It's arguably the scariest graphic adventure ever. Jim Gillies reports from behind a cushion.

Things from

▲ On occasion it's best advised that you do not look behind yourself, or else you may end up never being able to turn the lights out again.

CD ONLY

Publisher: Mindscape

Contact: (01444) 246333

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It's a sad fact that none of the Aliens games that have so far been converted to the home computer have managed to capture the atmosphere and tension of the original movie trilogy. Indeed, Acclaim's Alien 3 and even the Atari Jaguar's Alien Vs Predator were arguably little more than glorified shoot 'em ups. So for the latest Giger tie-in Mindscape has opted for a very different approach.

For starters, the game *isn't* based on the films at all, but in fact draws inspiration from Dark Horse's gritty Aliens comic books. The game itself is being developed by Paris-based Cryo who, interestingly, bought out Dark Horse France last year. Consequently, both teams have been working together closely to

Aliens: In Progress

ensure Aliens: The Comic Book Adventure will be as authentic as possible.

Work started on the game in February 1994, when game designer Nicolas Choukroun teamed up with Cryo MD Jean Martial LeFranc and roughed out the storyboard, visualised by graphic artist Bernard Bittler. Although the storyline is completely original, much of the game's background and plot twists are taken from the Aliens: Labyrinth comic series. It has also borrowed ideas from numerous other Dark Horse books and, of course, the Alien films.

The game revolves around a team of four terraformers who are awoken from hypersleep to investigate a distress signal from the shake 'n' bake colony on planet B54C. As their hibernation pods slide open and the USS Sheridan flickers into life, the crew find themselves in

orbit around the planet. Blissfully unaware of the nightmare that's happening on the surface below, the four slip into their exoskeletons and prepare to dock with the colony.

Revamped

Aliens is essentially a graphic adventure, and is based on a more advanced hybrid of the Lost Eden game engine. However, Cryo has drastically revamped the engine so that Aliens will be tougher and certainly not as linear as, say, Dragon Lore. What's more, Aliens will be visually more spectacular than Cryo's previous games, thanks to slick SVGA graphics which help to capture the eerie feel of the comics and, of course, the movies.

The game promises to be surprisingly simple to play, mainly due to the intelligent icon-based cursor system which makes

▲ The intelligent cursor makes the game incredibly easy to control.

▲ Each of the four crew members has different skills and abilities.

▲ Each location was sketched by hand before being rendered in 3D Studio.

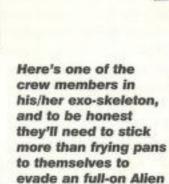▲ Like previous Cryo games, the cut-scenes that feature are awesome.

▲ Before the crew can leave, they must first climb inside their exoskeletons.

▲ The 3D iso-metric com-bat scenes are fast-paced, rather like a visually superior version of Virgin's Cannon Fodder.

▲ A lot of the feel of the Aliens comic strips has transferred superbly.

▲ There is strong language, but it all fits in with the characters' traits.

Here's one of the crew members in his/her exo-skeleton, and to be honest they'll need to stick more than frying pans to themselves to evade an full-on Alien attack. ▶

outer space

moving through the colony both quick and straightforward. It also makes many of the game's puzzles easier to tackle.

While many of the puzzles are solved by object manipulation, occasionally you'll need to call on the skills and abilities of each of the crew members to crack the problem. For example Herickson, an ex-marine and the obligatory meathead of the team, is the only bloke with military training and therefore the only crew member brave (or stupid) enough to take on the Aliens in combat. Sinclair, on the other hand, is a weedy scientist who specialises in all things technical and so proves invaluable when operating the colony computer and overriding the security systems.

As with all of Cryo's games, Aliens looks awesome, and when the graphics are com-bined with the sweeping soundtrack which howls away in the background, it really is moody, atmospheric and tense. Play this in a darkened room and I dare you not to jump!

On location

Each of the locations in the game, of which there are *loads*, have been painstakingly rendered in 3D Studio, along with each individual character sprite and all the impressive cinematic cut-scenes. In fact, the only hand-drawn graphics in the entire program are the portraits of each crew member, which were first painted on paper and then digitised into the game to give a more comic-style feel.

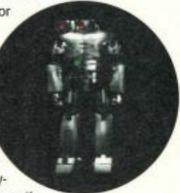Even the combat sections are rendered, and adopt a 3D-isometric view which looks down on Herickson in his exoskeleton. Equipped with grenades, machine guns and flame throwers, Herickson is moved around simply by clicking on the screen, and the cursor is also used for aiming his weapons. It's almost like Cannon Fodder, but with better graphics. However, no matter how glossy the presentation, if the gameplay is lacking, there's little to hold the player's attention. Thankfully, it looks as if Cryo has learned from previous experiences, and has created a game, nay an experience, that may well be described as not only one of the scariest graphic adventures, but also one of the most absorbing and playable graphic adventures this year. Let's hope so.

▲ Each character has their own fashion designer, but they've put too much starch in the wash. Probably.