

THE MAKING OF...

ALIENS

Having failed miserably to bring Back To The Future to life on home computers, no one was expecting great things when Electric Dreams announced that it was working on Aliens: The Computer Game. And yet the result was one of the finest film licences of the Eighties. Martyn Carroll talks to designer Mark Eyles to find out what went right.

RIPLEY

039



GORMAN

001



HICKS

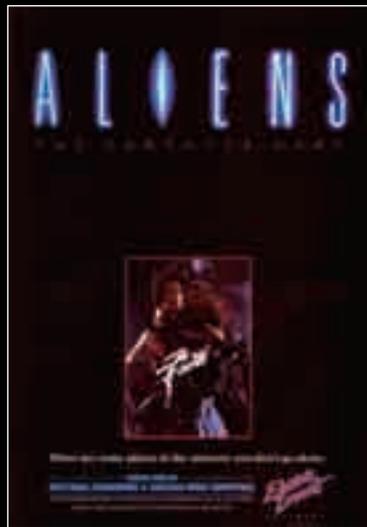
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"I DIDN'T WANT TO JUST CREATE A CLONE OF EXISTING 2D BLASTERS. I WANTED TO CREATE SOMETHING MORE ORIGINAL THAT CONJURED UP THE SUSPENSE AND FEAR THAT WAS IN THE FILM" MARK EYLES

Back in the 8-bit days there was lots of scary stuff, in the 'ugh' sense of the word at least. In-game graphics were often scary: all blocky and garish. Difficulty levels were scary too, with one-touch instant deaths compounded by a lack of lives. Loading times were also scary thanks to our reliance on standard audio cassettes as the storage medium of choice. And *World Cup Carnival* was definitely scary. However, there were no games – perhaps besides Cosmi's *Forbidden Forest* titles and the odd gothic text adventure – that really cranked up the tension and chilled the blood. There were no truly scary games except for *Aliens*.

Those who braved *Aliens* will surely remember the first time they played the game and felt the fear. Having arrived at the base on LV-426, you selected a member of your six-strong team and boldly ventured forth. You passed through several similar-looking rooms, getting further and further away from your team. No signs of any alien activity. And then your motion detector began to beep, slowly at first, but becoming quicker. You spun around the room, looking for the life form. And then you found it, rushing toward you with its jaws wide open. The beeping became a constant tone and before you could react, the screen blinked out in a shower of static. One man down, but at least now you knew a little about your enemy. It was large, fast and liked to eat your head. Some bug hunt this was turning out to be.



» After the awful *Back To The Future* game, Electric Dreams redeemed itself with *Aliens*, before scraping the barrel again with *Big Trouble In Little China*.

TOGETHER IN ELECTRIC DREAMS

Aliens was released in December 1986, three months after the movie hit UK cinemas. It was published by Electric Dreams, a fairly new software house founded by former Quicksilver managing director Rod Cousens with backing from Activision. Unusually for the time, a full team was put in place to develop the new title. Mark Eyles was tasked with designing the game while Jon Dean was the producer, overseeing the various coders and artists.

"Activision had acquired a number of film licences at the time and Rod



» Don't even think about leaving the base. Stepping outside results in instant death due to the moon's poisonous atmosphere.

asked me to design the *Aliens* game," says Mark, who had worked with Rod previously as Quicksilver's creative director. This was months before the film was finished, so with just the script and the original *Alien* movie for reference, Mark spent two weeks putting a rough design together. Right from the start he was clear about the kind of game he wanted to make: "There are different approaches to making a game from a movie. You can try to retell the movie, scene by scene, or you can extract elements from the movie and create an original player-led story that draws on the characters and scenario. I didn't want to just create a clone of existing 2D blasters – simply slotting in background graphics to suggest scenes from the movie – I wanted to create something more original that conjured up the suspense and fear that was in the film. I chose to focus on a single element that was at the heart of the movie: the combat between the crew and the aliens infiltrating the base. By doing so I was able to restrict the amount of graphics required and concentrate on a single core of gameplay, rather than ending up with a compendium of mini-games all themed round scenes in the movie."

Here Mark is no doubt referring to Activision's own take on the movie, originally released Stateside and later brought to the UK as *Aliens: US Version*. Regarding this rather odd publishing decision, Mark says: "I don't think Activision was really aware of what we



» The queen alien, as seen on the Amstrad CPC. Once she's flopping around in a pool of acid blood, you need to head right back to the beginning to complete the mission.

VERSION CONTROL

There is very little to choose between the different versions of *Aliens*, but if we were to throw them all before the Conversion Capers jury we'd probably find in favour of the C64 game. The graphics may be blocky, and nowhere near as detailed as the Spectrum version, and the sound is limited to a few spot effects (unlike the CPC version which features a superbly subtle in-game tune), but the C64 version triumphs thanks to the speed of the game. You can actually run through the base, whereas in the other versions you're forced into a leisurely ramble due the sluggish scrolling speed. Special mention should also be given to the Commodore 16 conversion by Mr Micro which, despite only featuring four controllable characters instead of the usual six, does a mighty fine job of shoehorning the game into a miserably small amount of memory.



» *Aliens* on the C16 is a credit to the computer, and closely resembles the Spectrum version.



» Mark Eyles with an alien model which fellow lecturers gave to him on his 50th birthday last November.

IN THE KNOW

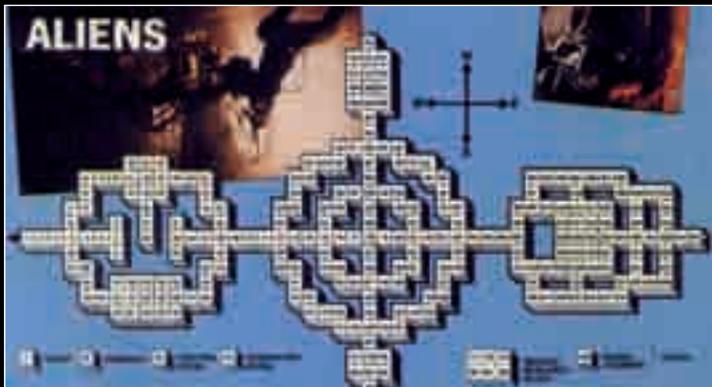


- » PUBLISHER: ELECTRIC DREAMS
- » DEVELOPER: ELECTRIC DREAMS
- » RELEASED: 1986
- » GENRE: FIRST-PERSON/STRATEGY
- » EXPECT TO PAY: £1

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» The display may be monochrome, but the Spectrum version displays some nicely shaded graphics to depict the base and its inhabitants.



» If you lost the original map, or more likely snagged a copy of the game from a mate, the magazines were always able to help out. This map appeared in Crash issue 40.

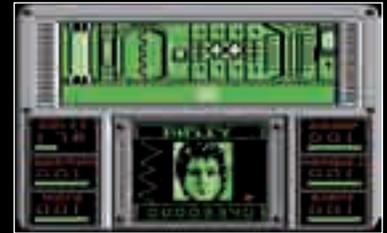
were doing. It had the licence and was keen to make as much use out of it as possible and thought that creating both UK and US games would ensure it would earn the maximum amount of money. I would guess that Activision was also hedging its bets as Electric Dreams didn't have a track record, so it probably wanted a backup plan in case our *Aliens* game didn't turn out well."

It's somewhat ironic then that the US game is a multipart affair that, while very faithful to the movie, is routine and tedious – two things the UK game is

» An alien rushes its pray in the game's terrifying attack sequence. As Hudson memorably said in the movie, "We're in some real pretty shit now man!"



» Two of the unique rooms you pass through on your way to the queen's lair: the control room (left) and the research block.



definitely not. "I saw the US version, but it didn't seem to be doing anything special," says Mark. "I believe there were two key innovations in the UK game. Firstly the use of a scrolling background that wrapped around to give the player the impression that they were standing in a room. This was not a 3D environment, but was trying to simulate one, giving the player a first-person view of the action. It seemed like an obvious game mechanism for immersing the player in the action. You're not sitting at a computer playing this game but you're actually tied into the cameras of the marines who are making their way through the base. A lot of design decisions were about trying to fully immerse the player in the game world. This was a game that said 'you're really there, you're not playing a game'. Some games take the 'this is a game you're playing' attitude and are very up front about the gameplay mechanisms, like on-screen health bars for level bosses. I chose the former as I thought it would better immerse the player.

"Secondly I believe *Aliens* was one of the first team-based combat games. The film was about a team arriving at a base and fighting aliens, not Ripley arriving alone. It was essential to try and reflect this in the game. It would have been significantly less interesting if the player only had Ripley to control. The introduction of more characters gave the player strategic decisions to make. You got to choose the outcome of the battle between the marines and the aliens – you were not forced through a series of pre-scripted hoops. Having a team also increased the tension as characters not currently under control were attacked."

COLONY WARS

Once the initial design was in place it was sent to 20th Century Fox for approval. This proved to be a formality. "I didn't have any problems getting the design passed," Mark tells us. "At the time film studios hadn't really realised the potential of videogames. They were happy to license them and let you get on with it. They did not yet see this as a major part of their business. That came later."

The good fortune continued as the development progressed with very few problems. Mark was fairly removed from the team, although he did continue to work on the design and tweak it as the game was programmed. Besides typically tight deadlines ("I remember the programmers were sleeping in the offices at Electric Dreams and working round the clock"), the biggest challenge was trying to add variety to the colony's 255 rooms. Memory restraints meant that the number of location graphics was limited, and while there were a few unique rooms such as the armoury and the control room, the vast majority of the locations looked identical. This meant it was very easy to get lost in the labyrinthine base,



» The original release came with a game map that was almost indispensable. Trying to navigate the base without it was futile.



"THE FILM WAS ABOUT A TEAM ARRIVING AT A BASE AND FIGHTING ALIENS, NOT RIPLEY ARRIVING ALONE. IT WAS ESSENTIAL TO TRY AND REFLECT THIS IN THE GAME" MARK EYLES



» Mark lecturing his students about the good old days when games were good and the pixel was king.

even with the map that came bundled with the game. "In retrospect the rooms could have been better differentiated," admits Mark. "There was actually a problem with the room wall graphics. They were created as a series of tile strips, designed to fit together in a specific order. When they were put into the game they got scrambled about a bit. There wasn't time to fix this before the game went out, and while it wouldn't have made a big difference, it might have helped if fixed. The reason a map was included was to help players with navigation. There was a trade-off between making the base big enough to give players a game that would last and was sufficiently challenging, and keeping the game easy enough to complete successfully. I guess if we had

been given longer to finish the game we could have spent more time balancing the difficulty level."

Aliens was developed simultaneously for the Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC and Spectrum, with ports to the Commodore 16 and MSX appearing later. The game was praised by the computing press – Zzap!, Amstrad Action and Sinclair User awarded it 81%, 90% and 5/5 respectively – and Mark himself had no complaints either. "I was very happy with the finished product. I was particularly pleased with the effect of the motion detector 'beep' when you were in a room with an alien, using sound as a key gameplay mechanism. I thought this served to build up tension very effectively, especially when an alien was right behind you."



» Mark's original design for the game interface shows how the user would be able to view the cameras of all of the marines.



» While the Amstrad version was much prettier than its 8-bit counterparts it was cursed by sluggish speed.

From his original design, only one main feature had to be jettisoned. "Initially I wanted to have views from all the characters' cameras on screen. However, this was far beyond the capabilities of the target platforms and had to be dropped. If the game was remade now this would be a great thing to include."

ALIEN LEGACY

As it would happen, Mark was given the chance to work on a modern *Alien* game when employed by Rebellion as head of design in 1999. "I joined Rebellion just as it was completing its *Alien vs Predator* PC game. I didn't have much input on this, but did do some design work on the Gold Edition that was released later. I think this conjured up the whole *Aliens* atmosphere perfectly. Later I worked on designs for a full *AvP* sequel which was sadly never made as the contract went to Monolith."

Mark worked in the industry until 2003 before escaping to academia. He's now a principle lecturer in games technology at the University of Portsmouth. For him, and his students, the legacy of *Aliens* lives on. "I teach my students about game design and producing design documentation. Part of this is looking at the history of games and also the development of gameplay mechanisms. I use *Aliens* as an example when I talk about game genres and specifically when I talk about shooters, as well as using it as an example of one of the ways that films can be turned into games."

And no doubt *Aliens* is also ideal for showing tomorrow's designers how to make one really scary game.



» Don't kill aliens in front of doors. Their acid is deadly.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

I OF THE MASK

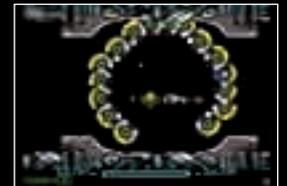
SYSTEMS: SPECTRUM
YEAR: 1985

SPINDIZZY

SYSTEMS: C64, CPC, SPECTRUM, ATARI 8-BIT
YEAR: 1986

R-TYPE

SYSTEMS: C64, CPC, SPECTRUM
YEAR: 1988



ALIENS: JAPAN VERSION

The UK was given two *Aliens* games – Electric Dreams' original and the US version. It was a similar story in Japan; only instead of the US version our friends in the Far East received a Japanese-only *Aliens* game for the MSX in 1987. More intriguing still is that the game was developed by Square and is widely believed to be the role-playing behemoth's first and only platformer. Playing as Ripley (who appears to be either naked or sporting a pink shellsuit), you bounce along the planet surface, Mario-style, shooting face-huggers, adult aliens and, yes, killer snakes. It's completely mad, but the soundtrack by well-known Japanese composer Nobuo Uematsu is excellent, and the end-of-level boss battles against the queen are grandiose in typical Square style. Here's hoping that one day this curiosity will appear on Virtual Console. Until then you can emulate the game now using blueMSX or something similar.

