

Trouble aboard the Sulaco

How *Aliens: Colonial Marines* went from iconic spin-off in the making to critical flop



Fangs for nothing

Signs were promising when, in March 2008, our then-staff writer Rachel Weber went to see *Aliens: Colonial Marines* for issue #17, describing it as "the game we've been staying frosty for" since the film's release 22 years previously. #17 remains the biggest-selling issue of OPM in its current form, suggesting you too were excited by the prospect of the legendary franchise finally getting the game it deserved. Five years on, it's fair to say Gearbox's ET-blasters failed to live up to expectations.

"This is a labour of love." Those were the words Gearbox's Randy Pitchford used to reassure Xenomorph obsessives last April, when he leapt in front of dozens of journalists at a major press event and admitted he'd spent most of his career nicking ideas from the *Alien* films. It was a statement meant to convince those in attendance that the studio was up to making a game worthy of the movie's most famous monster.

If only we'd known the six-year build-up – Gearbox announced it was working on an *Aliens* game in December 2006 – would be akin to sitting in the dentist's waiting room for half a decade, then getting all your molars sucked out by a Facehugger. Despite flying in journos from all over the world, no single-player code was available to play at the event. It was an ominous sign that one of PS3's most wanted games – issue #17 of OPM, with the game on the cover, remains our biggest-selling ever – would never be able to match the hype.

Sure enough, a month later a post appeared on the forums of Texas A&M University sports fansite Texags, claiming to be from an ex-employee of Gearsoft. Responding to some excitement over a preview, he wrote: "I wouldn't get your hopes up too high for *Colonial Marines*... The development of that game has been a total trainwreck. Gearbox isn't even making the game, except for the multiplayer. Primary development was outsourced to Timegate Studios, which has a less than stellar past."

The comment barely registered at the time, but then in January of this year review code started arriving with journalists, and it was clear the game would not match *Aliens* fanatics' lofty expectations. For a start, it seemed to lack many of the graphical effects of an earlier demo. Real-time lighting

was missing, smoke and particle effects were gone, and texture detail was down. Something was rotten on LV-426. What had happened?

Group effort

In early February, Pitchford spoke to IGN about how several studios – Timegate, Demiurge Studios and Nerve Software – had helped with development. According to him, Timegate worked on "probably about 20-25% of the total time". But then the Texags comment resurfaced, just as reviews started to come in. Was this the reality? Sega senior producer Matthew J Powers told Playnews, "Absolutely not, the game has been developed by Gearbox Software."

"Gearbox courted the fanbase of this beloved franchise."

Other studios [like Timegate] helped Gearbox on... single and multiplayer."

But that's not what Timegate appeared to be saying. On 12 February, a moderator on the developer's forum wrote: "Messaged a few people in TG and found out [it] basically had a hand in *everything*. It is responsible for the weapons, the characters, some of the story, a fair amount of the aliens. And I don't mean conceptualisation, it did the actual work of making said weapons and so on. Some had the estimate that 50% [of the] campaign is its work."

Then the reviews started coming in – most negative, many laden with acid blood-fuelled disappointment – and its Metacritic score at press time was

44. The next day, a post appeared on the forums of news aggregation service Reddit, purportedly from another disgruntled ex-member of the dev team. They claimed Gearbox's work on the game had repeatedly stalled due to other projects, notably *Borderlands 2* and *Duke Nukem Forever*. Finally, facing an immovable deadline from Sega, it outsourced much of the campaign to Timegate.

"Timegate managed to scrape together 85% of the campaign, but once *Borderlands 2* shipped and Gearbox turned its attention to [*Aliens*], it became pretty apparent that what had been made was in a pretty horrid state," the post explained. "Campaign didn't make

much sense, the boss fights weren't implemented, PS3 was way over memory, etc. Gearbox was pretty unhappy with TG's work, and some of the campaign maps were just completely redesigned from scratch."

PC gaming site Rock Paper Shotgun then contacted another former Timegate employee – and the anonymous source presented a now-familiar message: "Timegate definitely played a much bigger role in the development of *Aliens* than either Gearbox or Sega is letting on. *Aliens: Colonial Marines* is essentially Timegate's game. From my understanding, almost all of Timegate has been working on it for a few years, and it's not a small studio."

The Big 10

Stories everyone's talking about



A narrative was emerging. Gearbox, under pressure from its publisher and with other projects on its slate, ditched the lion's share of the single-player to Timegate. And what of Timegate – a studio based in Sugar Land, Texas, previously best known for the okay Section 8 and a couple of forgettable FEAR add-ons? Did it take on more than it could handle?

Texas strangers

Reviews of the company on the website Glassdoor, a sort of Tripadvisor for potential employees, are almost universally poor, with ex-employees criticising the extended crunch times and ineffective management. "It's sometimes hard to believe it actually gets any work done with all the producer BS that goes on," claims one review.

Neither Sega nor Timegate has

made any official comment, so all of this remains speculation. But as development costs rise and pressure heightens, outsourcing has become a key part of development – few in the industry would be surprised that great chunks of a triple-A game could be farmed out to other studios. But outsourcing brings with it problems, including quality control. Whatever the case, Colonial Marines was not the game many players had hoped for. Compromises were made, corners cut. Websites have posted videos comparing demo footage to the final game, taking a warm, critical bubble bath in the inconsistencies.

Still, question marks do hang over the sheer force of the backlash. Aliens is a beloved franchise, and writers have had six years to obsess over this latest game translation. Gearbox itself courted that fanbase,

promising a true sequel to James Cameron's movie, prodding at the simmering resentment many still feel over the latter films. It was a hornets' nest of expectation and hubris – and in an era where critical consensus is often built over Twitter, the merest hint of disappointment always had a chance of growing into a scandal.

There is, however, a final ironic sting in this Xeno's stabby tail. Despite the reviews, the game has sold extremely well, becoming the biggest UK release of the year in its first week. While it was rabid fan expectation that contributed to the gruelling critical reception, it could well be the element that saves this title from commercial failure. There could still be money in this for Sega. It's not game over, man.

See our review of Aliens: Colonial Marines – we scored it 6/10 – at officialplaystationmagazine.co.uk.