THE ART OF NATURAL SELECTION II

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In a time before the beginning, when 'Natural Selection' was just a stirring of butterflies in my stomach, I knew I wanted to work with Cory. He was fresh out of college, but his abundant talent and puritan work ethic was obvious. I then wrote the first Natural Selection inside my room in Somerville, Massachusetts. I barely left the confines of those walls for 18 months, but in my mind I explored great expanses. I spent my savings to make it and after releasing it, I was utterly, hopelessly, and happily hooked.

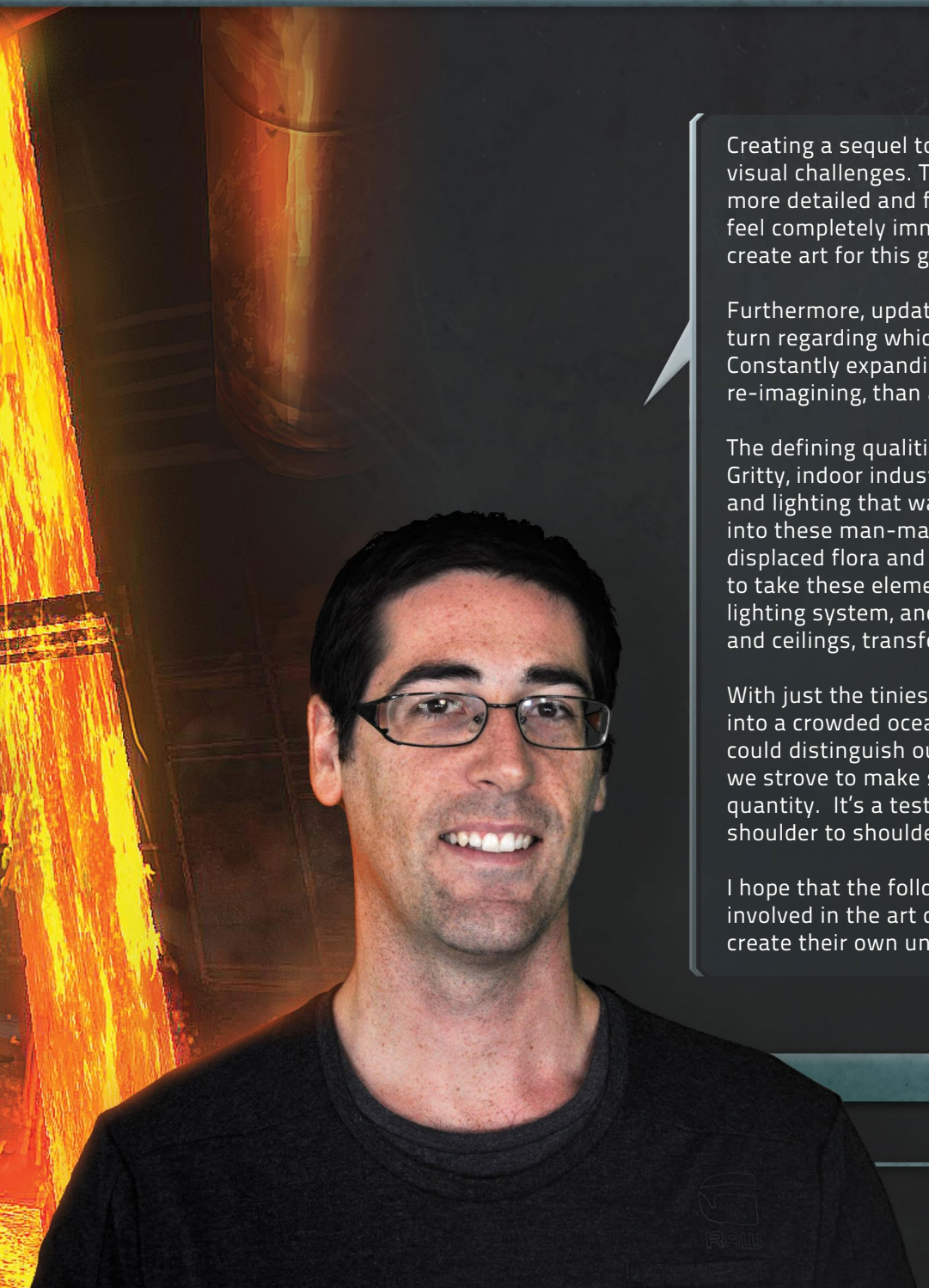
Tonight, we will release Natural Selection 2 on the world stage. We have tried every possible angle for funding, including making a casual game, selling middleware, donations, Kickstarter-style pre-orders (before that was a thing), angel funding, friends and family and plundering our own savings accounts. We've built a sophisticated and modern engine called Spark and have logged thousands of hours playing hundreds of versions of the game before release.

Among all this change and chaos, one thing has remained stable, and that's the game's artistic vision. Cory's unique concepts served as a guiding light and a hopeful reminder of what we striving for, and what we hoped one day to achieve. Of course we marvelled at his metal marines and shivered over his wickedly armored 'animals'. But he also managed to make small rooms incredibly detailed, hallways awe-inspiring, and generators jaw-dropping. Every detail was painstakingly agonized over by his largest critic: himself. We would give him the usual encouragements, but it was clear that most of our quick comments had already been researched and discarded, as he pulled up large composites of concepts and notes from sources in games, films and nature. Cory is clearly creative, but also thorough and calculating.

It's with great pleasure that after all this time, we managed to bring Cory's futuristic, unfolding, glowing, diaphanous, transforming and savage concepts to life in Natural Selection 2. We hope you enjoy a glimpse of that journey here.

CHARLIE CLEVELAND

GAME DIRECTOR



Creating a sequel to a game that was released a decade ago certainly presents its own set of visual challenges. Technology has advanced in leaps and bounds, allowing the art to be far more detailed and fully realized. We have many more tools at our disposal to make players feel completely immersed in the game world, yet the time, resources, and skill necessary to create art for this generation of games have grown exponentially as well.

Furthermore, updating the look of the NS2 Universe required careful consideration at every turn regarding which core aesthetic elements from the original needed to be preserved. Constantly expanding and evolving, the art vision for NS2 became, by necessity, more of a re-imagining, than a straight.

The defining qualities of Natural Selection 1 remained as the foundation we built upon. Gritty, indoor industrial maps, a mix of claustrophobic hallways and expansive landmark rooms and lighting that was atmospheric without being overly dark. An alien side that encroached into these man-made environments, expanding with a natural beauty all their own, the way displaced flora and fauna returns to reclaim an abandoned building. But for NS2 we were able to take these elements so much further, using technology that allowed for a fully dynamic lighting system, and alien infestation that dynamically spreads across floors and up onto walls and ceilings, transforming the maps into something both otherworldly and familiar.

With just the tiniest fraction of the resources of many game companies we dove head first into a crowded ocean of glossy, big-budget first person shooters. We've always known we could distinguish ourselves by offering a unique gameplay experience, and on the art side we strove to make sure we could compete visually, through a focus on quality rather than quantity. It's a testament to the talent and dedication of our whole team that we can stand shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the games out there.

I hope that the following pages will help to illuminate some of the thinking and process involved in the art design for Natural Selection 2, and maybe even inspire others out there to create their own universes.

CORY STRADER

ART DIRECTOR

MARINES

FRONTIERSMEN

HISTORY

The Frontiersmen represent a nimble, unconventional and somewhat underfunded group of soldiers, which their simple, relatively low tech appearance is meant to convey.
Their technology is centered around modularity, reuse, and centralized command/intelligence.

Note: In NS1 the parent organization of the marines was the Trans-System Authority. However the real life TSA (Transportation Security Administration) was not an acronym we wanted to be confused with, so midway through development of NS2 we changed the name to the Trans-System Federation.

CONCEPT

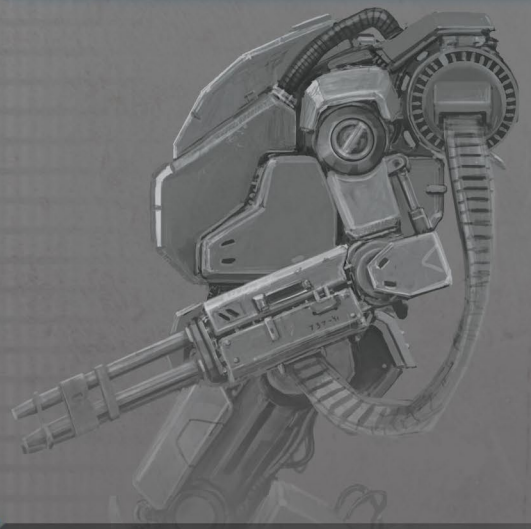
With a name like Natural Selection, we didn't want a battle of Good vs. Evil. Instead, both sides are simply species trying to survive. So while visually distinct, the two sides also take hints from each other, as seen in the subtly organic marine armor with its segmented plating.

We kept the faces of our marines visible. NS2 is all about teamplay, so we felt it important to do everything we could to get players to empathize with, and therefore help, each other. Exposed cloth and skin alternates with the protective layers of armor, to add some vulnerability to the look of the marines, since they are fighting an enemy that uses teeth and claws rather then advanced weaponry.

BLACK ARMOR HELMET

JETPACK UPGRADE

The expanding and retracting side thrusters were a practical solution to let the marines through the tight indoor spaces that NS2 takes place in.



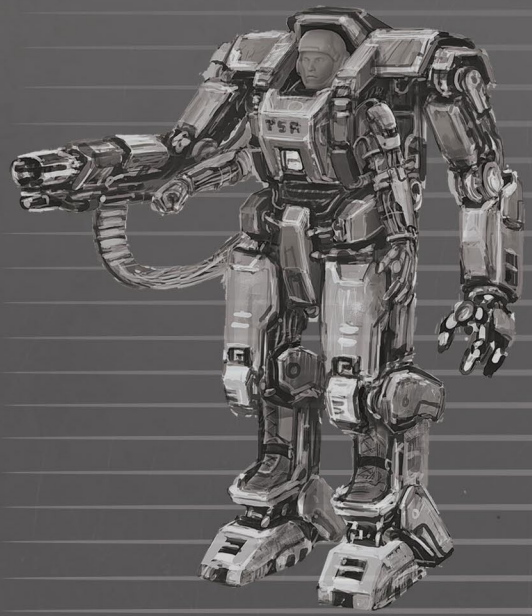
EXOSUIT UPGRADE

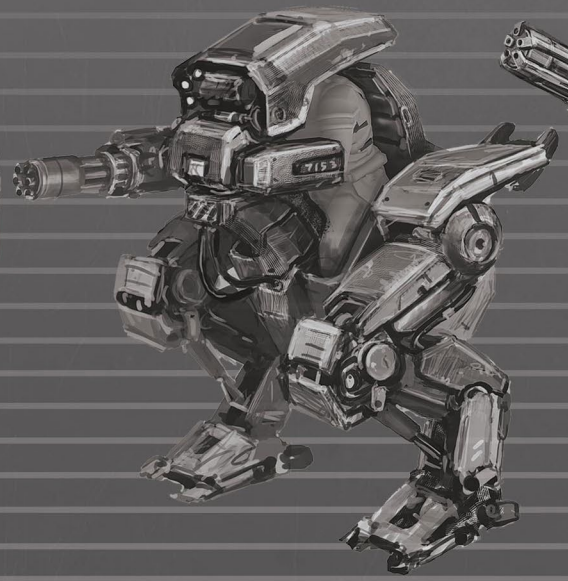
The old 'heavy' model from NS1 was about the same size, and used the same weapons, as a regular marine. This time around we wanted something much cooler and more impressive, so we changed it from a suit of armor to more of a mech design, with the player inside the cockpit. This size let us make the Exosuit much more powerful, with infinite ammo and weapons specific to this class. The robotic left hand can be upgraded to a second minigun.

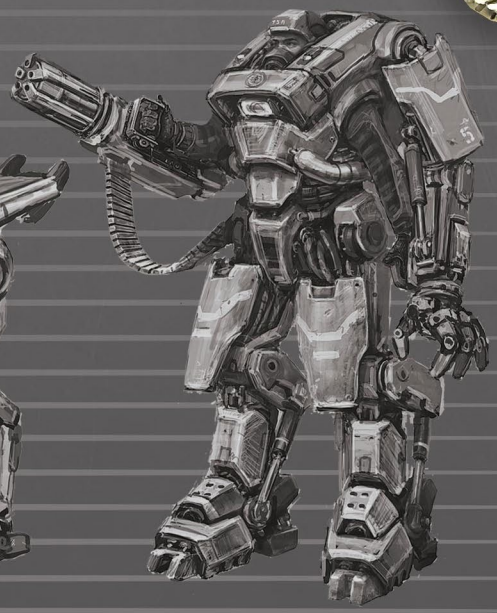
EXOSUIT HAND

CONCEPT EVOLUTION

An early design (shown at right) was taken to a preliminary modeling stage. However technical challenges with the exposed marine look, such as making it work with different marine models, and the Exo didn't look tough enough to serve its late-game role.







SR3 "STRYKER" FOLDING AXE

P37 9mm COMBAT PISTOL

STARTING GEAR

The original combat knife from NS1 was mostly used to hack through alien structures. So for NS2 we thought we would make the weapon more suited for that and made it an axe instead. For practical reasons, we had it fold down to fit on a marine's utility belt.

For the pistol, the mechanical workings of a WW2 Luger were merged with a futuristic pistol design, to create a unique combination of old and new, appropriate to the marines.

PISTOL FIRING SHOWING TOGGLE MECHANISM AND SHELL EJECTION

VORTEX TACTICAL SHOTGUN

WELDER ATTACHEMENT

BUILDER

SCREEN DEPLOY

M39 ASSAULT RIFLE

The rifle, the standard issue weapon that every marine spawns with, underwent several revisions over the course of development. The initial design (below) was in the game for quite some time, but was eventually reworked to be less bulky. The final model of the sleeker, more streamlined rifle is shown at the right.

A recurring element with the marine tech is a deploying animation that occurs when weapons are drawn or machinery is constructed. In the case of the rifle the stock quickly unfolds, the front end extends, and the top section with the ammo counter pops up.

FINAL RENDER

INITIAL CONCEPT ART

INACTIVE COMPACT MODE FOR STORAGE

ENDER G-70 MULTIPLE SHOT GRENADE LAUNCHER

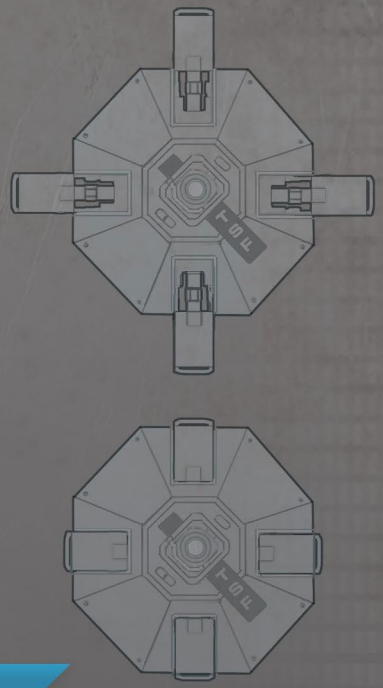
GRENADE LAUNCHERS

We had extremely limited resources when we started on the grenade launcher, and even one extra weapon model was costly to us. As a result we designed the grenade launcher to be an add-on attachment for the rifle (shown on right).

After much playtesting, we realized that the combination of the two was simply too powerful and was over-used, so we swallowed our pride and redesigned it as a separate weapon. The look of the final concept (above) was based off the beloved GL from NS1.

GRENADE LAUNCHER ATTACHMENT

TACTICAL FLAMETHROWER



TSF LAND MINES

AMMO PACK

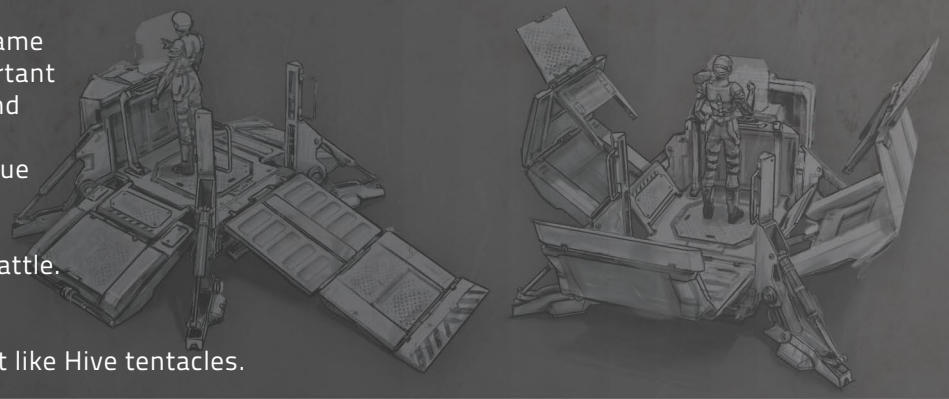
MED PACK

CATALYST PACK

COMMAND STATION

This is the center of the marine base and is the winning condition of the game when destroyed, so we knew it had to be much bigger and look more important than the original 'chair' from NS1. We designed it to be a portable command bunker, that could be dropped in the middle of a battlefield, and withstand bullets and gas and other threats. A large open platform with a glowing blue holographic interface draws players to it, encouraging them to log in and become the commander, and the thick protective armored panels fold up around them forming a protective shell from which to safely oversee the battle.

We wanted to tie it in to the corresponding alien structure - the Hive.
So it's roughly the same size, and there are cables that hang from the front like Hive tentacles.



We decided to make many of the marine structures almost animal-like, both to give them some added personality and recognizability and to further explore the theme of subtly unifying the marine and alien sides. The Robotics Factory (below right) manufactures new structures, just like the alien Gorge. It almost has a Gorge face at the front (the exit point for structures) and has dangling wires (like the Gorge tentacle tails) in back.

The MAC is yellow rather then the usual military green of the marines, because it was a construction robot that was repurposed by the military. It also makes this small AI unit easier to be seen and selected by the Commander. His darting eyes and prehensile welding claws place him halfway between structure and player.

WELDER BOT

EXTRACTOR

ROBOTICS FACTORY

ARMORY STATION

PROTOTYPE LAB

OBSERVATORY

For gameplay requirements both the Armory and the Prototype Lab were designed to allow multiple players to access them at once and from any side. The arms on the Armory and the Screens on the Proto Lab automatically extend out when a player approaches to get their attention and indicate that the structures are interactive. These arms then 'print' new weapons and equipment right in the player's hand.

ARMS LAB

The Arms Lab allows the marine commander to research weapon and armor upgrades for the troops on the ground. The hologram was added to give the structure some more visual interest, and to indicate to players which type of upgrades the commander is currently researching.

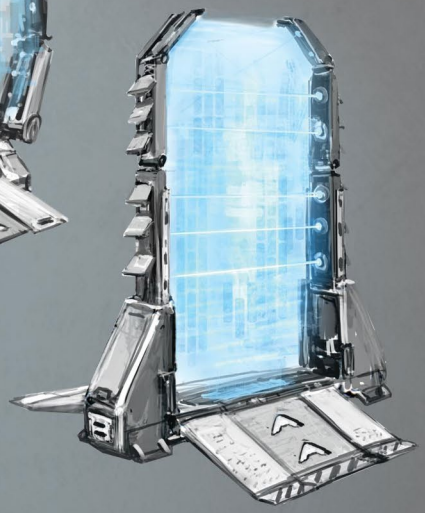
As with all marine structures, when it finishes being built the arms lab transforms from its compact and protected undeployed state, to an active mode with exposed electronics. This makes it clear to commander, marines and aliens alike when a structure is deployed and active.

ACTIVE

UNDEPLOYED

INFANTRY PORTAL

When marines die, they are 'respawned' at this structure. It functions like a 3D printer, which uses the last-uploaded marine consciousness as a construction template. Teleportation technology does exist in the NS universe (Phase Gates), but is only viable for short distances. The arms that spin when a marine is spawning in, are 'printing' the marine, and so have the same design as those on the Armory.



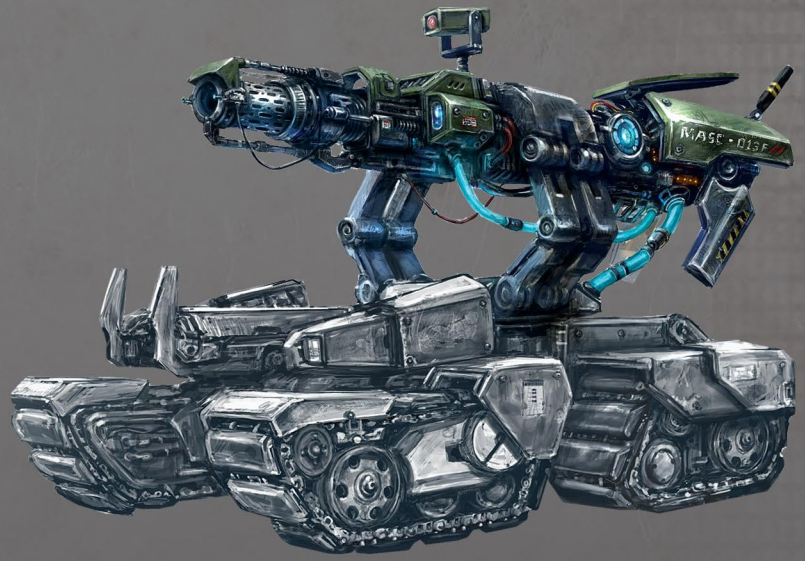
PHASE GATE SKETCHES

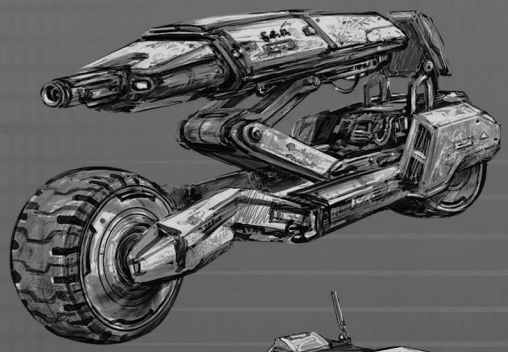
PHASE GATE

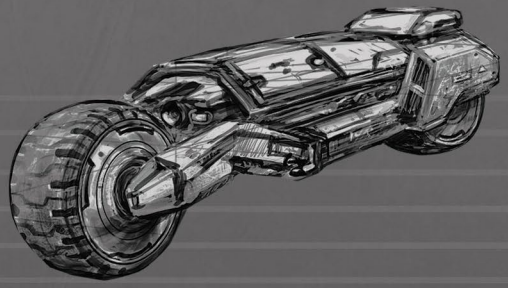
UNDEPLOYED

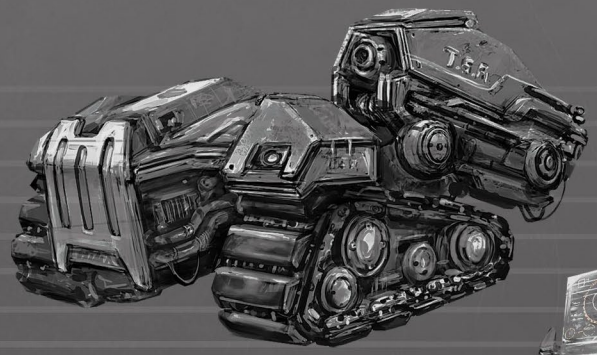
TURRETS

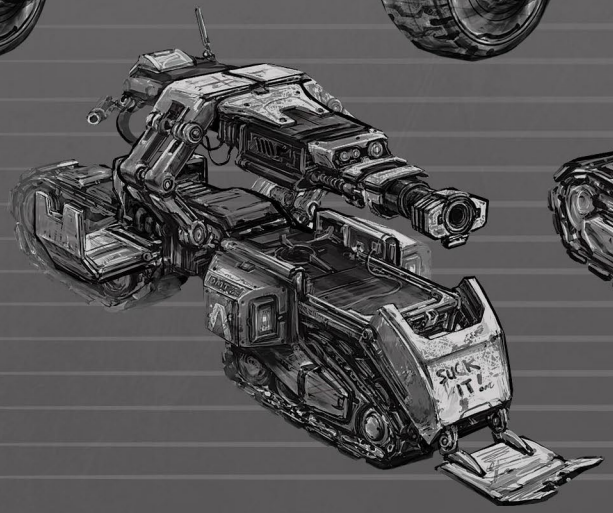
Another recurring marine theme is an outer shell protecting sensitive electronic insides. The A.R.C transforms between mobile hardened 'warthog' and delicate station cannon. Dangling wires, and exposed electronics show that the ARC is especially vulnerable when deployed. The upward-pointing 'tusks' add an aggressive look and the pivoting front treads allow it to more easily traverse steep inclines.

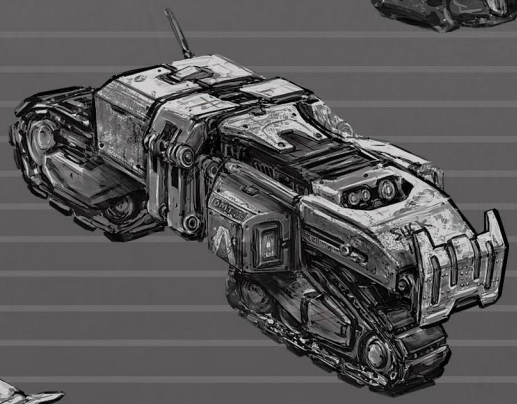


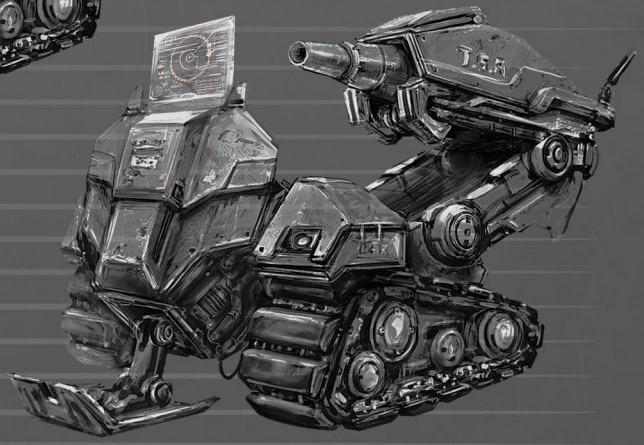








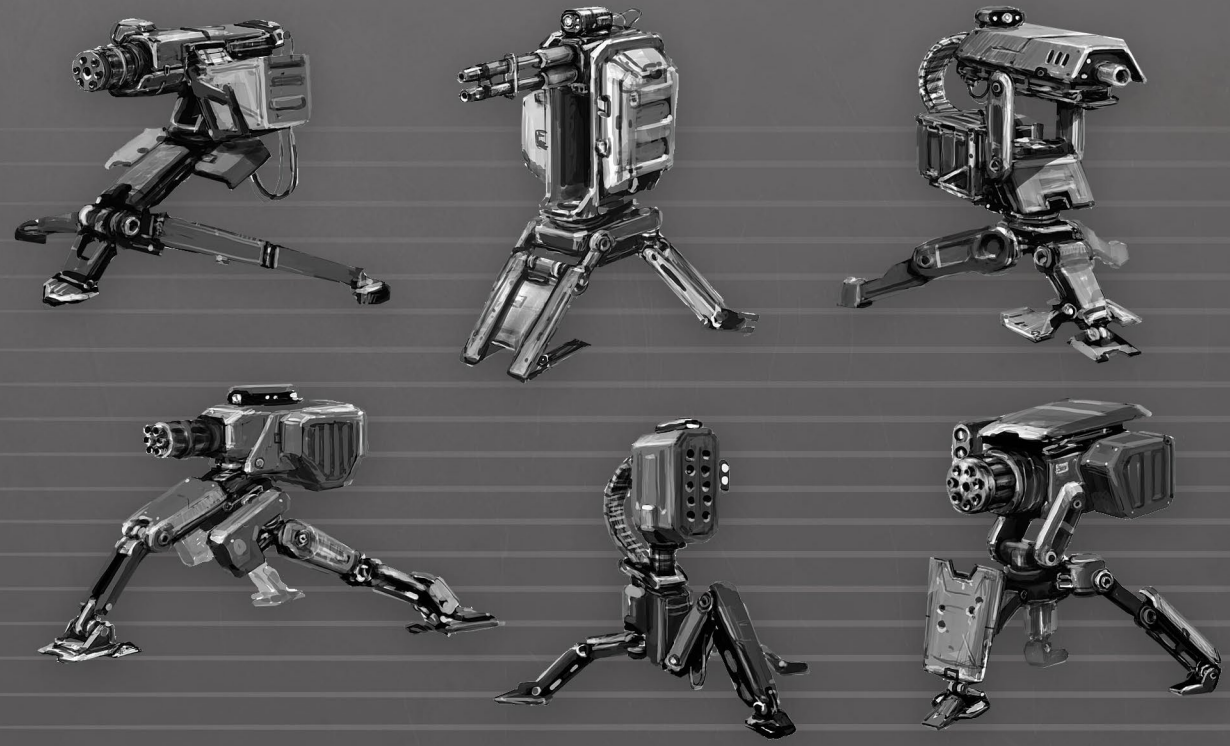


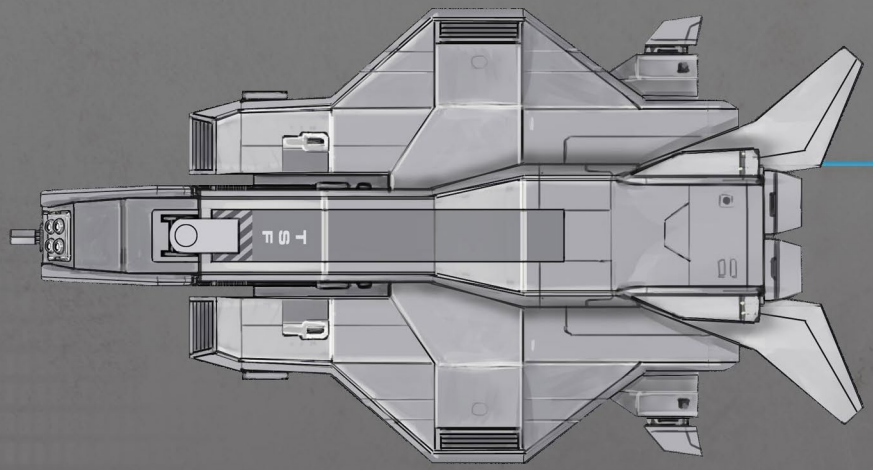


SENTRY BATTERY

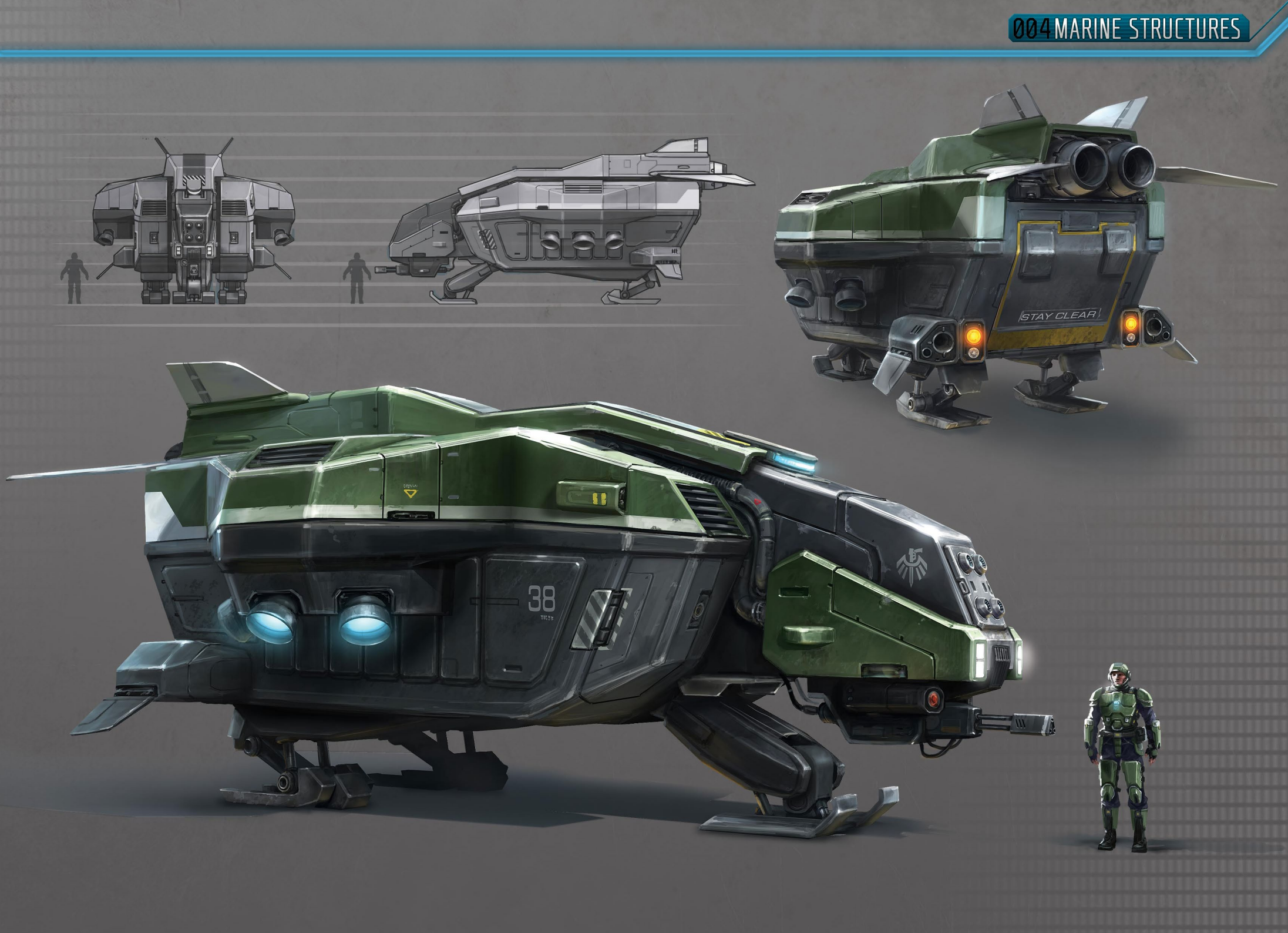
Originally designed as a portable power generator for all marine structures, this asset was eventually removed from the game, but then made a comeback late in development as a battery to power sentry turrets.

SENTRY TURRET





TSF SUB-ORBITAL DROPSHIP


STAY CLEAR
38

ALIENS

KHARAA

HISTORY

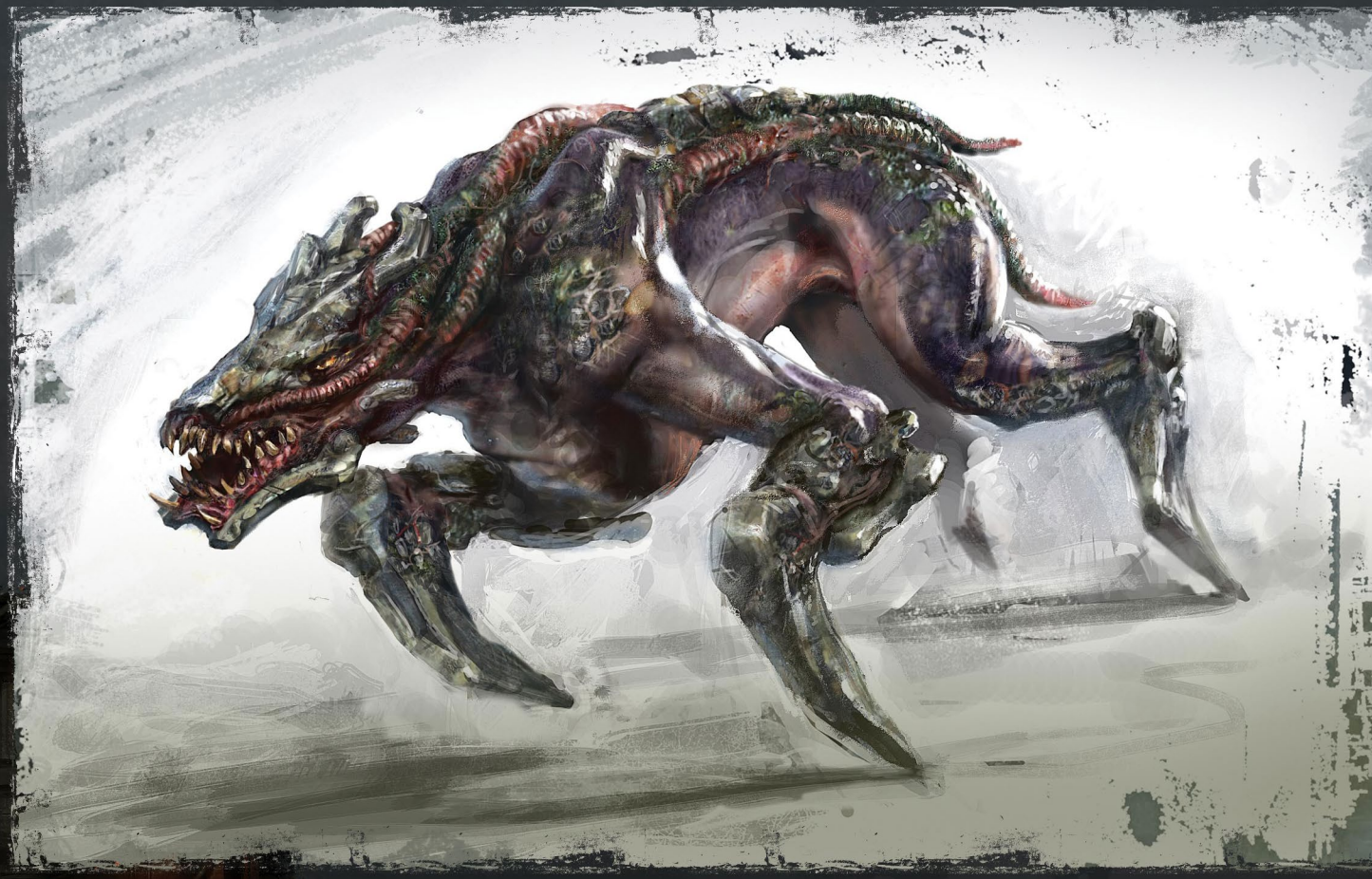
The alien 'Kharaa' is actually a bacterium - not the formidable creatures you play. This bacterium is a parasite that takes over and controls other species. We liked the idea that we could use animals as the basis for the 'aliens,' and the bacterium explanation lends itself well to that.

CONCEPT

Every alien has this host bacteria somewhere on its body. It 'corrupts' and transforms its hosts in a variety of ways. Tentacles form under the skin and burst out. Small bone clusters merge and grow together, forming larger alien plates. This gives the aliens their fearsome appearance, as well as natural armor.

SKULK

We wanted to make the new Skulk bulkier and more armored looking than the Skulk from NS1, allowing us to make the life-form tougher. The Skulk can drive its bone-spike legs into metal-paneled walls, enabling access to walls and ceilings. The Skulks' lower jaw was designed to unhinge and expand to fit prey many times its size.

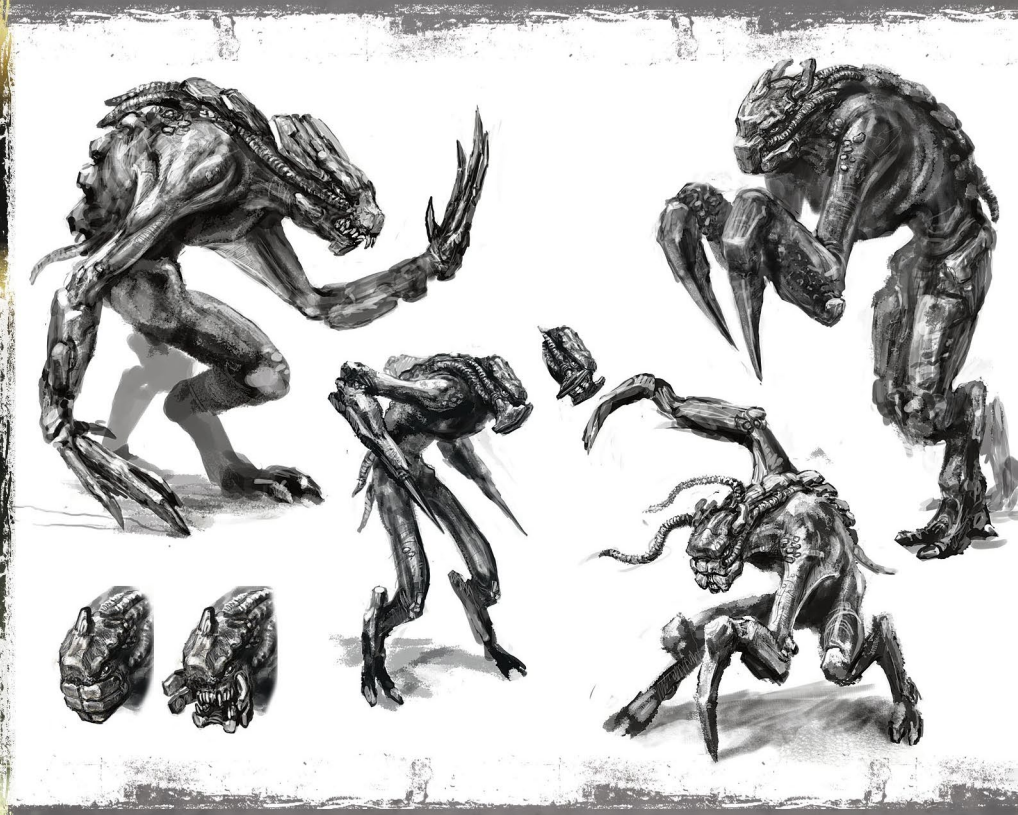


LERK

The wild-eyed Lerk combines aspects of a vulture, bat and parrot.

FADE

The Fade's primary method of movement is teleportation. Because it spends little time walking, we felt it appropriate to design the life-form with a hobbled gait. With each step, the Fade balances awkwardly on its scythe-like claws, before disappearing and reappearing behind its unsuspecting prey.



ONOS

The iconic Onos was the first alien designed for NS2 and established the look. Larger and more impressive than its NS1 predecessor, the design takes cues from a gorilla instead of the original bull or rhinoceros. This allowed the life-form to be more mobile, thus more enjoyable to play. The Onos' squared-off bone plates allude to marine armor shapes, referencing a core idea that both sides are not altogether different in origin or motivation.

GORGE

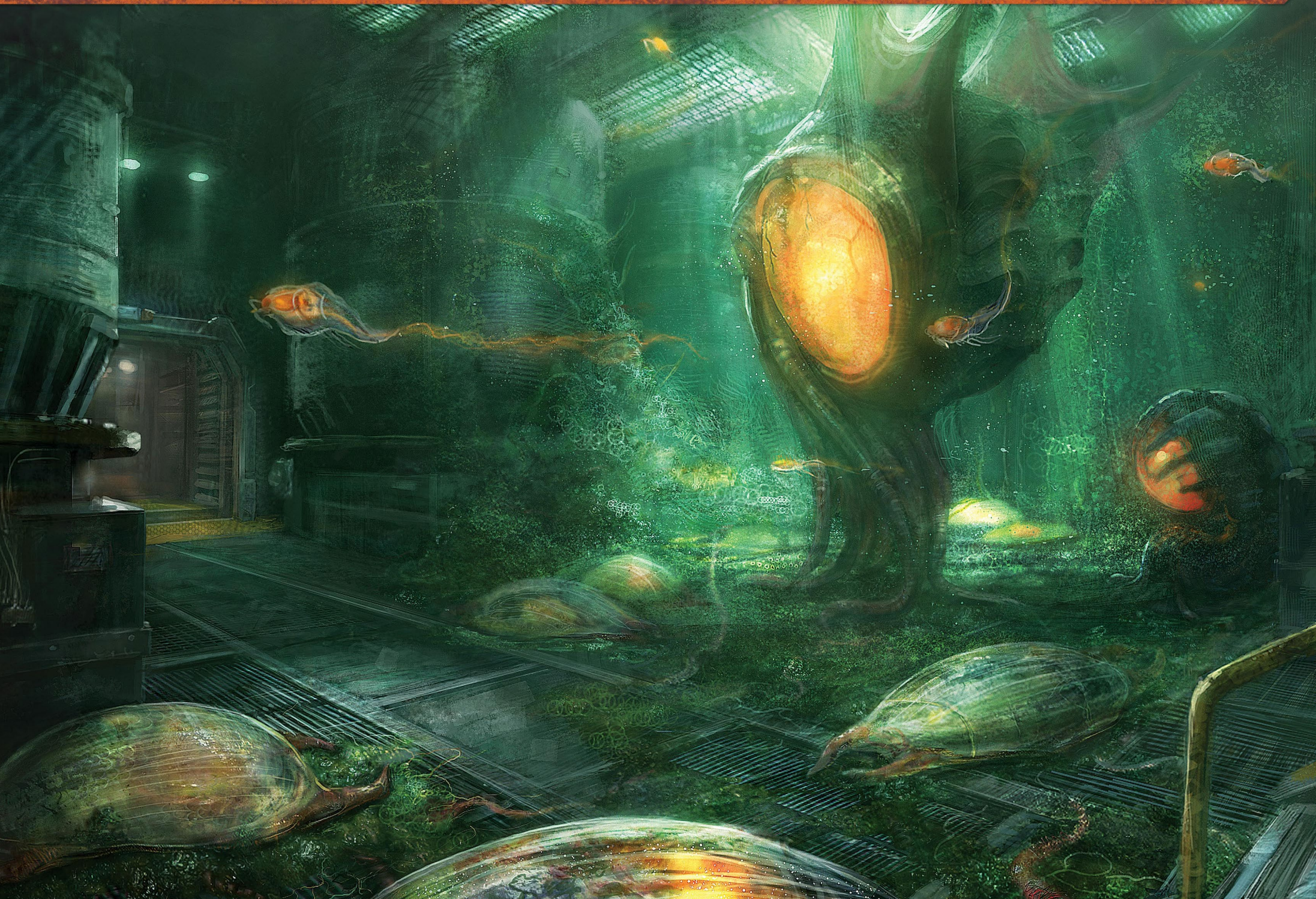
The Gorge was often viewed as 'cute' in NS1, due to its chubby features, waddling gait, and non-combat role. We emphasized this characteristic for the NS2 design, using rounder shapes as well as giving it smaller feet and a pig-like bony snout. The Gorge's ability to pathetically vomit up structures and slide about on its belly contribute to creating a disgusting yet lovable personality.

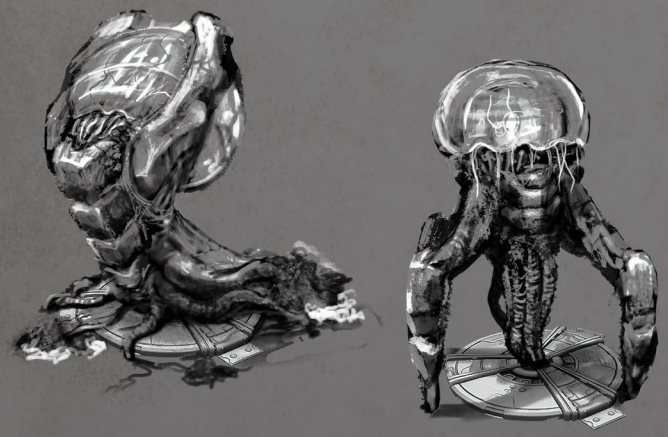
KHARAA STRUCTURES HISTORY

As life started in primordial pools, we thought the infestation should also start in the sea and eventually spread to land. So while the aliens have terrestrial designs, the alien structures are based on ocean creatures. We used membranes, mantles and hard 'coral' as design elements and added swaying, rippling and undulating structure animations.

HIVE CONCEPT

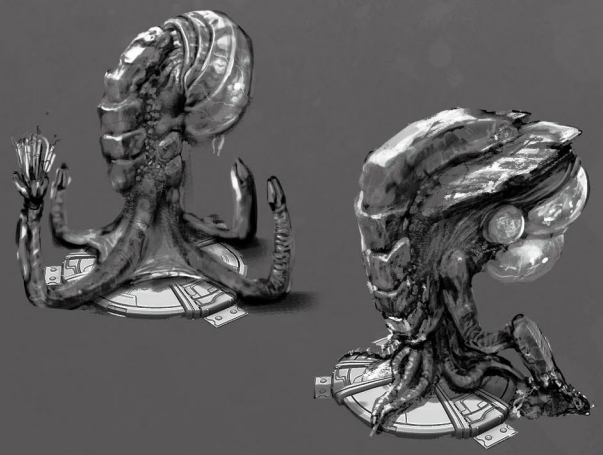
The hive is a primary game objective and the housing for the alien commander. Therefore, it had to be visually impressive. This original concept image depicted it dwarfing nearby marines, who appear to stop and gasp at its magnificence. The small glowing creatures circling the Hive eventually became the Drifters.





HARVESTER

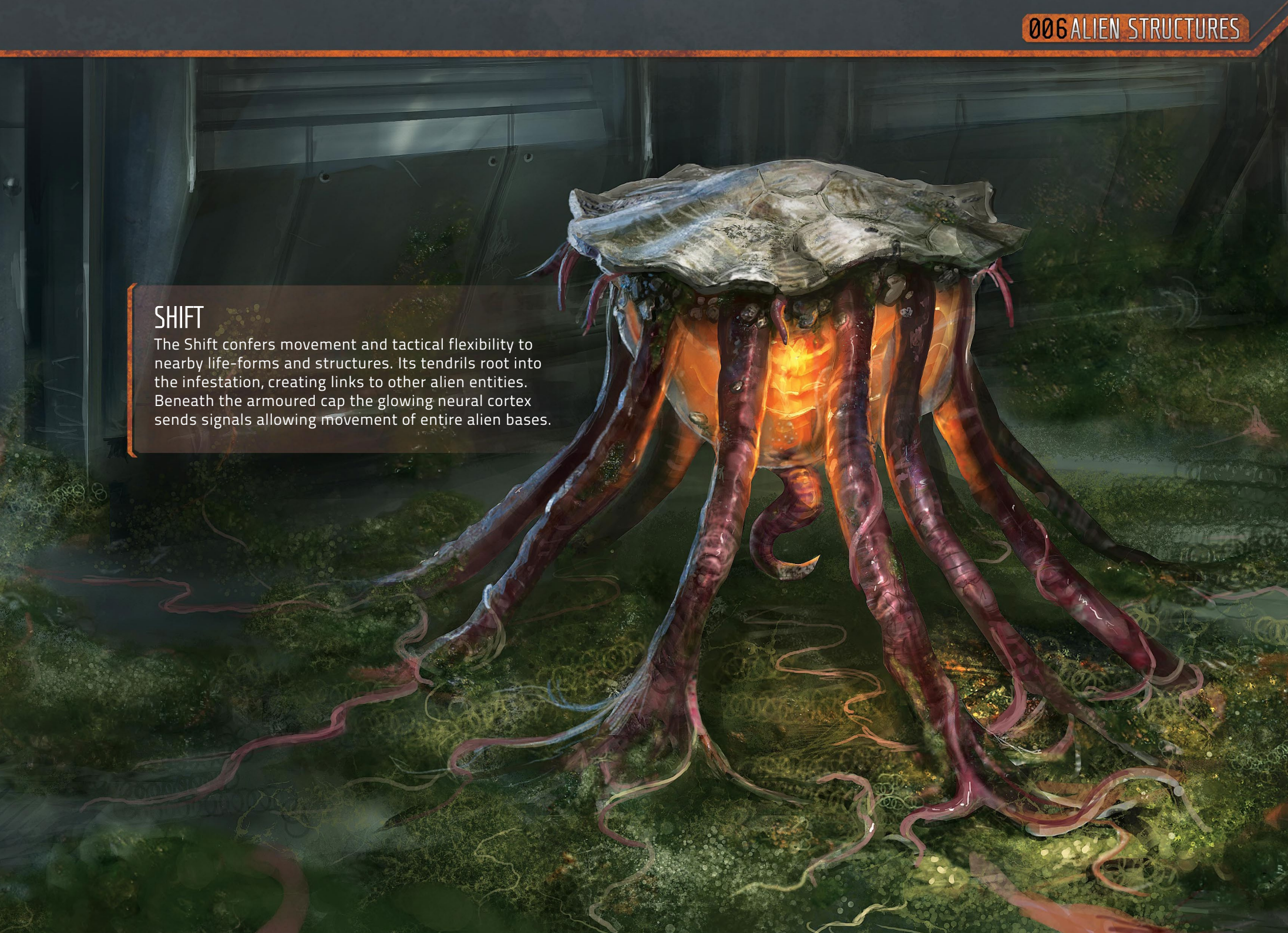
Like a giant sea worm, with a mouth like an eel, the Harvester form evokes function. It clamps down around a resource nozzle and siphons out the resources, inflating its glowing sack in the process. The structure has evolved bone-ribs to protect this vulnerable organ.



STRUCTURE CONCEPT ART

WHIP

HYDRA
DANGER



SHIFT

The Shift confers movement and tactical flexibility to nearby life-forms and structures. Its tendrils root into the infestation, creating links to other alien entities. Beneath the armoured cap the glowing neural cortex sends signals allowing movement of entire alien bases.

CRAG

SHADE

SHELL

The shells glowing elements reference phosphorescent creatures found in the deep sea. Its armored top communicates that it is responsible for defensive upgrades.

DRIFTER EGG

VEIL

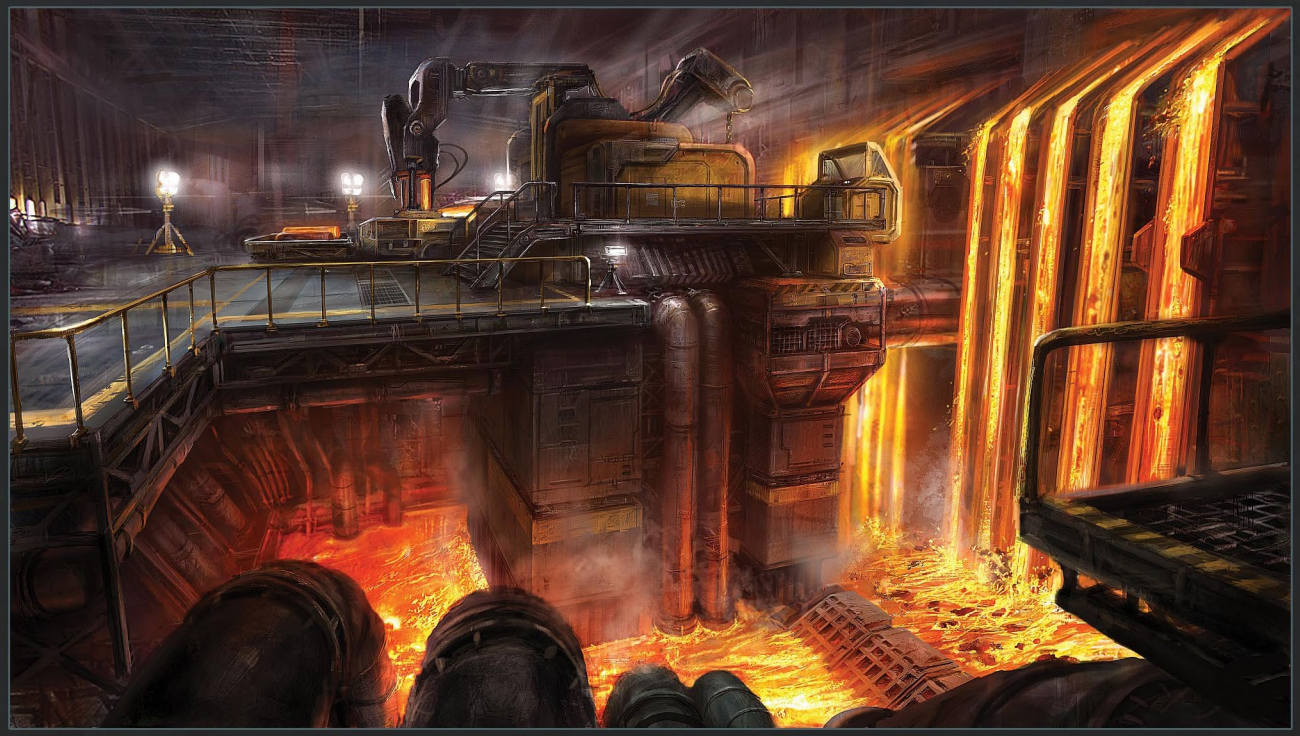
SPUR

This structure gives movement-based traits to the aliens, so we designed its silhouette to imply motion. We dulled the tips and made them translucent so as not to appear sharp or dangerous.

REFINERY

Refinery was conceived as one of a set of four official maps, along with Tram, Mineshaft and Docking, and each are meant to represent one part of a huge mining and refining facility. Some of the maps have skylines filled with smokestacks, depicting a world ravaged for its precious minerals. In Refinery, large machines process ore from Mineshaft, transferring it to tracks that will transit Tram, all attended by workers who have their quarters in Docking. Of course, where there is ore processing, there must be lots and lots of lava.

Refinery was to be a small, fast-paced map, based around a large and open central Lava Falls area (Next page). While much of the map layout changed dramatically over the course of development it always maintained Lava Falls as the centralized hub of the map.



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TRAM

The very first map designed and created for NS2, Tram is probably the map that has seen the most change over its lifetime. Thematically designed as the section of the facility that handles the transportation, storing, packing, tracking and shipping of the refined materials, the map takes its name from the tram tunnel that runs like a spine through the center of the map.
The tunnel not only gives the map a visual signature, it also serves as a primary route that allows players to easily navigate from side of the map to the other, with most of the important areas accessible directly off of the tunnel.

8N

DOCKING

This map was conceived as the arrival point for the giant refining facility, where workers shuttle in from offworld. Featuring living quarters, amenities, and recreation facilities, this map allowed us the opportunity to break away from the grungier, industrial heavy look of most of the other official maps, and explore some fun landmark areas, such as futuristic ball courts and an Onos alien themed bar.

LEVEL
02
THIRSTY ONES
drinks. music. happy

WELCOME TO HOBBS FACILITY 23
PERSONNEL QUARTERS
TRAM STATION
5

ONOS
BAR

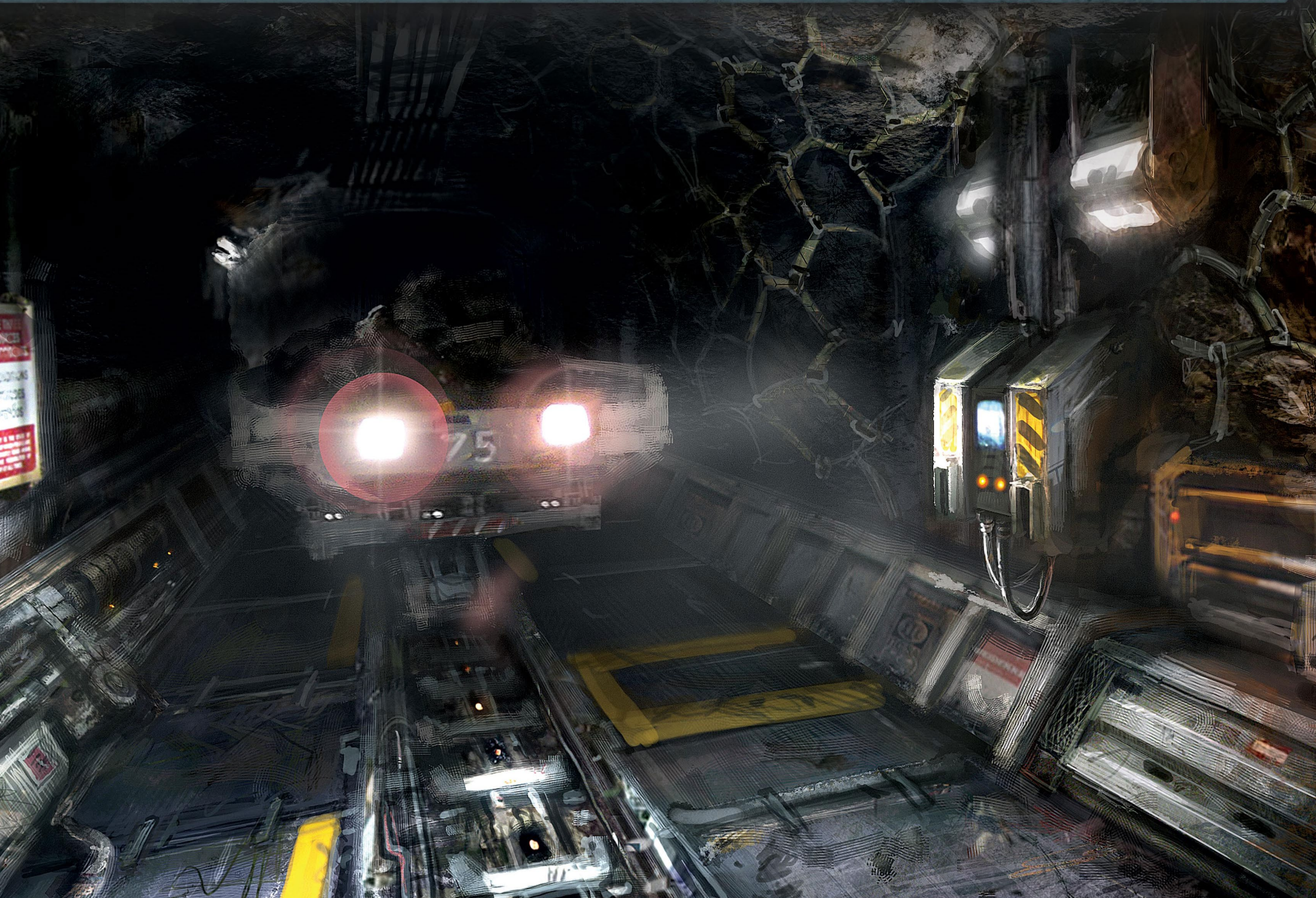
VEIL

A remake of the popular NS1 map of the same name, Veil started as a community made map. We decided to make it official and brought the mapper on board, providing them with unique art assets and some concept art to better define the look.

MINESHAFT

Steel drills, mining pits, rock crushing machines, tunnels carved through stone and caverns with underground waterfalls all flesh out the mining theme of this map. A mix of natural beauty and ad hoc man made architectural elements mix to create an eerie backdrop for this atmospheric map.

The marines start near the planet surface and then descend down towards the alien base. The changes in elevation as well as the transition from constructed rooms to bare rock, and stalactite spiked ceilings help the players on both sides realize when they are entering enemy territory.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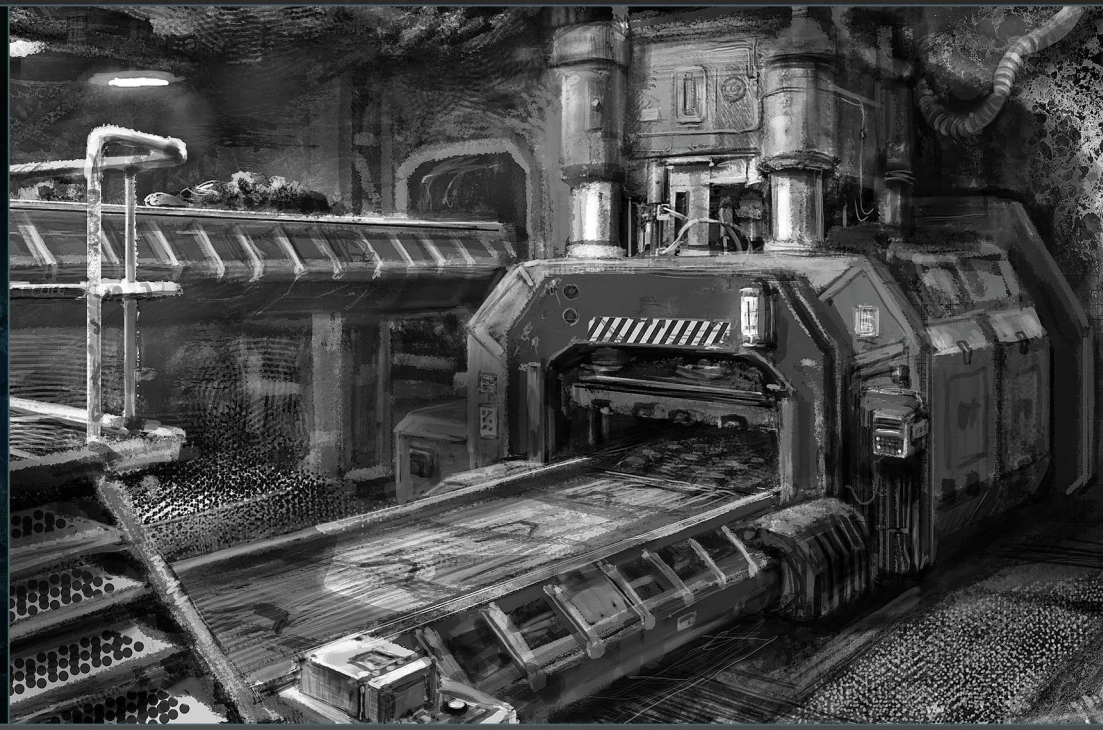
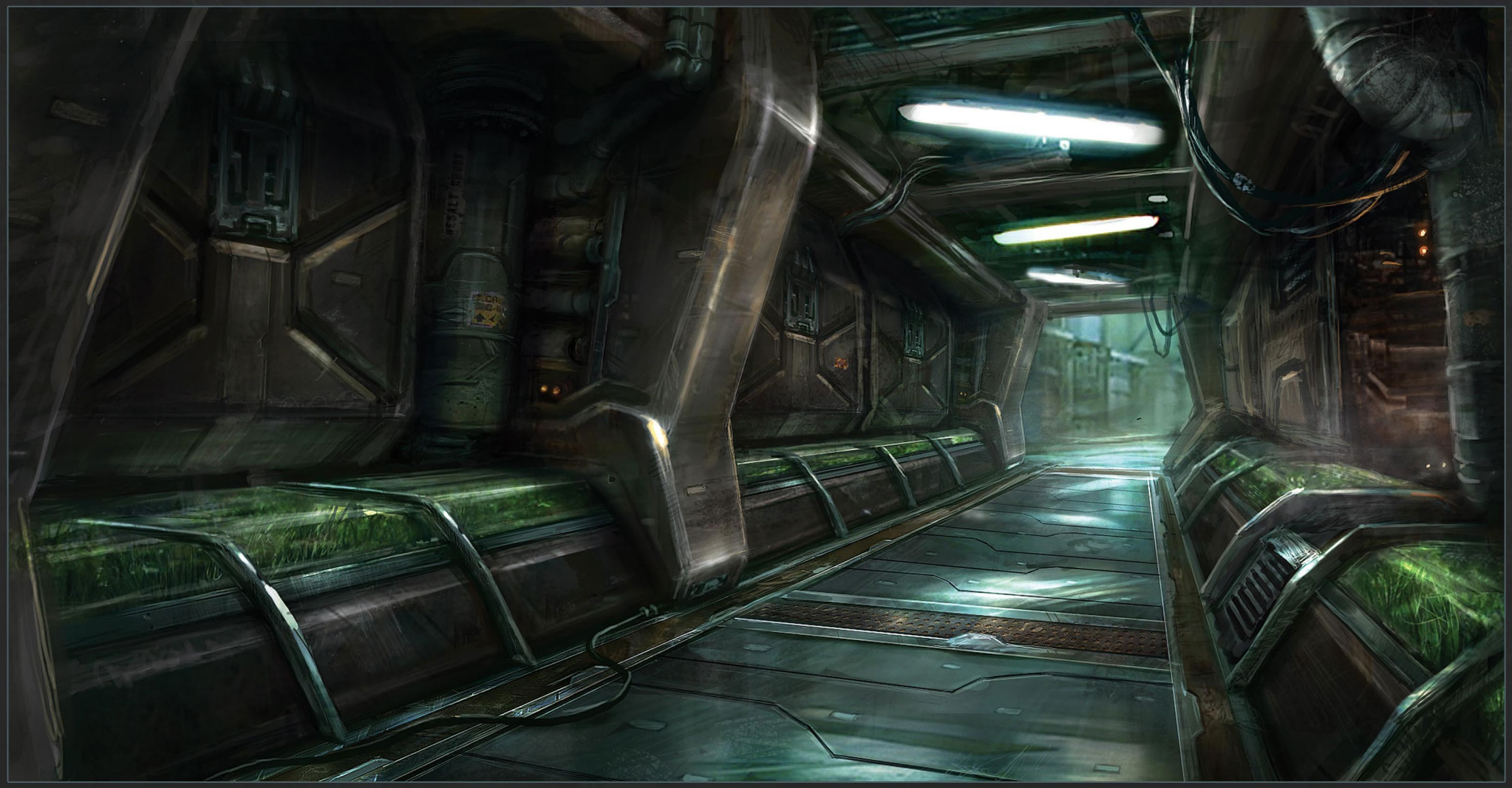
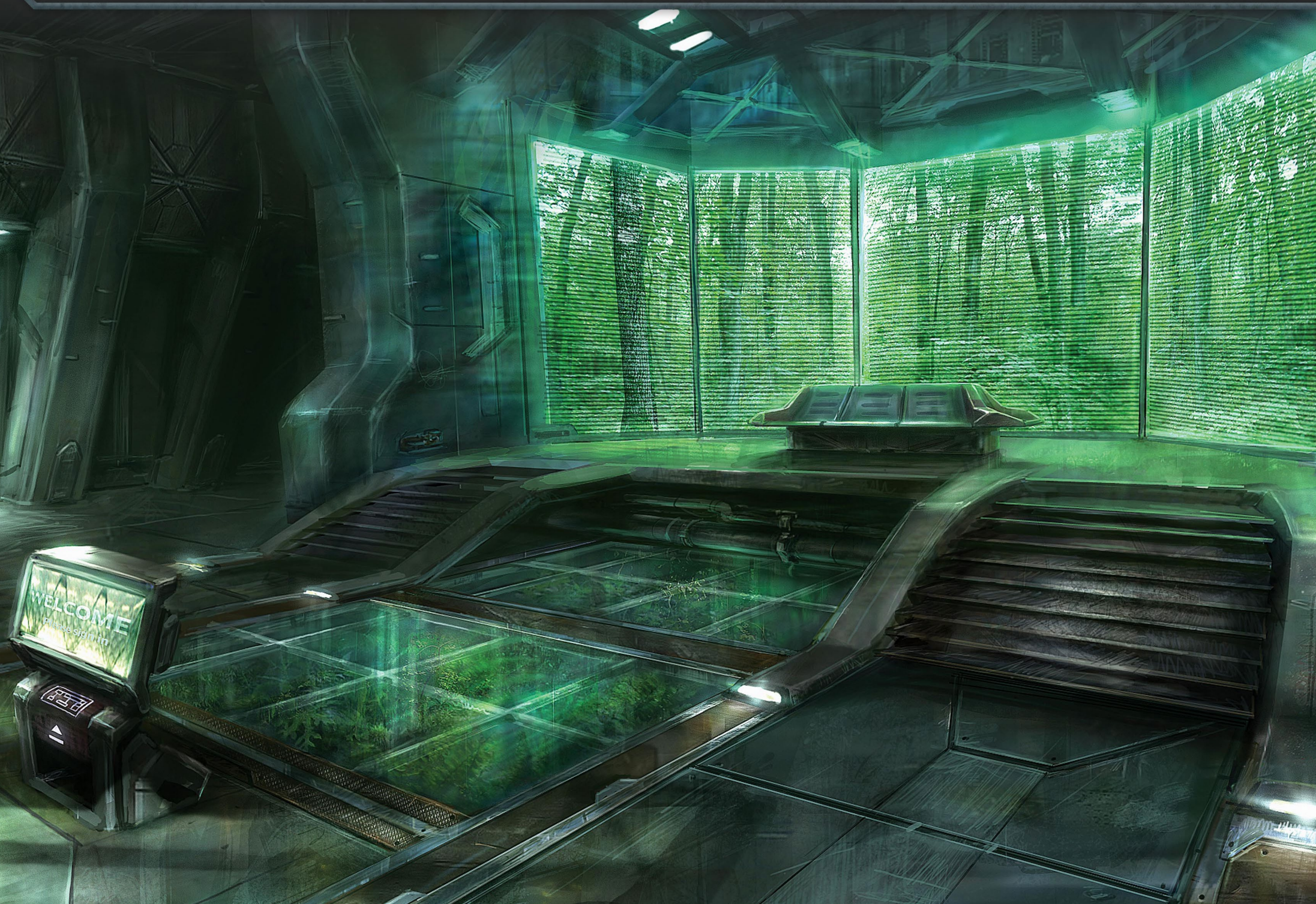


BIODOME

Originally we planned to have multiple map sets covering a wider variety of themes. Biodome would have introduced a very different color palette, with its emphasis on the plants and vegetation. Much like the refining map set shows a world overtaken by industry, Biodome also explores the general theme of man's attempted dominance over nature, with the lush vibrant flora trapped behind glass containers.

Given our limited resources we had to cut this map set, but it will make a comeback in future NS2 updates.




WELCOME

ALTERRA CORP.

DESCENT

This concept of a shuttle bay was created for a space station themed map, due for release post NS2 1.0.

DISCOVERY

Another release map in development, Discovery, will feature a brighter, cleaner, high tech laboratory environment.

UNKNOWNWORLDS
ENTERTAINMENT

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