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ALIENS

COLONIAL MARINES

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Dripping with death

Game over, man? No chance. Phil Iwaniuk's world first play of **Aliens: Colonial Marines** proves it's only just begun

cover game

Aliens: Colonial Marines

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cover game

Aliens: Colonial Marines



For fans of the iconic movie franchise, Aliens: Colonial Marines is in equal parts a hugely exciting and nerve-jangling proposition. Having been jaded by tie-in titles from Rebellion and Monolith, each disappointing and flawed in its own way, it's easy to look at the long development time of this latest xeno-shooter – and the Duke Nukem-shaped blip in developer Gearbox's record – and dismiss it as just another bug hunt. But spend any time with the developers behind Colonial Marines and two things become abundantly clear. Firstly, they're a team full of clinically obsessed Aliens-ophiles. Secondly, they're deadly serious about making this the best Aliens game of all time.

What sets it apart from all others right back to the Atari Jaguar side-scroller is that this is

a canonical sequel, following directly on from James Cameron's seminal 1986 movie Aliens. The fact that 20th Century Fox is on board with Gearbox's vision and is, according to CEO and studio head Randy Pitchford, "treating it almost like a movie sequel" speaks volumes

is: after a suspiciously long time in development, how do Colonial Marines' core mechanics hold up under scrutiny?

As the lights drop and the intro music swells, we're about to become the first people to find out. The opening level is set just after

"This is a sequel, following directly from 1986's Aliens."

for both Colonial Marines' stakes and how the games industry in general is growing in importance. But by securing sequel status and digging up secrets from the creative powerhouses that gave the series breath, the pressure's really on. And so the real question

the final scene in Aliens, and we're space marines on a rescue mission. We know some bad shit's gone down on the Sulaco – we just don't know how bad. Leaving the safety of the dropship, we traverse a giant glass bridge on to the alien-infested vessel. Here goes.



★ LV-426 may be familiar turf, but it's not very welcoming.

THE ALIENS DREAM GAME CHECKLIST

Design lead John Mulkey on what's made it in...

CAN I GIVE TEAM ORDERS BETTER THAN LT GORMAN DID?

"No. It's not a squad-based game, it's a full-on experience – we want you to really 'be the guy.'"

CAN I DEPLOY SENTRIES?

"Yep. Anywhere you want. It's straightforward – you can pick it up, deploy it, and it's automated just like the movie, so it senses motion, blasts everything, runs out of ammo, and then you're sad."

CAN I CALL IN HELP FROM THE DROPSHIP?

"Umm... [Pause] I'm gonna say no. There are still some things on the fence, so we'll see. It's a maybe."

CAN I FIGHT THE ALIEN QUEEN?

"Well, it's an Aliens game, so I'm going to say yeah to that, probably."

CAN I NUKE THE SITE FROM ORBIT?

"[Laughs] No. No you cannot."

CAN I DRIVE THE APC?

"Oh, wow, grinding it until the trans-axle's blown? [Laughs] That's a maybe."

CAN I WALK DOWN A CORRIDOR WITH ONLY A MOTION TRACKER FOR COMPANY?

"Yeah, the motion tracker's seriously integrated into the game, so yes."



Since there are no xenos around to pounce on us right away, we get a moment to take in the ear-melting quality of the sound and the impressive lighting and shadows all around. In the early stages of development, Gearbox spent a lot of time creating a bespoke engine, which boasts a very impressive deferred lighting system – before you walk in a room, the engine's rendered the textures already.

Aliens' resurrection

As you actually enter it, the lighting kicks in – in real time – providing realistic shadows and glow. It uses a lot of processing power, but ➤

▼ The gun is smart. The marine who gets into this situation? Not so much.



cover game

Aliens: Colonial Marines

Gearbox has made it work on PS3, proving there are new tricks yet to be taught to our mature console. "And what better game to implement all those deep, realistic shadows in than one set in the Aliens universe?" Pitchford points out.

It certainly doesn't hurt as we make our way through the Sulaco, motion tracker in hand, feeling distinctly like we're on some kind of Fox theme park ride round the 1986 set. Look, there's the bottom half of Bishop on the cargo bay floor! Get the camera out. The tour leads us to the cryo tubes, some of which has the opening sequence in Alien 3 reveals) have been ejected, and it's clear that this will be one of the opportunities Pitchford talks of to inject the lore the team learned from those involved with the films.

Fantastic Fox

Fox's involvement has handed Gearbox a treasure trove of original movie material like set photographs, concept art and original audio to work with, which offers an instant authenticity hit and geek-gasm for any Aliens fan. Executive vice president Brian Martel and art director Brian Cozzens got one-on-one time with Aliens' concept artist Sid Mead (who designed the Marines' spaceship Sulaco among other iconic locations) and were able to share his creative vision, which extended well beyond the movie's material: "I realised he already had all these ideas from the late 1980s after Aliens that he never got to implement," explains Cozzens. "So not only did we get him to make new environments, but he also

got to show the original environments that were true to the actual film." Gearbox was also lucky enough to speak to some guy called Ridley Scott. And there isn't really a better place to start than that: Scott created the entire Aliens universe when he directed Alien in 1979, even

drawing the storyboards for the film by hand. It was through spending time with Scott that Gearbox was able to find out about the gaps in the universe's mythology, enabling the team to stockpile a wealth of juicy lore that forms the genus of Colonial Marines.

The development team is understandably cagey about the extent of this, but the nerd-citement almost reaches anaphylactic shock levels as Randy Pitchford outlines what Scott imparted on to them: "Ridley revealed secrets. He shared the universe as he saw it, how and why things existed, things that were never even touched on in the film. Who are those space jockeys? [The giant dead creature in Alien] We got the answers. Sometimes when we watch the movies we identify what seem to be inconsistencies, and every time that happens, it's an opportunity for us. Is that truly a mistake? Creators don't make

until eventually we pop his head and his acid blood burns into the floor. In this moment, a few things become apparent: the frenzied "Contact, contact, here we go!" chatter between you and your fellow marines is hell of atmospheric; all that authenticity that the team's focused on is apparent at every turn and gives Colonial Marines the edge over previous Aliens games.

Silent running

Also, the aliens move a bit funny. It's the age-old problem for a dev, as it's rare enough that a xeno's fully exposed from phallic head to razor-toe in the movies, let alone animated and under decent lighting. As a result, there is no authentic way for a xenomorph to run – in fact watching one do so feels distinctly wrong. But as their numbers increase there's no time to dwell, and things quickly become about

"Fox's involvement has handed Gearbox a treasure trove of movie material."

mistakes like that. There are reasons for these things that just might not have come through [in the final cut] and the reasons are a lot better than you could imagine in a lot of cases." Pitchford has an intriguing prediction for where this new lore will take fans, too: "For people who love the franchise and play this game... Alien 3 will become a much better film. A lot of things will make more sense."

First contact

But enough tripping down memory lane: reality... er, science fiction, calls. Just as soon as we delve into the organic matter-filled alien hive we find a marine stuck to a wall. As we're trying our best to free him... the game's first xeno turns up. And it's a new breed, at that. He's a stalker, and his AI is telling him to be as stealthy and evasive as possible, moving from floor to ceiling and around corners to avoid our pulse rifle fire and trying to flank us

raw, panicked sprays of gunfire, peppered with macho quips and military classics such as, "Watch those corners!" Yet the pace of the game's set-pieces jars a bit, too. When you interact with any object, like a monitor, you 'lock in' and enter a quasi-cut-scene first, which feels really at odds with the urgency of the combat and, come to think of it, the pace of the movies' quick cut-filled action scenes. Still, the game's on the brink of alpha stage" according to Pitchford, so there's every chance these are simply creases waiting to be ironed out.

Solo play is just one part of Colonial Marines' arsenal, though – not only can you play through the campaign in four-player drop-in co-op [which might as well be called "quotes mode"] there's also a competitive multiplayer element that pits marines against xenos. Ready for some controversy? Controversial fact number one: when you're controlling the xenos, you're doing so

THE NON-LETDOWNS

Films don't usually travel well across the celluloid-to-console void. Here's a few that made the journey with *some* integrity intact...



Spider-Man 2 PS2

Whether swinging through New York on the way to destroy an evil nemesis or just delivering pizza, Spidey 2 offers a huge sandbox of webbed glory filled with addictive combat and endless civilians to save.



Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga PS3

Actually better than some of the films themselves – cough, prequels, cough – the recreation of Lucas' misisive universe in Lego bricks is a perfect outing for Yoda and co.



Ghostbusters PS3

Proving that you ain't afraid of no ghosts is a surprising amount of fun on PlayStation 3. Yes, for the most part it's a bit clunky, but you get to wield a proton pack! And frankly, we can't ask for more than that.



King Kong PS2

The result of Peter Jackson's collaboration with Ubisoft, King Kong lets you play as both man and ginormous ape as you tackle dinosaurs and monsters on an atmospheric Skull Island.

cover game

Aliens: Colonial Marines



■ Co-op play is a big part of the game. You need all the help you can get.

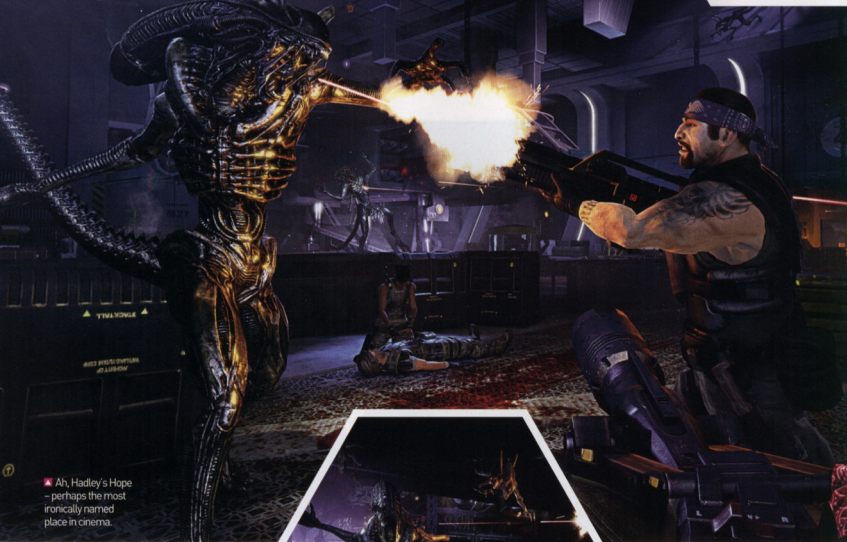


■ HUD elements are sparse in-game, and provided as the fiction, in all its '80s glory, dictates.



■ Xenomorphs are great chiropractors. Pity no one survives their ministrations.





▲ Ah, Hadley's Hope – perhaps the most ironically named place in cinema.



in third-person. Controversial fact number two: the rewards and upgrades you earn in multiplayer carry over to your solo campaign. Design lead John Mulkey explains: "There's a series of challenges in multiplayer that allow you to unlock things, which is pretty cool. So as you go through the game, what we really want is for you to be able to customise your ultimate badass. We want it to feel like you're naming your gun, through upgrading this or that, making adjustments to your armour – and that crosses back and forth between single-player and multiplayer. You are who you are, which is kind of neat."

The hive

We get our hands dirty with our very own ultimate badasses in an eight vs eight team deathmatch, taking on a team of xenos being played by Gearbox. And sure, we might have

beaten them once. But let's not go on about how we beat a development team at its own game. Let's not take any time out to gloat about that. No sirree. Instead, let's focus on how frickin' close every single match was – the balance is spot-on, to the extent that one game literally came down to the very last second of play. It's awesome to see the mechanics guide you into behaving like the movie characters: as marines it's crucial to

stick close together, use the motion tracker constantly and watch your backs, but playing as the aliens, you're a hive mind. You can see each other's locations through the walls, making it easy to co-ordinate flank attacks – just like the real xenos would. It's incredibly hard to set a nervy and cinematic tone to any multiplayer experience, but somehow, Colonial Marines manages to absolutely nail it.

The promise

The first hands-on with *Aliens: Colonial Marines* has revealed tense and rigorously authentic solo play, and surprisingly engaging and well crafted multiplayer. From this – and, just as importantly, the genuine obsession the team has with the universe they're dealing with – it's clear that it isn't a matter of whether this will be the best *Aliens* game yet. Really, it's more a matter of whether a videogame can ever really deliver on the movies' promises: the presentation of the aliens on-screen, the nature of the combat, the distinctly corridor-bound action in James Cameron's firefights all pose serious conceptual problems to a canonical sequel.

If any game can take those problems and turn them into an engaging and progressive first-person shooter, it's one built by fanatics so die-hard that they pestered Kodak for the saturation figures of the particular film that was used to shoot *Aliens*, and can't help but grin from ear to ear when they talk about the secrets they learned from Ridley Scott. Those fanatics are Gearbox, and the result is *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. And it's far from just another bug hunt.

WHO'S ON BOARD?

Finally, we can reveal which voices from the film are in the game

Randy Pitchford has previously stayed tight-lipped regarding the voice cast, only teasing that "several cast members from the original films have been involved." Thankfully the secrets, much like the xenomorphs, are out and we know which *Aliens* veterans will be heading out in search of their film counterparts aboard the Sulaco. Lance Henriksen makes a return to voice the successor to android Bishop, in the shape of Rod – hopefully we won't have to see his milky insides, too. Also from the original *Aliens* cast, William Hope is on vocal duties. Previously in the role of Lt Gorman, Hope has upped ranks and now voices one Commander T Shannon. Private Wierzbowski, a character from the original movie who is notable for being the only marine with no dialogue other than his dying scream, will also make an appearance – but this time with new actor Josh Ridgway. No word on Ms Weaver, though, so don't get your hopes up.



In!



In!



Out?



XENO MANIAC

Gearbox Studios' Randy Pitchford on working with Ridley Scott and bringing Aliens back to the fans

DPM Having spoken to Ridley Scott, how have you translated his pearls of wisdom and made them work for your game?

Randy Pitchford You know, that first discussion, I wasn't there, and I'll never forgive [Gearbox co-founder] Brian Martel for that. But Brian was there. It was a very speculative discussion. They weren't specifically talking about, 'Okay, what are we going to do here?'. There was a desire to understand one another and to understand the creative values that were there, and a way that a collaboration could happen.

Ridley got very passionate about it, brought out his storyboards, blew the dust off of them – clearly these hadn't been out in 15 years or so – and started going through them. When they talked about the film, Brian was sharing what it meant to him, what he'd do with the franchise, and they talked about the backstory. Ridley shared the universe as he sees it, and how and why everything exists. That meeting allowed us to believe that this could happen, and that if it did, it'd be worthy.

DPM What was it like working with Fox? How open was its team to the ideas that you were throwing out at them?

RP 20th Century Fox cares very deeply about their franchises. It also knows the value of talent, and trusts talent. You have a couple of different kinds of people who approach existing talent. Some care about it so much they want to stay with what's in there. And there's a risk that they're not taking enough of a risk, they're just recreating something that already exists. Then there are others who think they could've done it better and want to change it and make it their own.

The correct balance is a bit of both. That's one of the reasons why we loved Abrams' Star Trek movie. It's true to the core of Star Trek, but it also took risks and brought it into a new place. And I think we found a way – like it's stuff that we're familiar with and know, but it's pushing it in new ways. It's an all-new story, not a retelling of the film. It takes place later, with all-new twists, turns and characters, but we still get to go back to LV-426, we still get to go back to the Sulaco, just like it would've been a crappy Star Trek movie if we didn't get to go on the Enterprise. You've got to find a way to have your cake and

eat it. It's gotta be new, it's gotta be fresh, and you have to provide a storytelling experience that hasn't been had before.

DPM Have you taken that same approach to the creative licensing as far as weapons go?

RP Really early on we saw the Crusher. We've had some fun, we have to make sure that the stuff that we care about is there, but if that's the only thing that's there then I'm not surprised or excited by anything new. But it's tricky if you're going to add something new, it's 'Why is that there? Why is that there?'. You know, like 'How does the Crusher come to be there?'. Sometimes you can introduce something and it's just cool that it exists, so you don't have to worry about it. Hudson has this diatribe before they get on the ship where he talks about how badass the weapons are. 'What's fun is you go, 'Dude, we get to make all that stuff now!'. Stuff that's not in the film. We've made sure that everything that we want, and everything that someone who watches the films wants, is covered.

DPM The multiplayer and single-player work together so you level your way up through multiplayer. How does that work?

RP We don't say single-player or multiplayer, because the campaign is also multiplayer if you want it to be – you can play co-operatively. There's all kinds of different ways that we like to use our entertainment: sometimes we want to be alone with the lights off and the sound up, and that's what we typically think of as a single-player, right? This game works great that way. Sometimes we want to get a couple of friends round and just blast through some stuff together. We want to beat the game, we want to go through the narrative experience, but we want that to be a shared experience. It's all single-player and multiplayer and campaign, and any of these can be played in different configurations.

DPM In Mass Effect 3, single-player and multiplayer are very different modes. Have you been surprised by the fans' reception of that system? Has it made you worry at all about the system in Aliens?

RP I think those guys did a really good job of upping the ante of a franchise and a game that already had an established set. The first

Mass Effect does not have these different entry points that the third one hopes to, and because [BioWare is] looking for ways to find those entry points on a game model that already exists, that's a different challenge.

We started from the beginning, so I think it's a different problem. We certainly have our own challenges, but I admire BioWare for wishing to support those different use cases. But it's really difficult, especially with the type of game Mass Effect is, with a narrative that's really heavy. You know this is a narrative game, but it's not a 'choose your own adventure' book. And nobody does that better than BioWare, but we've always felt that the best fiction is not the 'choose your own adventure'. The best fiction in the world is what Tolkien gives us, or what Robert Heinlein gives us, depending on your genre – that's more crafted fiction.

DPM If Aliens was just plunked into game form, it'd be a corridor shooter. How have you approached the level design with this being a canonical sequel?

RP I like that bias and assumption by the way, because when players start to have it, we leverage that bias – because the Sulaco is a vessel. The first act of the game takes place in the Sulaco, but eventually you end up on LV-426, and that's a world. So now it's not an open-world game, but when you've been in the corridor for a while, and all of your expectations are on the corridor, you realise 'Holy crap, I'm now in this desolate place' – that's kind of a cool moment.

I don't want to spoil that moment, but we leverage the fact that all the expectations are on corridors, to have some fun when we can do a 'wide corridor', so to speak. Then when we get to the surface, we can have some fun with those different variations, and they're kind of surprising and they open things up.

You know if you take a Halo game or Gears Of War, on the surface, or even Call Of Duty, you think, 'You know, most of the time I expected to be in the corridor'. And they are linear games, but then there are those moments when things widen up a bit, and it's like, 'Oh, this is a whole new playspace now – this is kind of cool'. The challenges change, and that's fun.