

Publisher: Sega Developer: Gearbox Software
Players: 1-2 Co-op # of players: Release: 12/18/12

Aliens: Colonial Marines

We crawl underneath the skin of 2013's first big shooter. It mostly seems alright. Mostly

The Xenomorph queen hitched a ride with Ripley, and the rest of the hive got nuked from space. LV-426 isn't in a good state, but the story isn't over just yet. You only need a few eggs to make a terrifying omelette.

Before the original marine squad mostly met a sticky end, Hicks pointed out that the search and rescue party likely wouldn't arrive for 17 days. Seventeen weeks later, the cavalry

finally turns up. It seems like things haven't gone to plan, and you aren't the first humans to appear on the scene. The Weyland-Yutani Corporation is back on the surface, and it seems like it's lost interest in political games.

Picking up where the events of *Alien 3* left off, Gearbox President Randy Pitchford explains that *Colonial Marines* is a direct continuation of the *Aliens* story: "After the end of *Alien 3* we know that the Sulaco is in orbit around the prison planet, and somehow

WRITER
**MIKEY
NEUMANN**
TALKS FAMILY

Is it difficult following in the footsteps of some of the great writers that have worked on *Aliens*? At the time I knew I was writing canonical *Aliens*, but I was so immersed in the work that I didn't really think about it, and then when we started going out to PAX and E3 it hit me. That became really terrifying.

Do you spend a lot of time watching the movies to get the tone right? The *Borderlands* humour I wrote came naturally to me, and a lot of the stuff in *Aliens* was really cheesy, too. "Game over man, game over!" But yeah, it was interesting trying to get that balance and not push it too far, and finding our own way to pay lip service to it tonally.

Lip service is important, but are you worried about being overly referential?

I can put it this way - in terms of aping *Aliens* and stuff, there are more references to *Aliens* in *Borderlands 2* than there are in *Colonial Marines*. We don't ape anything. That was a rule. If you look at *Aliens* the movie, that's very much about motherhood, it's about Ripley. That's definitely a theme that echoes throughout the franchise, but with *Colonial Marines* we wanted to focus on the marines themselves. We've got some of the old ones, some of the new ones, and the theme that came out of that was definitely family. Not everybody gets along, not everything works out, and not everybody makes it, but it's about sticking together and watching the person next to you.

Is it hard switching from writing games like *Borderlands* over to stuff like *Colonial Marines*?

It turns out we're pretty good at that. I mean we came straight from *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* into *Borderlands*. Hell's Highway was the most personal game I've ever written. There's a tear in that game that to this day tears me up a bit. When I was brought onto *Borderlands* and started making things silly, it was sort of a reaction to that. But we're still adding a goofy side to *Aliens* - people love quoting it, and it's always been funny.

On that note, we were big fans of what we'd seen of *Brothers in Arms: Furious Four*. Can you tell us what's going on with that? I was creative director of *Furious Four*, so thank you. That game has evolved, and I've never been more excited about something in my entire career than what they're doing right now. It's so cool. And that's all I'm going to say.

"It's the first time there's ever been an original *Aliens* story in videogame form"



"Many of the scenarios have been motivated by fan-fantasy fulfilment"

Aw, he's just pleased to see you.

Cheers, mum. Worst Easter egg ever.

Go on, she's been waiting all night.

Michael Wey (and knew it was there. He's tried to get Ripley, but she martyred herself. What's his next move? He's going to board the Sulaco, figure out where it came from, and take it back there."

In the Way

By the time you rock up with the second squad of marines, Weyland is already dug in on the surface. Capturing a Xeno for military research is the only priority that matters to the corporation, and you're just another loose end to tie. It's an enticing set-up for a new slice of story, but it's far to say that the pressure is on. "Everything that's happened before has either been a remake of the films or a what if scenario like *Aliens vs. Predator*," explains Pitchford.

"This is the first time there's been an original *Aliens* story in videogame form. Ever!" It's said that Ripley Scott only considers James Cameron's sequel as genuine canon, but legally the decision still sits with 20th Century Fox. After much badgering from the guys at Gearbox, they finally agreed to let them add a new chunk of story. "We begged, and they trusted us for some reason," says Pitchford. "I think they just decided to take a bet, and I'm thrilled they did because we're living the dream. We worked on *Halo* for the PC, and I loved that, because up until this happened that was the closest we were ever going to get to actually making something like *Aliens*." We don't know the first thing about coding games, but we have to admit that

we're still a bit jealous. "I've been stealing from *Aliens* for my entire career," Pitchford confesses during an excited discussion about the classic motion scanner used in Cameron's film. "I always thank James Cameron for designing that game mechanic for us." Forget about the clip-on sensors you've seen in games like *Modern Warfare 2*; the *Colonial Marines* sensor is still old-school. If you want an idea of what's lurking nearby, you'll need to put your gun away first. Choose the right moment, or things are likely to turn bad. Recreating the tone of the second film's scenarios has been central to Gearbox during development of the game. "A lot of it is motivated by fan fantasy fulfilment," explains design director John



"The attention to detail is truly incredible"

ARMED AGAINST TEETH

Whether it's the iconic M16 Smartgun, the M41-A Pulse Rifle, or just a good old fashioned Barrett. Aliens: Colonial Marines should keep that trigger finger happy. We keep this for close encounters.

Mulkey, "what would I want to do? Well, I sure as hell want to fire a Smartgun, so you're going to be able to fire a Smartgun. Mowing down Xenos, acid spraying everywhere. You'll get to use the auto turrets you saw in the film, set them up for these moments of defence, before it all goes terribly, terribly wrong. We want you to have those kinds of moments."

Bad blood

Fan-service is probably the game's main aim, but sadly it can't do everything justice. After seeing technology like DICE's Frostbite 2 engine, we can't stop thinking about the incredible potential of a game in which Xenomorph blood deformed the environment. "We played around with the idea a little bit," admits Mulkey, "but we don't do anything crazy. It can't bore a hole to the centre of the planet or anything like that, but it is deadly and dangerous like you saw in the films."

Recreating the tone of James Cameron's film was a monstrous task to try and step up to what Brian Martel, Gearbox's chief creative officer, is quick to point out the ludicrous perks. "I actually had the ability to expand the Aliens lifecycle canon, and that was the greatest moment of my life. Kill me now."

We've got Facehuggers, Drones and Chestbursters from Alien and Warriors and Queens from Aliens. The Runners from Alien 3 will also make an appearance, and we've seen a couple of Gearbox's new inclusions too. The Crusher made its debut at E3 last year, with its bull-charge antics and bullet-proof skull. The latest addition we've seen is the Spitter – a green-gilled Xenomorph that spits blobs of acid to attack the marines from an impressive range. The design feels like a clear nod to both Left 4 Dead 2 as well as Jurassic Park's iconic Dilophosaurus.

If you're old enough to remember the extensive range of Aliens toys that Xenomorph released in the 1990s, you'll have a good reason to be concerned. Expanding the Xenomorph family with mutations based on a variety of animals yielded very questionable results. "Oh, stuff like the gorilla alien?" recalls Mulkey. "Those were just nuts. That was crazy. We haven't quite gone in that direction – there's nothing like a chihuahua alien or anything like that – but it was really cool working with 20th Century Fox to come up with new alien types to add to the franchise. We came up with things that we thought would fit in with the context of the story that we're telling," judging by the lack of local life on LV-426, radiation is likely to have played a part here. Either that, or Ripley has opened a zoo. While the origins of the Spitter and Crusher still remain a mystery, we are able to tell you what they're like to control. Colonial Marines pits a team of humans against Xenomorphs in asymmetrical multiplayer – again, reminiscent of Left 4 Dead.

There are three classes to play for each faction, with a standard shotgun/mini-gunner fare on offer if you're on the marine side. The Xenomorphs can choose between Hunters, Luxers or the aforementioned Spitters. Hunters rely on pure melee strength and a deadly tail-strike, which initially proves tricky to use effectively. The most fun of the bunch is undoubtedly the Luxer, who is able to pounce on their daft enough to stray away from the rest of the pack. Controlling the Xenomorphs is functional enough even when running across ceilings and walls, but this age of control comes at a price elsewhere: from the perspective of a marine the aliens appear very slow, moving in a way that looks strange and awkward.

The animation quality remains an concern, but it's also worth pointing out



DESIGNING YESTERDAY'S TOMORROW

Gearbox has collaborated with Syd Mead, who did the design work for the original movie. His 1970s concept sketch for the 'Sulaco' is on the exclusive poster that comes with this issue. "The fundamental design essence of Aliens was a gritty, 'we're at war' scenario with an overall dark look," he told us, "with over-designed mechanical elements to boost the machine-vs-man interface as they confront an implacable threat... fantasy has to be triggered by familiarity as a recognition hook." When I work on a pseudo-design problem, I always treat it as reality for that particular job. "He's unlikely to go back to it, though. 'I don't know if I'll return to that world if there is another sequel.' The last two for the movie were awful – for the franchise, that would be cool to work on."



"Environments look like they've been ripped straight from the films"

LANCE HENRIKSEN
ON BRINGING
BACK BISHOP



So, you're back as Bishop! How exciting has that been?

I'm going to live forever. That's how exciting that is, really. I've gone from being a toaster to living forever.

What does it mean to you to know that a character you played all these years ago still means so much to so many people? It's not me that's making this live. It's the whole event, Jim and his vision. Cameron and Gale, and all the actors that are in it. It's like I fell into the luckiest river in the world and just got swept away. The movie looks good. It's not lost anything, it's not dated. I saw Sigourney and we had a reunion. We were all there and it felt like it was yesterday.

Can you tell us how the knife trick scene came about?

Well, Jim called me from London and said, "we're not sure how we're going to introduce Bishop." He said, maybe he'd been up all night doing push ups, like 10,000 of them? But he didn't like that idea - I didn't bring that idea up. So he suggested the knife trick, like when we were kids, you remember playing that? So when we came to shoot it, it was me doing a demo, and I said, "what if I put my hands on top of Bill's hands and that's what happened. It was an extraordinary movie to work on because everyone knew what they were doing."

And then you improvised Bishop's first line in the game based on that?

This really is a fact that is because in every restaurant I go to some waiter will come up and say, "Here's your cheque. But would you do the knife trick?" Even cops have said it to me. A cop pulled me over once for speeding and it was raining and he said, "Look, the window down and he went, 'Hey, do you know how fast you were going?' Then he looks down at me and says, 'Bishop!' And I say, 'Yeah, that's me.' He just said, 'don't do it in front of me, okay?' and then let me go."

How exciting is it to be in a videogame, to live on forever? It's a resurrection. It's not like it looks like the real environment I was in when we made the movie. It's pretty cool.

...that the people controlling Xenomorphs in our demo may well have been muppets. We've seen to see more of the alien AI in the single-player game. We've not been privy to huge chunks of the campaign so far, but the attention to detail we've witnessed is truly superb.

From the beautifully bleak vistas of LV-426 to the gun-metal corridors of the Subco, all of the environments we've seen in *Aliens: Colonial Marines* look as if they've been ripped straight out of the films. Newcomers to the franchise will blitz through the game without a clue to their significance, but anyone who grew up with the films will be amazed at the accuracy of the recreations.

You'll walk past the APC that Ripley abandoned, and the dead Facehugger on the Med Bay floor. The wreckage of Hadley's Hope has seen better days, but it's unmistakably in the same place as in Cameron's film. The aesthetic style of the movie has been captured perfectly thanks to the bespoke rendering engine that Gearbox created for the game. Lighting and shadows are immensely important in a game where you're hunted by evil black things, and the visuals certainly do it all justice. Dynamic lighting works to great effect as a snaking flicker of a shadow on the wall might be the only warning you get. Keep the flashlight near, and keep your wits about you.

Alien quality

In addition to the pairs taking recreation of famous areas we've already seen, new additions fill in the gaps. An audio diary recorded by Newt's mother fleshes out the story of the film, while two actors from *Aliens* have also recorded fresh voice acting for *Colonial Marines*. Lance

Henriksen reprises his role as a Bishop-model android that supports the main crew, while Michael Biehn appears as Hicks in a capacity that remains unknown. Corporal Hicks died just before the beginning of *Alien 3* so unless they're planning a tie-in with Cospiracy's unlikely we'll see him mingle with the crew.

Getting to fight alongside Bishop is a childhood dream that's only amplified by the opening line that Lance improvised: "Don't ask me to do the knife trick. I can see it in your eyes." Aside from this admittedly brilliant transgression, nods towards the original films are promised to be kept to an absolute minimum. After hiring the writers from *Bortez* *Golcor* to write the tons of new material, it's hardly a surprise. "If there's ever an *Aliens TV* show, we have some stuff for you. We've got plenty," jokes Martell.

We don't know how much of an influence Gearbox will have on the franchise after this, but Pitchford's personal theory suggests that they might have already had a profound effect. "I remember in 2006 - back before

WHAT'S GOING ON? A SUPER-NIPPY TIMELINE RECAP



ALIEN

Ripley and her team discover LV-426 is being terrorized, so heads in with marines to wipe out the threat. It turns out that Weyland-Yutani wants to bring an alien back alive. Ripley escapes, making the colony from orbit.



ALIENS

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ALIEN 3

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ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

Weyland tracks the prior location of the Subco back to LV-426 and begins looking for more Xenomorphs to go home and play with. You turn up with a bunch of marines, and lots of exciting stuff happens.



ALIEN: RESURRECTION

Ripley's revived as a Xeno-human clone using DNA taken from the molten metal. Weyland-Yutani appears as an unrecognizing android, and...you know what, let's just pretend it never existed.

"The actors behind Bishop and Hicks reprise their roles"

TAILS OF THE UNEXPECTED

When you're playing as a classic Xenomorph in the game's multiplayer, you'll rely on your tail-whip to guarantee kills. Aiming it is tough, but level up the class a bit and you'll unlock an alternate spin attack.

"It's a rollercoaster ride of false scares and rollicking action"

Flare down, help is incoming. Probably.

Motion scanning is vital in messy areas

"Nods towards the films are being kept to a minimum"

we even thought about making the game – when Brian Martell sat down with Ridley Scott and talked about *Alien*. He blew the dust off his original storyboards, and they're talking about the nature of what we used to call the space jockey when Scott tells Martell we can now call them the engineers. I think it was that moment that Scott got excited again about his universe. I believe that. I don't know – only Scott can tell us – but the timeline makes sense. It was another year or so before he actually started his project."

Moving on

While we're on the topic of timelines, we can't help but wonder if *Prometheus* is partly to blame for *Colonial Marines*' massive delays. Regardless of whether or not the engineers play a part in next year's sci-fi shooter, the fan-service here is already superb. Our only other tonal concern is whether Gearbox can nail the series' sense of pace. Cameron's *Aliens* was pure schlock-and-load action, but you can't have Xenomorphs without a pinch of horror.

"Our game is a rollercoaster ride," explains Mulkey. "We have areas that are slow, you're not sure what's going on, and there are a lot of false scares. But we'll also have the areas that are absolutely full of rollicking action going on as well."

Despite getting a decent chunk of time with the game's multiplayer, the solo campaign is still a hands-off affair. Considering the release date of 12 February next year, this remains an obvious concern. The team still has enough time to finish up, but we still have reservations about a couple of key things. The guns don't feel as punchy as they should, and the quality of the animation isn't on-par with the genuinely excellent environment design. Fans will fall in love with the faithful recreation of Scott's iconic sci-fi world, but everyone else may still need convincing. Until we can get to play the game for ourselves with the lights off, it's hard to make any kind of solid judgement. In space no-one can hear you scream, but when you're in the living room, it's probably quite audible.

We're promised a squad of interesting characters that fit the *Aliens* vibe.