

The Making Of...

ALIEN TRILOGY



IN THE KNOW

- » PUBLISHER: ACCLAIM
- » DEVELOPER: PROBE ENTERTAINMENT
- » RELEASED: 1995
- » PLATFORM: PC, PSONE, SATURN
- » GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

With *Aliens: Infestation* and the upcoming *Colonial Marines* putting *Alien* back on the gaming radar, Dave Cook speaks to the team behind a tie-in that defied convention and perfectly captured the tone of a derelict space colony gone terribly wrong



» [PC] Walking too close to a Facehugger will result in a nasty close-up of the alien's anatomy, as well as a slight health drain.

“They’re coming outta the walls! They’re coming outta the goddamn walls!” While Bill Paxton’s swaggering jarhead Hudson was referring to the attacking xenomorph horde in 1986 action flick *Aliens*, his ranting could just as easily apply to the barrage of lazy movie games that launch each year. The process of knocking together a lazy hatchet job of a game,

basics and then used the movie plotlines to make the mechanics for each section. I applied the same principle for *Alien Trilogy*, and because the movies are so atmospheric, we wanted to make an eerie game that frightened you. We wanted you to jump, so that the first time a Facehugger came on screen and sucked at your face, it would be enough to get any gamer slightly panicked. It was great to watch people cold testing the game, and it gave us many a chuckle.”

“Because the movies are so atmospheric, we wanted to make an eerie game that frightened you”

slapping a movie logo on the case, then charging over the odds for the privilege isn’t a new trend, nor is it going away any time soon, but every so often a game comes along that dares to be different.

Released in 1995 in the US and in both Europe and Japan the following year, Probe Entertainment’s commercial smash *Alien Trilogy* shook off the creative restrictions that come with movie scripts and went beyond the original source material, resulting in an experience that, while bearing all the aesthetic quality of the films, tried to deliver something fresh and unique.

The project was helmed by then-designer Matthew Nagy, who cut his teeth at Probe with another movie game developed in tandem with the *Alien* licence, *Die Hard Trilogy*. “That title was my first game design. We looked at a few arcade classics to get the gameplay

Despite the name, the plot of *Alien Trilogy* bore only slight resemblances to the film canon. Ellen Ripley served as the player character, although rather than retelling her origins as warrant officer of the Nostromo in the first movie, Ripley was depicted as a fully fledged member of the Marine Corps. Other series hallmarks such as the titular aliens, infested colonies and mention of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation allowed the team enough space to deviate from the established series and get inventive without creating something that felt detached from the licence.

“We were grateful we could deviate from the plotlines,” says Matthew. “It’s hard to make games based on movies that have already been out for a number of years as there’s no mystery left. Everyone’s seen the films, so you ideally want to give them a new plotline.” While the concept of creating something



new from existing source material may have proved to be daunting for some, Matthew and his team started and completed the game in just over a year, which is no small feat.

“From the point I came on, it took 15 months to get the game completed, and at that point there was no design at all – just the idea of creating an FPS title, the opening cinematic and a lot of tech. I had to make the game design document first, and I gleaned from the movies as much as possible, then moved on to designing levels on paper, as well as helping the guys get around technical restrictions as we progressed.

It was awesome seeing it all come together, watching the feel of the movie getting captured in the artwork, then watching it manifest on screen and become playable.”

The atmosphere was indeed true to the dark, dank nature of the LV-426 colony, as depicted on the big screen in James Cameron’s sequel *Aliens*; the prison facility from *Alien 3*; and, finally, the mysterious crashed spacecraft from the beginning of the first film. The claustrophobic corridors smacked of *Doom*’s labyrinthine stages, except the low visibility and erratic lighting helped make for a much more unsettling experience. The tone was topped off by the familiar, piercing sound of Ripley’s motion scanner. Probe’s inclusion of

BREAKING THE HABIT

THE *ALIEN* IP has enjoyed a smooth transition to the game format when compared to many movie licences out there. One of the exceptions to the tie-in curse is Probe’s very own take on *Alien 3*, a game that bears many similarities to *Contra*, and with a brutal difficulty curve to match. The best version for many is the 1993 Mega Drive build, which includes dark visuals, a creepy tone and considerably more firepower and xenomorphs than David Fincher’s negatively received movie. Other notable *Alien* releases include Sega’s frantic 1993 lightgun arcade title *Alien 3: The Gun*, Capcom’s 1994 arcade brawler *Alien vs Predator*, and, of course, Rebellion’s much-loved Atari Jaguar shooter *Alien vs Predator*. Rebellion’s blaster initially launched on Atari’s machine in 1994, but many still consider the studio’s 1999 PC follow-up, *Alien Versus Predator*, to be the pinnacle of *Alien* games.



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STAND-UP FIGHT OR BUG HUNT?

NEXT ON THE *Alien* tie-in slate is Gearbox's *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, a project that has been in development for what feels like an incredibly long time. Given the harsh learning curve experienced by both Matthew and Ben, we asked them what Gearbox will have to bear in mind to create a title that feels as authentic as their very own project.

Matthew believes it's a question of tension: "As long as they keep the atmosphere, and the level of surprise on the player, such as the suspense of what's around the next corner, then I'm sure they'll do a good job."

Ben takes the same stance: "From the point of view of an artist, it's simple – focus on the atmosphere, the lighting and the overall sense of claustrophobia and terror that the films are so great at conveying. I'm sure they'll do a great job on the game and I look forward to playing it."



» [PC] Just as android Ash turned on the *Nostramo* crew in the first film, the colony is overrun by aggressive synthetics.

this chilling radar device was certainly a masterstroke, and the perfect way to make the shooter all the more gripping.

Assisting Matthew in realising this terrifying vision was Ben McGrath, one of the talented artists who distilled the experience down to a level that relied on a sustained sense of terror, rather than cheap scare tactics used by all too many horror titles today. "With a franchise like *Alien* the art direction is so clearly defined that it's easy to see where you need to take the visuals," Ben explains. "Our job was really to translate the art from one medium to another. We sat there with VCRs and went through the films, taking screenshots of every set design, logo, weapon and so on. I must have watched all three films frame-by-frame multiple times."

The dedication of Ben and the rest of the art team was underlined by the transition in technology being felt by the industry, following the advent of PlayStation hardware. With Sony offering studios more technical clout than the 16-bit era, fully grasping the possibilities of what could be achieved



on the new hardware resulted in a few teething problems at Probe.

"I think the biggest challenge we faced was that *Alien Trilogy* was both the first 3D title and the first PlayStation game that most of the team had worked on," says Ben. "At that point in time console development was going through a huge technology shift, and many of the experienced staff from the 2D days didn't want to learn 3D, and decided to move into handheld development where their skills would still be valid. Team sizes had increased dramatically – although they were still nothing compared to what we see today – which introduced the need for more specialists than had been seen before."

With the drive to succeed and the manpower to finish the job in place, the next challenge for Ben was purely technical, as the scope of the project at such an early stage in PlayStation development demanded the creation of bespoke tech and skills. "The tools we used to make the game had to be figured out from scratch, as there were no industry standards. The modelling was done on Silicon Graphics machines, all the textures were created in Photoshop on Mac, and the coders had to write a custom tool that allowed us to

map textures and status attributes onto the models."

On the subject of the game's atmospheric lighting, Ben and his colleagues made the effect possible by entering into a complicated but entirely worthwhile process that was derived from bas-relief art styles – an effective way of achieving striking depth – which is a perfect fit for the first-person nature of *Alien Trilogy*. "Most of the lighting was actually rendered directly into the texture maps," Ben explains. "We drew bas-relief versions of every wall and floor panel by hand, layered on surface details from photographic material and then rendered them using the lighting filters in Photoshop. The results were pretty impressive for the time."

As powerful as it was, the PlayStation hardware still presented a few headaches for Probe, many of which were felt directly by Ben. "The texture warping on the PlayStation was really hard to live with. Basically it didn't do perspective correction on triangles as they passed near the clip plane, which is perhaps easier described as them coming 'through' the screen. That caused a lot of visual problems, so we spent a long time trying to keep horizontal lines out of our textures until the coders wrote something that chopped up the triangles as they got closer to the camera. That mitigated the problem and we could start doing a lot more with the textures."

Through the entire process, both Matthew and Ben rarely had contact with the licence-holders at Fox, something that removed an unnecessary number of fingers from a project that was making considerable headway given the size of the task at hand. Even simple asset inclusions from the films, such as the



» [PC] The Alien Queen serves as the boss of each of the three acts. She's fast, powerful and vicious, meaning you'll need to unload everything you've got into her to survive.



rasp of Ripley's devastating pulse rifle, the design of the aliens themselves, or the familiar settings required little in the way of moderation from Fox.

Ben can't recall a single instance where any of his team's designs had to be pre-approved before use, and similarly, Matthew remembers a notably hands-off approach from the film company. "You know, I was extremely lucky as I never had to get approvals from Fox," he explains, "which was perhaps because I stepped in when I did and a lot of the work had already been done, or maybe because the initial 'Stinger' concept video was so good and captured *Alien* so well. Unlike *Die Hard Trilogy*, Fox were very hands-off with *Alien Trilogy* because unlike that first project, they were the co-publisher; on *Alien* the licensing deal went through



» [PC] Each stage is littered with switches, but poor signposting means that it's never quite clear what they do.



» [PC] The second act throws more gun-toting enemies into the mix, demanding a more strategic approach.

the game can most certainly be considered a success.

Regardless, the game went on to join the ranks of Sony's Platinum range, and ports were developed for DOS and Sega's Saturn, both of which perfectly captured the same values as the original

Matthew believes that *Alien Trilogy's* Platinum status stands as a fitting reward for the hard graft displayed by his tireless team. "I was over the moon at how well *Alien* did. I was really proud of the game and what we achieved given the timeline. Back then, I was

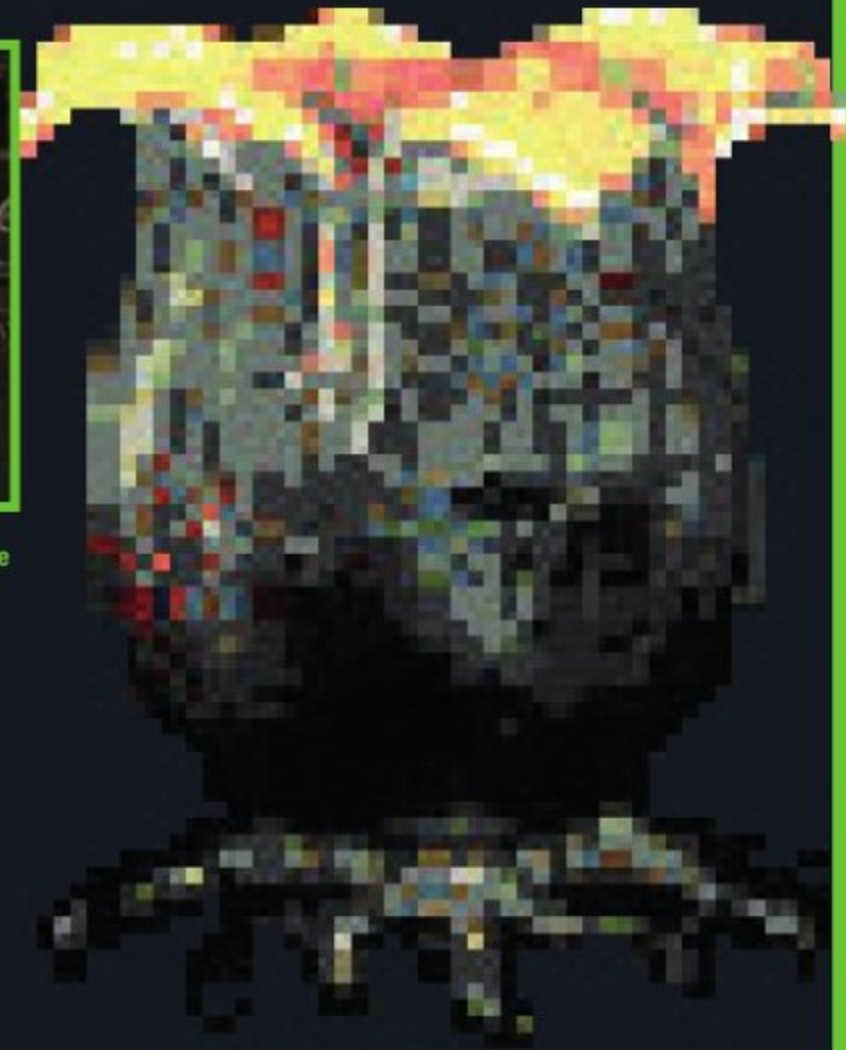
“Many of the experienced staff from the 2D days didn't want to learn 3D, and decided to move into handheld development where their skills would still be valid”

Acclaim, and Fox dealt with them rather than Probe directly."

The completed *Alien Trilogy* release ended up receiving a mixed to positive critical reaction at the time. While a handful of critics grew tired of the weak signposting, familiar environments and routine objectives, the gaming press at large reacted positively. If anything, the disorienting, dark environs helped create a feeling of being trapped, an aesthetic highlighted further by swarms of aliens, Facehuggers and demented android attackers baying for Ripley's blood. As a companion piece to the movie canon,

version. Although Probe's game was met with great commercial success, a sequel was never commissioned, a move that is almost unheard of today when movie licences are involved. Ben explains: "It was well known during development that the licence would expire shortly after we'd released the game, so a sequel was never really considered. In hindsight it would have made a lot of sense for the same core team to carry on making FPS games, but back then every game you made was in a different genre. We all got split up and went to work on Probe's other projects."

young and naive and didn't really think about how many units it would sell. My attitude throughout the project was to refrain from using the movie as a crappy skin that could fit over a platform game, but to try and tailor the game's genre and gameplay to match the films effectively. Then I wanted us to borrow as much as we could from the movies to create unique gameplay mechanics that not only suited the licence, but would deliver great entertainment value to the player. Later, as I became more business-savvy, I would look back at what we did with both *Die Hard* and *Alien* and smile, as I still love both of those games and think they stand the test of time."



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

MORTAL KOMBAT (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE
YEAR: 1993

MORTAL KOMBAT II
SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE
YEAR: 1994

DIE HARD TRILOGY
SYSTEM: PSONE
YEAR: 1996

