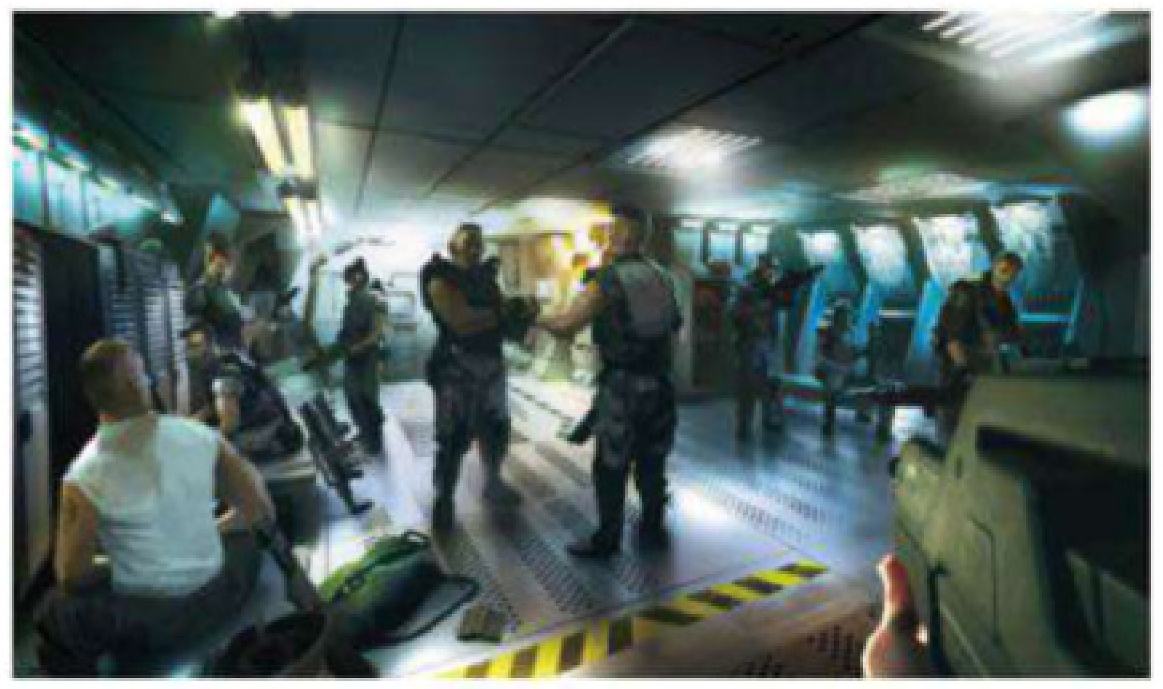
The sense of enclosed terror is often a solitary experience in the films. How do you preserve that in a co-op context?
A lot of it comes down to the mission design itself, how the layouts are put together to give what I call these 'points of possibility'… It's the position in the world where something can change, a threat can come through, that kind of stuff. Through that notion, the way the xenos work, the way they are stalkers, how they can enter the space in such interesting ways, you can feel vulnerable while you're carrying a pulse rifle, and multiple people together are going to feel vulnerable because of the way it's played out. We're also adding a lot of cinematic presentation things where we demonstrate how deadly these things are, how deadly the situation is, and how they have control over the situation. You're moving through it with far less control. There are areas where you're really vulnerable. Being with co-op and other players, you'll leverage that as you try to manage this vulnerability.

You have a lot of Aliens art and assets from Fox, plus hi-def console hardware – how do you make the most of that?
The horsepower we have for the visuals that we're presenting – we're going to revisit things from the films. You're going to go to Hadley's Hope, you're going to go to different locations that are from the films. And the visuals are turning out amazing. It's not just evocative of Hadley's; we're at a point where we're making Hadley's. You're walking around in the film set. You're fighting xenomorphs right in the film. It's such a legitimate experience; it's definitely that fantasy fulfilment [for] people who like this universe. You get to walk around in it.





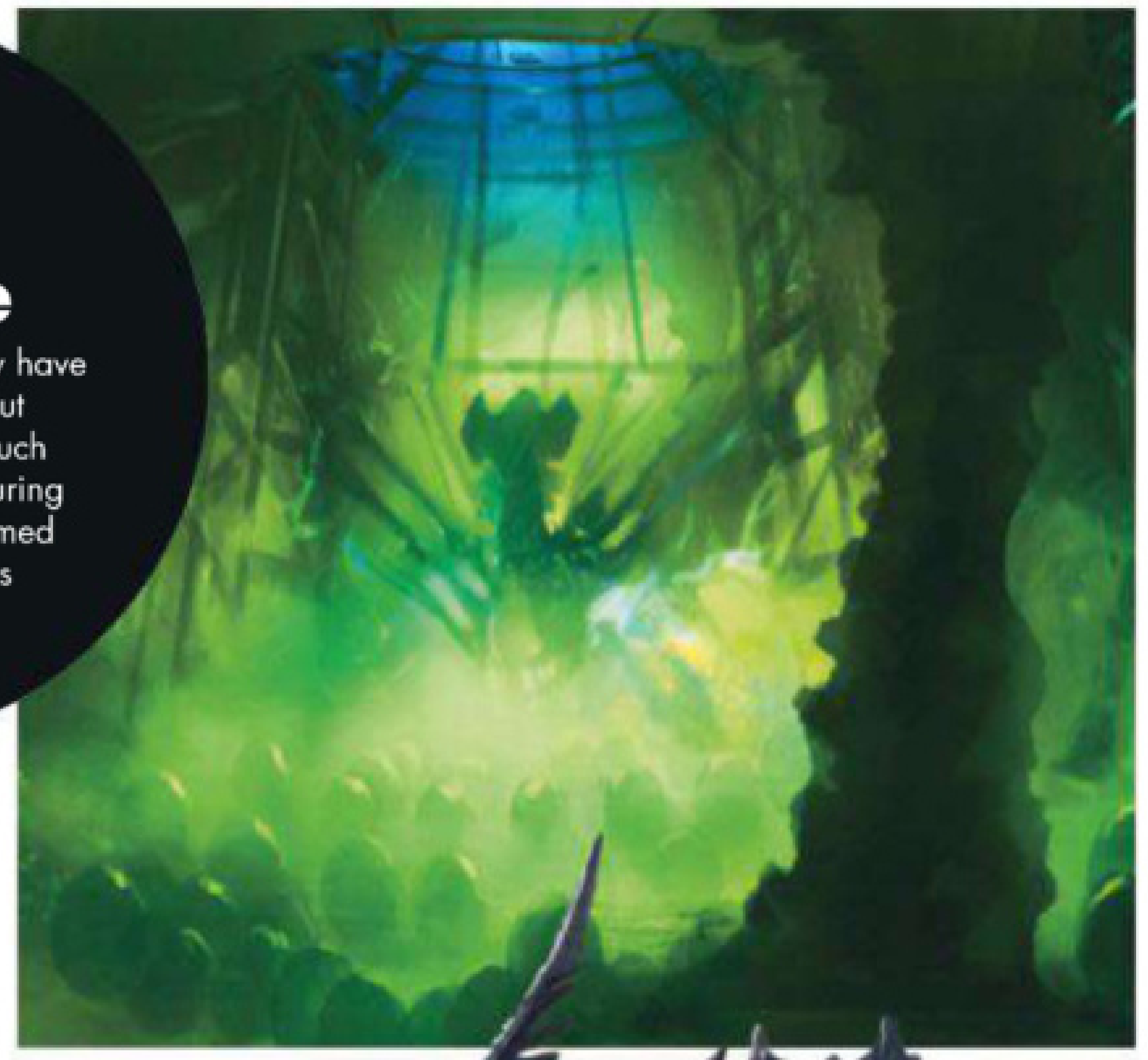
ABOVE + LEFT **There's a lot of work going into the marines, but given the nature of Aliens, don't get attached.** RIGHT **Gearbox is being cagey about your arsenal, but as this concept art makes clear, smart guns are certainly in the frame**



RIGHT **Although the game plays out as an FPS, you'll get to check out Private Winter, the lead colonial marine in this expedition, when the camera pulls away for tense moments such as cutting troops out of traps**

Design showcase

The Aliens franchise may have spent a while in stasis, but Gearbox is being no slouch when it comes to recapturing a universe that has informed the nightmares of millions



ABOVE **Renowned sci-fi film concept artist Syd Mead lent a helping hand to Gearbox as it brought his decades-old creations to life. "Seeing all the reference stuff no one else gets to see has been huge and exciting," says producer Brian Burleson.** LEFT **A lot of work has gone into making the aliens scuttle about correctly, and Gearbox promises AI that will challenge players too**