

"This is the real deal, the game that puts you in the dropship"

> Developer Gearbox > Publisher Sega > Players TBC > Co-op 1-4

# They're Back

25 years after the movie and three years after it was first announced, we've heard very little about *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. Is it game over, man, or going to kick ass? We had exclusive access to Gearbox to find out what's happening

**T**here's a big problem with making a console shooter based on *Aliens*, and Gearbox boss Randy Pitchford knows exactly what it is. "I've been stealing from this franchise my entire career," he admits, in an LA hotel room a stone's throw from the 20th Century Fox building. "The whole industry has... at the end of the day, every case where space marines save the world from aliens, it all started from this root." How do you make a game out of a movie that so many games have been ripping off for years?

The answer: fan service. This is the real deal, the game that puts you on the dropship, in the mining colony, driving the powerloader. Not that Pitchford or any of the other Gearbox staffers want

to talk about the details - or rather, they do, but they won't confirm them.

Will you be able to use the mech-suit powerloader, as Ripley did in the finale? Well, it's there, but "we wanna cover that later." Can you drive the APC? No comment, but they're there, and hey, did you know that it has those squad monitor screens in it? And a turret? And pop-up rocket-launchers? Nobody's ever seen those, wouldn't it be cool if you could see what they're like?

There's a maddening refusal to commit to specifics. Pitchford will, at least, confirm the storyline, which has been carefully built into the canon.

## Late arrivals

Following the events of *Alien 3*, corporate overlord Weyland-Yutani discovers the remains of

**SAY MY NAME**  
As in the movie, the basic squad is hugely important. While some are mere redshirts, the core group including pegleg Cruz here are key characters who you'll form a bond with over the course of the story. If they go, you'll feel it - both in heart and body, because there'll be one less person gunning down acid-spitting xenomorphs. Facing aliens alone is where it gets really scary.

"Gearbox has clearly nailed the setting"



Every grating could have acid-spitting death beneath.



The planet is in ruins after the events of *Aliens*.

"Back up soon encounters an alien attack"

original ship Sulaco in orbit around the prison ship, discover what happened, and send it back to colony planet LV-426 with a view to harvesting some aliens. Then the backup squad sent to support Hicks and chums arrives, late, discovers the Sulaco and is told to find out what happened. They soon encounter the aliens, and things go rapidly downhill.

If you didn't understand any of that paragraph, don't worry. *Alien* nerd-dom is not required to enjoy the game, stresses Pitchford, it'll just be more rewarding if you know Vasquez's first name. If you don't, "it doesn't matter, what you get is this intense co-op squad-based tactical shooter, times survival horror, times adventure and exploration. It's a varied experience along those fronts."

Ambitious goals, although the demo only shows the first three qualities. It's set some way into the game, as the remains of the Sephora crash to earth in Hadley's Hope, the mining colony from the

second movie. Slapped into consciousness, the squad takes its first steps into the ruined facility - their first alien encounter being a twitching facehugger in a jar. Worse lies ahead.

It's clear from the off that Gearbox has nailed the setting, recreating both the shattered labs and then, when we arrive in a ruined control room with most of one side missing, the ravaged and seemingly deserted landscape. The visuals don't look as shiny as, say, *Dead Space 2*, but the whistling wind mixing with the ever-present orchestral background music means it's still a hugely evocative location.

And *Dead Space*, crucially, doesn't get to play with *Aliens'* iconic motion tracker. When that instantly-recognisable pinging sound starts up, and we see the player lower his shotgun to bring up the screen showing tell-tale blips closing in, there's a jolt of dread tinged with nostalgia that makes the game's appeal very clear.

When a luckless marine is yanked up into the heating duct, the shouting starts, followed quickly by a

"With a twinge of nostalgia, the game's appeal is clear"



**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS**  
Foes like these demand a robust arsenal, which the game will provide. We saw a shotgun and the famous pulse rifle, and other items from the movies will be available. Gearbox will be revealing more details in the screens and videos it puts out between now and the game's release. It will say it's working on some entirely new weapons, though, perhaps to deal with the new alien types.

**BUMP IN THE DARK**  
The demo we saw was built for the bombast of E3, but the game will incorporate survival horror moments. "We have the opportunity for all kinds of varied experiences and pacing is designed to take you through that," says Pitchford, citing the movie scene where Ripley and Newt are trapped in a room with a facehugger. Expect to be separated from your squad at key points in the game.

GEARBOX  
PRESIDENT  
**RANDY  
PITCHFORD**  
ON LOSS,  
MONITORS  
AND NERDS



**A lot of people die in the demo. Is this a squad we're going to care about?**  
The squad is going to be really important. With this material, you wanna see aliens rip guys in half and you don't want to think about it too much, you wanna have fun. The other time, you wanna have this "oh my god, please don't let anything happen to X." We remember these things from the squad in the film - we care about those emotional experiences as well. It's been crafted to allow for both to exist.

**Will you be using the marine's monitor screens? For squad control, maybe?**  
We know that they have the equipment to look at each other's cameras, and the game desires to play with that - not as a top-line feature, but at moments in the narrative where it makes sense, just like the film did. In the game you're one of the marines, and your friends can be marines with you, it's not an RTS... if someone assumes that because we made *Brothers in Arms* there'll be like, squad command, that's incorrect.

**Is it tough working within the limits of the *Alien* fiction?**  
What's interesting is it's fiction, and sometimes the fiction actually has some mutually exclusive 'facts.' We've identified some of those and taken them to [20th Century Fox] and been like "can we come up with something that makes sense?" So what we think is mutually exclusive actually makes perfect sense if you only had this bit of information. And we've solved some of those problems, those are the fun ones.



The new squad gradually discovers what's happened.

**NEW AND OBSCURED**  
The game will add several new xenomorphs, which Gearbox won't discuss. "If we start with a bunch of new shit we're not familiar with, we're gonna ruin our sense of authenticity," explains Pitchford. "As a diehard *Alien* fan, I have to be sure I trust the experience before I'm ready to accept a bunch of new xenotypes to my beloved franchise."

**BISHOP'S MOVE**  
The story's been built to take you back to the locations of the movie. "You'll explore the cargo bay and you'll see the milky trail from Bishop's ripped-in-half body, and his legs," says Pitchford. "The dropship that Bishop piloted, that Ripley, Hicks and Newt all escaped on, you'll ride that. That's still there in the hangar." The Derelict ship from the first movie is also present and "has a role to play."

**MORE POWER TO YOU**  
Though Gearbox won't discuss it, it's abundantly obvious that you'll get to use the series' iconic power loader at some point in the game. In our demo, we had to make do with watching another marine do the honours. This means we can confirm that yes, the flamethrower is present and working and no, it's not going to do much good when there are a dozen aliens coming for you.

"The familiar alien forms pour through windows, doors and air vents"

▶▶ rush of familiar alien forms, pouring through the windows, doors, and ventilation systems. With the music soaring and stinging, and the slithering forms lit by the flash of gunfire, it's an impressive and atmospheric sight. Recharging health and blood that temporarily obscures the view, rather than melting through flesh, keeps the fight from ending quickly. "We actually wanted it to be a very accessible experience," says Pitchford. "The goal is not to have complicated interfaces, (there's very little in the way of a HUD) we're not worrying about having things like squad command. You don't need fire and manoeuvre - there's no manoeuvring on an alien." With the

squad at full strength, the aliens don't seem to pose much of a challenge, going down with three shotgun blasts each, and it's not until one jumps the player and knocks him through the window that things get threatening. We're treated to a close-up shot of that famous grin, but he's able to punch it clear and put a shotgun shell through it. Now we're amid the wreckage of the planet's surface, and a bigger threat crashes into view: a newer, bigger alien with a triangular headpiece not unlike the film's Queen. **Cracking wise** This, one of several new xenomorphs in the game, is impervious to standard

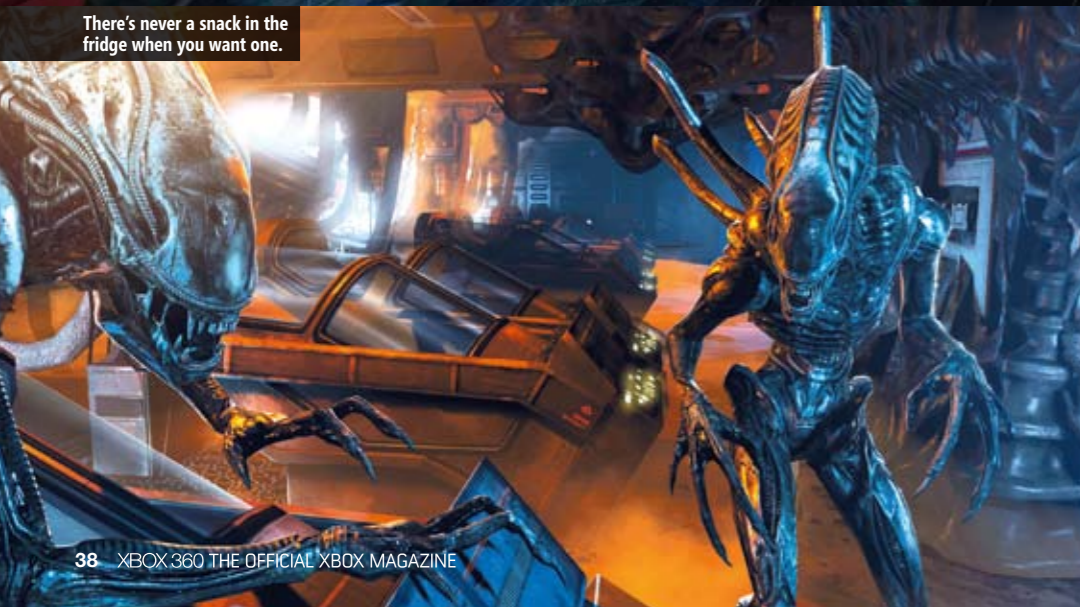
assault rifle fire, so the squad is forced to leg it through the windswept ruins to another structure. The main character slides under the door just as it slams shut with an oh-so-metatextual cry of "I'm probably supposed to say something memorable here!" Later banter will be snappier. Gearbox is well aware of the film's endlessly quotable dialogue, and is introducing new zings with a script written by the creators of the recent *Battlestar Galactica* reboot. "We could make a whole TV series out of the material they crafted for us," says Pitchford. "You gotta be careful with it, though. You can imagine when ▶▶

**LONG TIME NO SEE**  
We debuted *Colonial Marines* on our cover back in early 2008. Since then, nothing. Why the delay? "That was the proposal," explains Pitchford. "It was a prototype - prototype content, prototype technology, and intent." He admits that Gearbox "probably announced it too soon."

“There’s just enough time to tool up before aliens descend”

CO-OP CONTINUITY

How does the drop-in co-op work if key squad members die? Pitchford remains mysterious. “That is handled. It’s a new kind of thing so if I described it, I think it would be interpreted different than what it is. So I’d rather you see it. Imagine before you saw how *Left 4 Dead* was handled, if someone tried to describe that with just words. When you’re playing it is fine.” Intriguing.



There’s never a snack in the fridge when you want one.



Gearbox has built a renderer specifically for this game.



Fighting with friends is sure to be a highlight.



Sorry chum, this one’s bullet-resistant.

“The boss alien smashes through the hangar and grabs the player”

▶▶▶ the characters belt something out and it doesn’t work... it’s delicate and difficult so we’re being very subtle.”

Inside the base, there’s temporary peace, light and a weapons cache. Here too is a rare HUD prompt: Player Two has joined. *ACM* supports drop-in and drop-out multiplayer throughout the campaign and the help is sorely needed.

There’s just time to tool up before a horde of aliens descends. The squad prepares with another film prop, the automatic turret. It’s not enough to hold the xenos back, though; they advance from the walls and floor, snatch squad members into grates, and squeeze through gaps in the piles of crates.

The squad is starting to become overwhelmed when the power goes out, plunging the base into nightmarish red emergency lighting, and a hasty retreat is beaten to an adjacent hangar.

Here’s where we glimpse the APC trucks and the power loader, but there’s no chance to use them. Another marine hoists himself into the power loader as

something huge starts beating the door down; as the cracks appear aliens swarm into the room and attack. Seconds later the boss alien smashes through the hangar doors and grabs the player. The final shot of the demo is a close-up of those fetching nested teeth coming towards the camera.

It’s a comprehensive demonstration of the studio’s love of the franchise. The game might look less polished than its extended development time might suggest, but it’s clear that a huge amount of research has gone into making it a new but authentic story in the movie’s world.

“And there are so many neat, fun things we get to do,” Pitchford grins. “Like, what happened to Burke? What happened to Hudson? They’re there, somewhere. They’re all fun play spaces that you get to visit after these events unfolded.” 25 years after the film released, it’s finally getting the game it deserves.

Jon Hicks