

A character in a dark, futuristic setting, possibly a spaceship or industrial facility. The character is wearing a dark, tactical jacket and pants, and is holding a large, futuristic firearm. The background is dimly lit with various mechanical structures and lights.

JUMP POINT

A ROBERTS SPACE INDUSTRIES PUBLICATION ISSUE 01.12

IN THIS ISSUE

- Work in Progress: Cutlass 3
by Jim Martin, Patrick Thomas
- Portfolio: Drake Interplanetary 29
by Ben Lesnick
- Behind the Scenes: Piratey Stuff 32
an interview with "Rob Roy" Irving
- Galactic Guide: Magnus 35
by Ben Lesnick
- The Void Rats (Part 5) 38
fiction by Doug Niles

GREETINGS, CITIZENS!

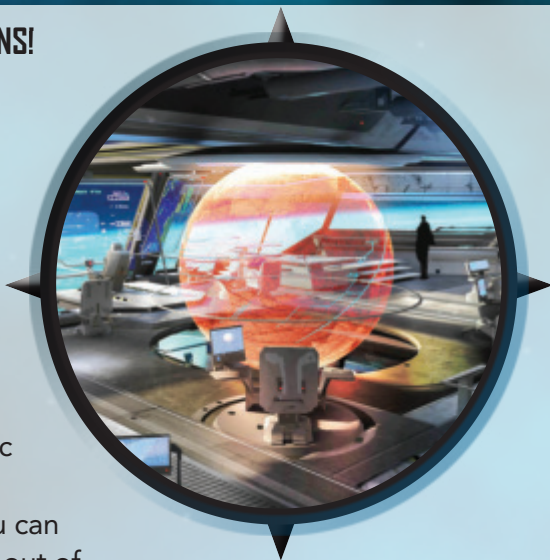
Once more, we coordinate the WIP ship (the Cutlass), its manufacturer in Portfolio (Drake Interplanetary) and Drake's home system in Galactic Guide (Magnus).

Enjoy it while you can — we're running out of triplets like that. The first time we run a second ship by a corp we've already featured, we'll need to go elsewhere for the corp and system.

But in the meantime, we stick with that theme for Behind the Scenes as well, as Rob Roy fills us in on all things relating to pirates. Well, all things that we know so far ... And our fiction continues Doug Niles' *The Void Rats*. Our fearsome foursome (can I say that?) are taking the battle to Zather Dane, as they enter Nul V.

Aspiring SC authors: I have your messages and writing samples (even those that were posted to my forum account because I neglected to include my email address in one of the posts), and we're working through the list. I guess the silver lining in how long it takes to get back to you is that it means I'm not just skimming through your samples — I'm trying to give each one a legitimate review. (And it's paid off — one story that I was ready to discard after the first couple of paragraphs kept getting better, to the point that it's one that we're seriously considering.)

There's one question that I keep forgetting to answer: what do the numbers mean in the Galactic Guide Market Deals?



Some of the speculation in the forums is pretty close to accurate: we don't yet have an exact economic model, so these numbers are intentionally vague, but they basically identify goods that you can make a better profit on, because of higher supply (BUY +) or demand (SELL +).

And one other note. There are occasional forum posts about how JP is done a week or two ahead of time, and we simply hold it for release on Friday. Not so. :) We're working on JP right up to the last minute (and sometimes beyond). I don't think it's ever been released more than an hour after final approval — what you get is hot off the presses.

Hold on, it's gonna be a wild ride!

David

David.Ladyman@cloudimperiumgames.com

CUTLASS STATS

Manufacturer: Drake Interplanetary

Length/Beam/Height: 29/25/7 meters

Crew (max): 2

Mass (empty): 35,000 Kg

Focus: Militia & Patrol

STRUCTURE STATS

Cargo Capacity: 10 tonnes

Power Plant, Shield, Jump Engine: TBD

Factory Engine: TBD (2x TR4)

Maneuvering Thrusters: 16 x TR2

Joker Docking Collar Extension

HARDPOINTS

2 x Class 1 (wingtips; tentative)

1 x Class 2 (tentative)

2 x Class 3 (tentative)

2 x Class 4 (tentative)



FROM THE HICKORY

Cutlass

This month, our Work In Progress contributors include:

Chris Roberts (CR)

Jim Martin (JM) Concept Artist (Freelancer)

Patrick Thomas (PT) Modeller (Freelancer)

Chris Olivia (CO) Chief Visual Officer

Chris Smith (CS) Lead Vehicle Modeler

Mark Skelton (MS) Art Director

Ted Bargeon (TB) Concept Artist

Elijah McNeal (EM) Concept Artist



WORK IN PROGRESS

CR: Could you nail a sketch of a new pirate-themed ship we want to roll out for the end of our campaign? There's a lot of our community that like to play pirates and this is tailored for them (and I think would be a big hit). Here's the initial description on it:

Drake Cutlass

Builder: Drake Interplanetary
Crew (max): 2
Mass (empty): 35,000 Kg
Focus: "System Defense" (Piracy)
Cargo Capacity: 10 tonnes
Thrusters: 1 x TR4, 16 x TR2

Hardpoints:

2 x Class 1: Equipped 2 x MaxOx NN-13 Neutron Gun
1 x Class 2: Equipped 2 x A&R Mark IVc Tractor Beam
2 x Class 3: Equipped 4x Python Tracer (HS) missiles
2 x Class 4: None Equipped

Drake Interplanetary claims that the Cutlass is a low-cost, easy-to-maintain solution for local in-system militia units. The larger-than-average cargo hold, RIO seat and dedicated tractor mount are, the company literature insists, for facilitating search and rescue operations. While it's true that Cutlasses are used throughout known space for such missions, their prime task and immediate association is with high space piracy. Cutlasses, often operating in groups, menace distant transit lanes to prey on hapless merchants. A single Cutlass can ravage a mid-sized transport and a pack operating as a clan can easily take down larger prey. STOL adaptations allow these interceptors to operate off of modified transports or pocket destroyers, the most common warships that make up pirate caravans.

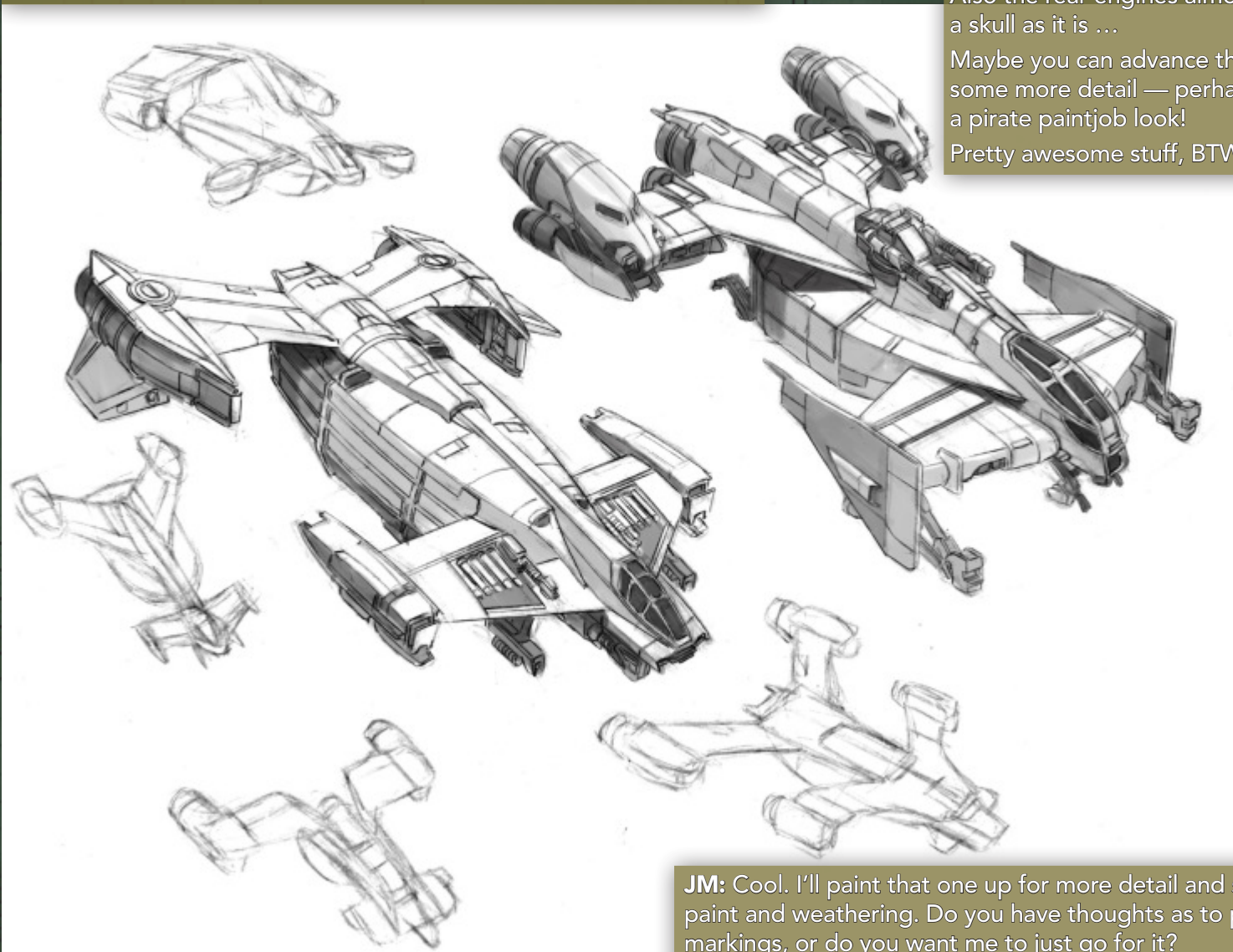
Designer note: the idea is that Drake Interplanetary builds ships which are ostensibly for legal purposes (local militias, etc.) but are 'obviously' for pirates: so it has the appearance of a military fighter, but mated to an awkwardly larger hull for collecting loot; it should have visible forward-facing tractor beams and a seat for a second crewman even though there's no turret (as you'll need a second man to board an enemy ship). It also has a cheaper build quality: if Anvil is building Jeeps and Origin is building BMWs, this is a Honda.

JM: OK, I'll do a pass on this, Thursday for notes and Friday for something more finished. Sounds good.



SYSTEMS ENGINEERING

JM: Here's a possible direction for the Cutlass ship. The idea is that these are tough sturdy little bastards, not pretty. A cargo belly is included, but you feel they can dogfight. Let me know if this is where you want to go ... I can try another direction if you need.



CR: I think they're both great, but I'm leaning towards the one on the right over the one on the left, as it feels a little more "evil" or threatening.

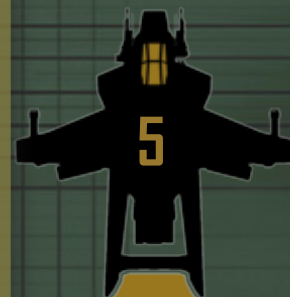
Also the rear engines almost look like a skull as it is ...

Maybe you can advance this one with some more detail — perhaps showing a pirate paintjob look!

Pretty awesome stuff, BTW!

JM: Cool. I'll paint that one up for more detail and some pirate paint and weathering. Do you have thoughts as to paint job or markings, or do you want me to just go for it?

CR: Go for it — we're selling this to players that like to play pirates so I think a scheme that plays up being a futuristic Captain Blood.



WORKING IN PROGRESS



JM: Here is a paintover of the Cutlass. I think this version is presentable. I don't mind taking this to an even higher level of finish, but this is feeling good to me. The model of this really has a chance to have some sweet angles.

CR: Sweet! People are really going to get jazzed.

Can you also do a black pirate version with the rear engine nacelles being white skulls?

We could offer the Pirate ship in two different liveries ...

BTW, your MISC 1 & 2 work is getting great feedback — people love both, but it looks like MISC 1 is winning as the choice for the Freelancer on our site (it's got 75% of the votes between it and MISC 2 out of 3,553 votes).

This is the cool thing about getting your community involved early — you get feedback on cool work that in a traditional game or film set-up the users would never see or appreciate ...

Some interior design would probably be next up, and then to 3D!

JM: Yeah! Sounds like we need to go with Freelancer version 1, but change the wing idea on the back to something else or we're going to have a riot on our hands!

CR: The crowd speaks! :) It's kind of like old Roman days and tossing a few Christians ... err Concepts into the ring!



WORK IN PROGRESS



JM: Cutlass, version 2, in Blacks with white skull-engines.

CR: Can you lose the teeth and eyes and replace with a crossbones across the fuselage there?



JM: Here's a skull and crossbones, and just crossbones.



WORKING IN PROGRESS

JM: I uploaded a couple renders of a “first pass” model of the Cutlass. I’m still working on the engines and the cargo crate module but the bones are there. For the second pass I’m reworking the layout, trying to get things balanced to the concept art, but it’s a cool overall design that I think looks good even in this rough state. So if you have a chance to drop me any thoughts, please do, or if you want to wait until I send a more refined pass that’s fine.

CR: Cool!

My biggest comment is that the ship has lost some of its nimbleness / hard-core dogfighting gunship vibe that the concept art had, compared to the 3D model — mainly because the fuselage / hull has gotten wider / bigger. The model has more of a dropship vibe (where you would carry troops / cargo in the square-ish hold / mid-section).

I would prefer to go more with the concept art’s setup, where this part felt narrower and had a little more interesting shape (more oval vs. square)



... so I guess more vertical height and less width, have the hold be closer to the concept art. I would also beef up the rear engines / wings —in the concept art they felt more substantial and there was nice detail (like intakes on the front, and it felt like the whole assembly, intakes and engine nozzle could rotate / articulate).

One other thing — I liked the side door detail on

the concept art’s hull; it looked like this is where you would load / unload cargo.

One thing to consider is where / how we will place the docking collar & tractor beam — from here? Or somewhere else?

JM: Yes, I hear you on all points. First pass is a bit sacrificial, because I was sure that you would want to increase the cargo module and I learn that I was dead wrong! I’m on to refining the overall design. “Dog fighting” and “nimble” are good ones for me to key on. Let me re-proportion and restyle down that avenue. More aggressive, less utility. Addressing the docking collar and tractor beam.



WORKING IN PROGRESS

CR: Just saw you posted some further work – which looks great!

Still miss the rounded sides of the main hull / hold (just think it's a little slicker than the more angular look), but love the big ass engines and general proportions. Ship feels really solid and like you wouldn't want to tangle with it in a dogfight — even more so than the concept art which is great!

JM: yes, you're right. That volume under the wings (Hold or Hull) should have a nice arc or belly like the concept. It's a little too straight and boring the way I modeled it. I'm on that note and a few more things to fix up.



WIKONPRIPRESSES

CR: Looks good to me! I would go with the thinner, rounded hull ...

What are next steps? Have we figured out the landing gear / docking collar / interior yet?



Cutlass with rounded cargo-hull



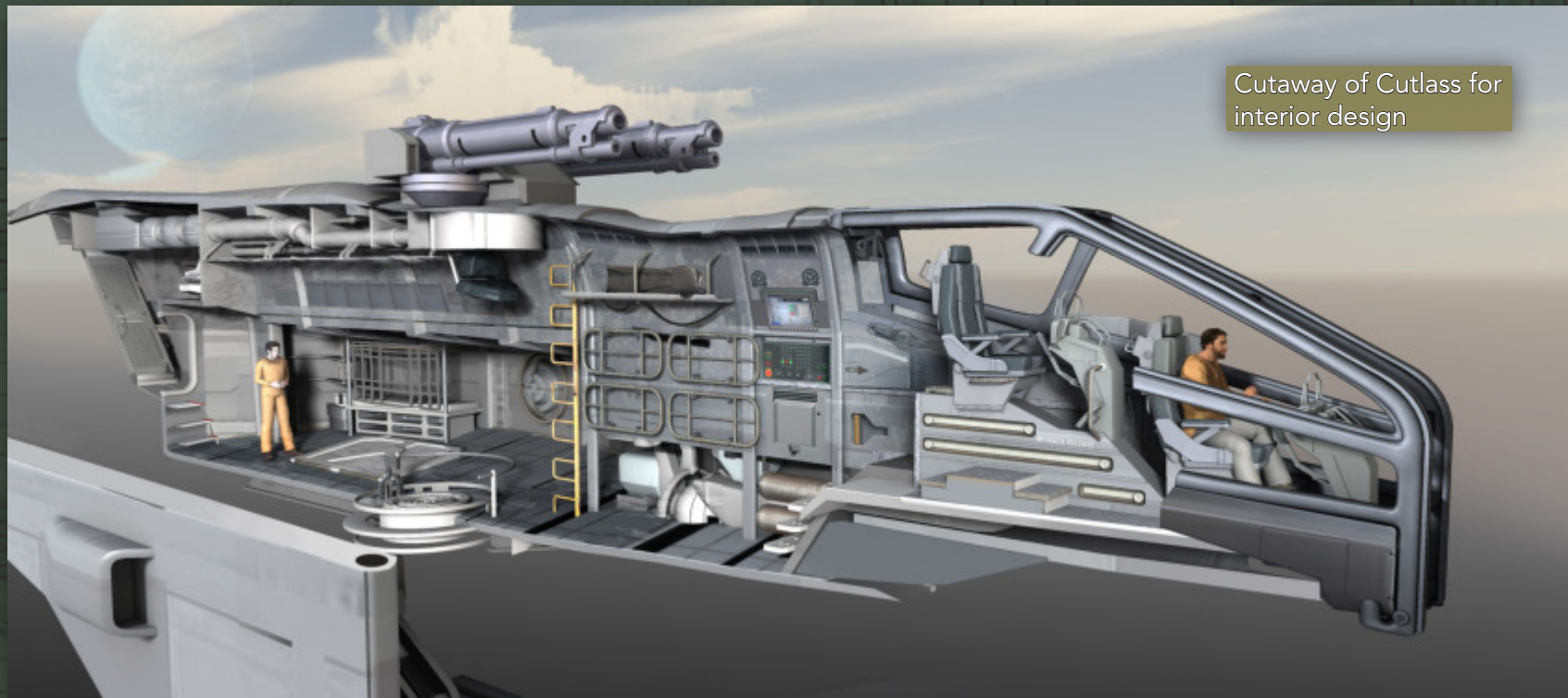
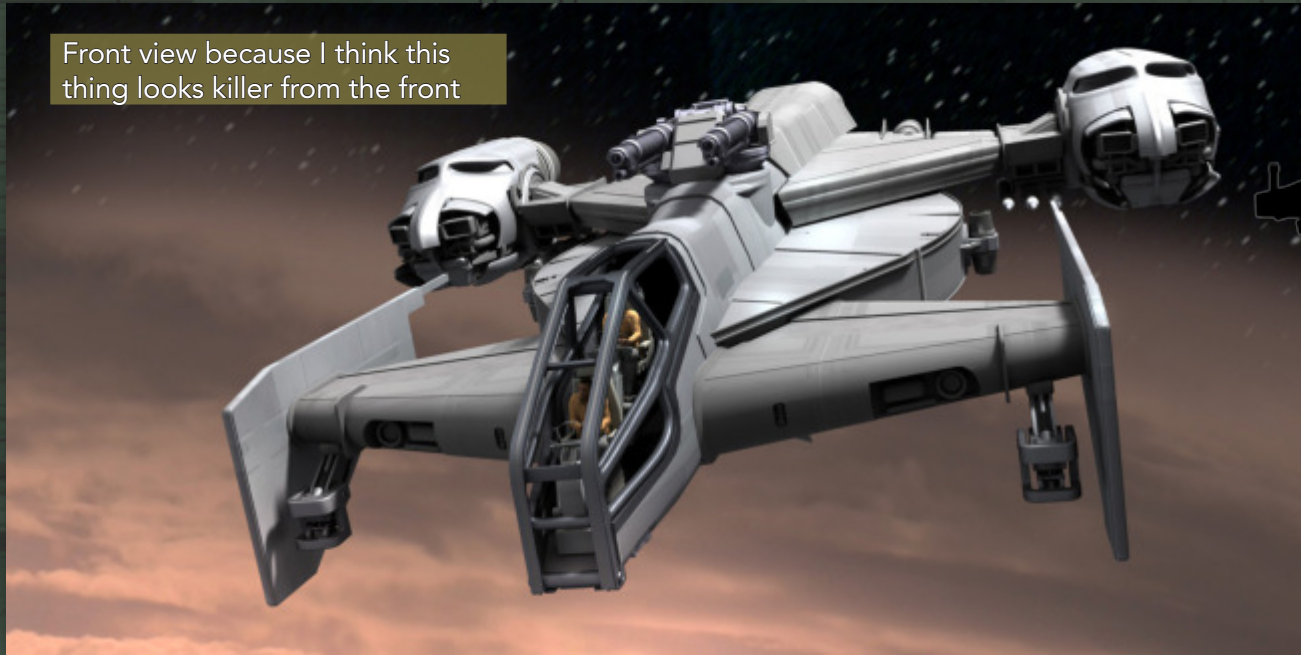
Cutlass with slimmer rounded cargo-hull



WORKING DRAFTS

JM: I have worked up an interior for the ship; I'm hoping you're a fan of the stacked cockpit. I like it but it can be reconfigured if you and Adam and Chris want to go a different way. I'm doing a cutaway showing underside docking collar with magnetic docking clamps — the "leech" school of docking.

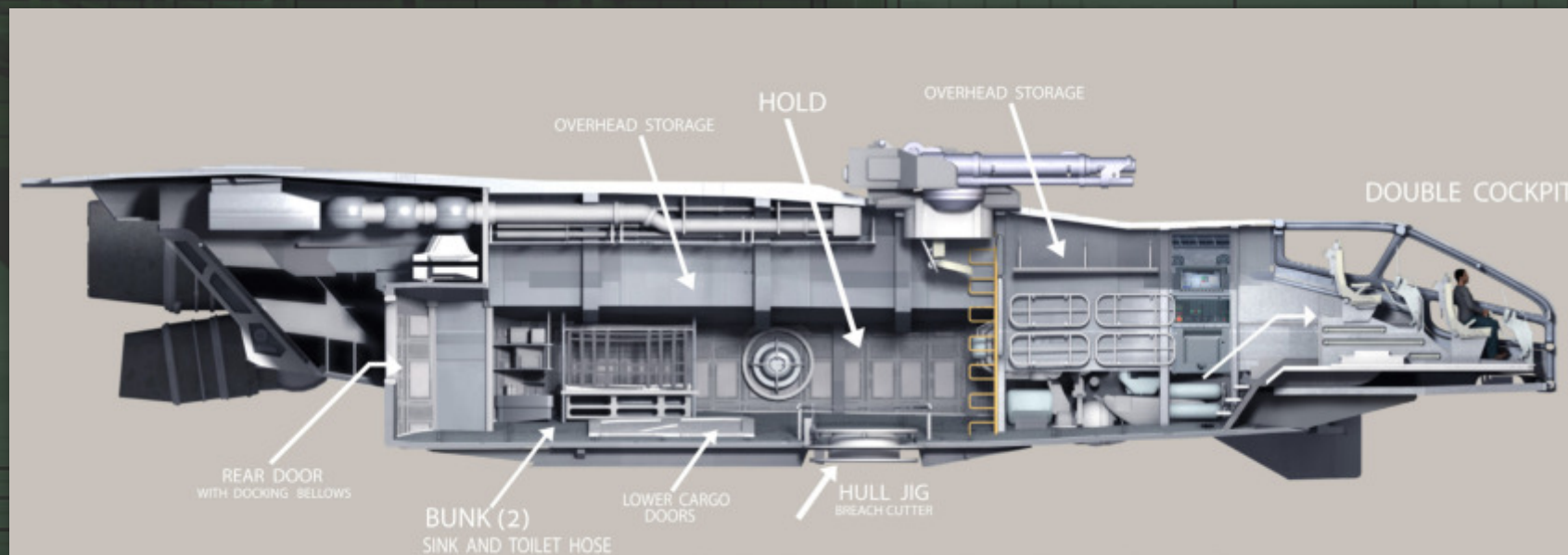
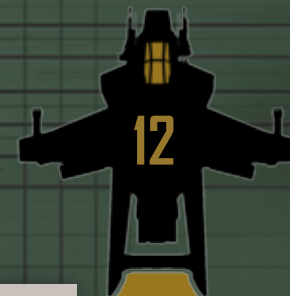
Front view because I think this thing looks killer from the front



Cutaway of Cutlass for interior design



WORKING PROGRESS



CR: This looks great!

I don't really have any comments ... We'll check with design to see if there is anything missing. I would say we should move on to the Drake Cat-erpillar — the armored assault transport from the same manufacturer ...

Then it was on to Patrick Thomas to convert the concept into a game-ready set of polygons. His primary contact was Mark Skelton. As he began work, he had a few questions:

MS: Chris, Patrick's running into a problem on the Cutlass where the landing gear is interfering with the storage bay. He suggests either moving it up or getting rid of it. I suggest moving it up because as a pirate ship, it seems like it would have kind of messy storage bays everywhere. What do you think?

PT: Or ... I could just put doors/panels there to give the illusion of access.

MS: Yeah ... let's go with panels there for now.

CS: Is there not enough space to fit everything into the cavity? That thing has to tuck into that cavity area.

PT: The cavity/recessed area takes up most of the space. I'm thinking when he concepted that area the faces were not rendered double-sided so he didn't notice it was filling the whole void ... I think going with what Mark said would be best — not have a cubby hole but instead have doors that describe it as storage.

CS: But that's not a storage area. It's where the gear goes when retracted, no? You can close the hole — that's fine by me — but I don't think that that is supposed to be a storage compartment.

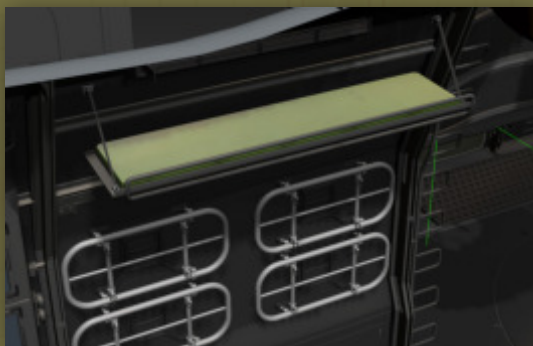
PT: Wouldn't showing something that retracts inside the ship mean the ship wouldn't be sealed? (i.e., a screen door in space)

CS: Uh ... no, because we can put a glass there. :)

Just close it up and put some detail there. I still think a little lookout window would be cool ... but don't make it look like storage.

PT: What are those? (see image)

MS: Let me check ... bunk beds? Pal-



lets? Oh, wait — it's to strap cargo to, so it doesn't bump that wall.

PT: Do the engines and turret need to be on their own texture sheet, since we swap them (left and right)?

MS: Yes, I believe so. Chris, is that how you're doing it now?

CS: Yeah.

PT: How big should I make the texture for the engine cap — 1024 or 2048?

MS: Make it 2048 and we can cut it down. I think we should always go for bigger.

CS: Make the top scoops a little bit taller and bigger; on the concept they seem to be more prominent.

PT: Got it! Already fixed!

CS: Don't model guns for the ships; just gun mounts.

PT: ???

CS: Our guns can't be custom — we have to be able to fit an array of guns on the ship.

MS: We use pre-existing guns for all our ships, so we don't include custom guns. We just need mount points. Though at some point we will be making more guns. So if you started making guns on the Cutlass, we will probably modify and use them later.

PT: Is the sensot upgradable? Does it need a separate texture map?

CS: Only if it's a swappable hardpoint.

PT: What's a swappable hardpoint?

MS: Like the weapons or engine — it's an item that the user buys to upgrade a ship. It's represented by a model swap of containers.

PT: Got it. So is it swappable?

CS: Go ahead and include it in your main map.

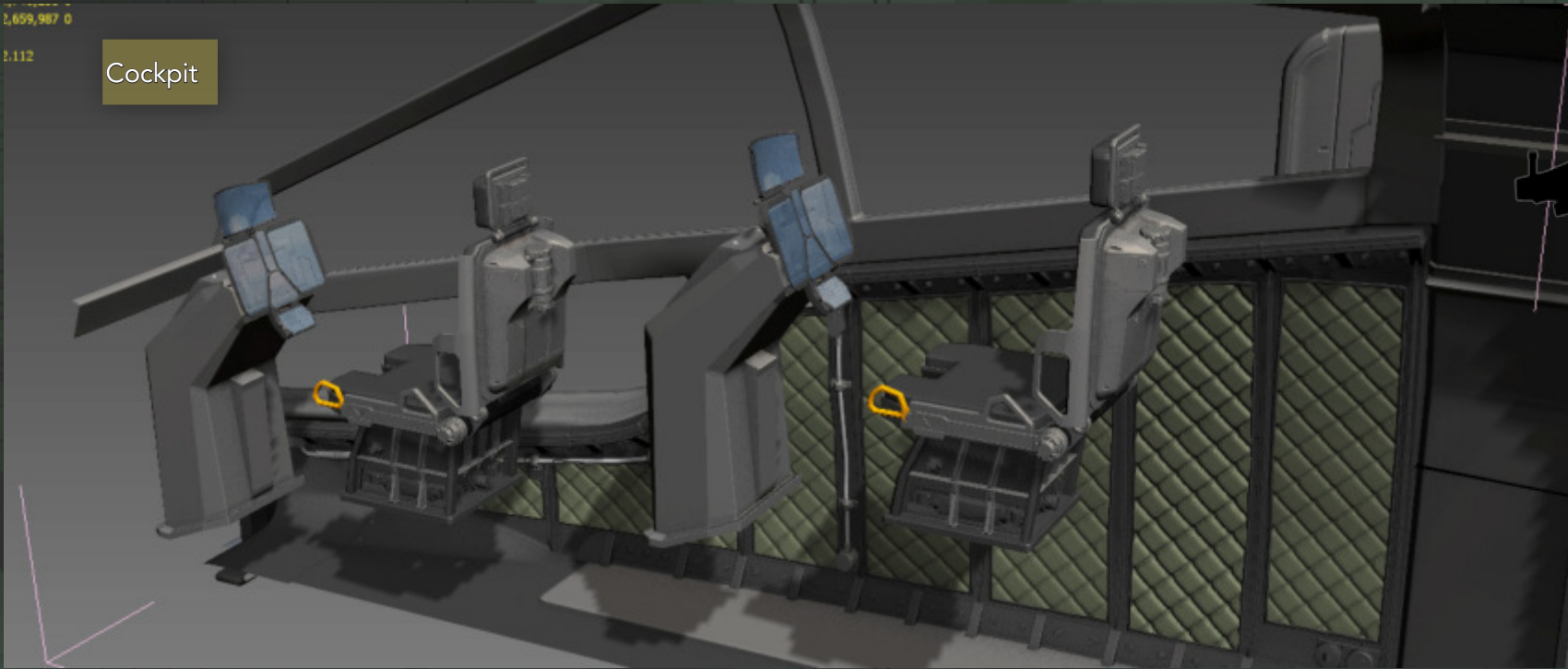


WORKING IN PROGRESS

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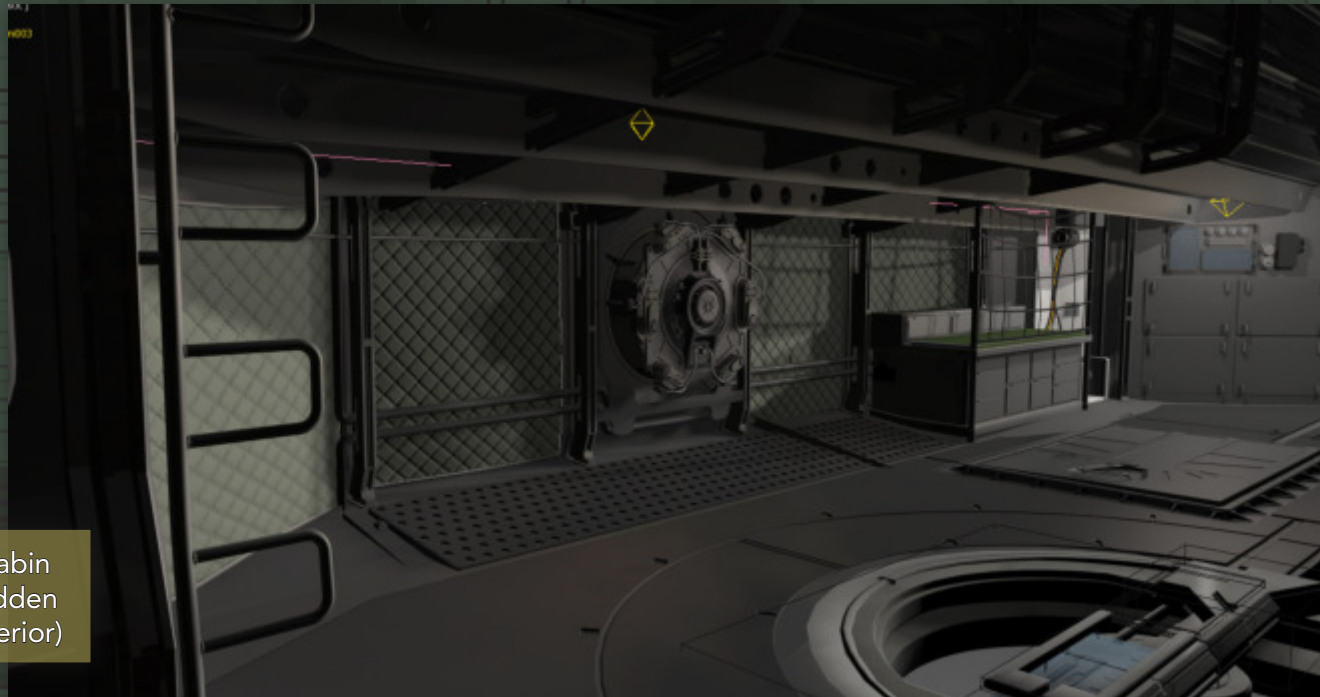
2:112

Cockpit

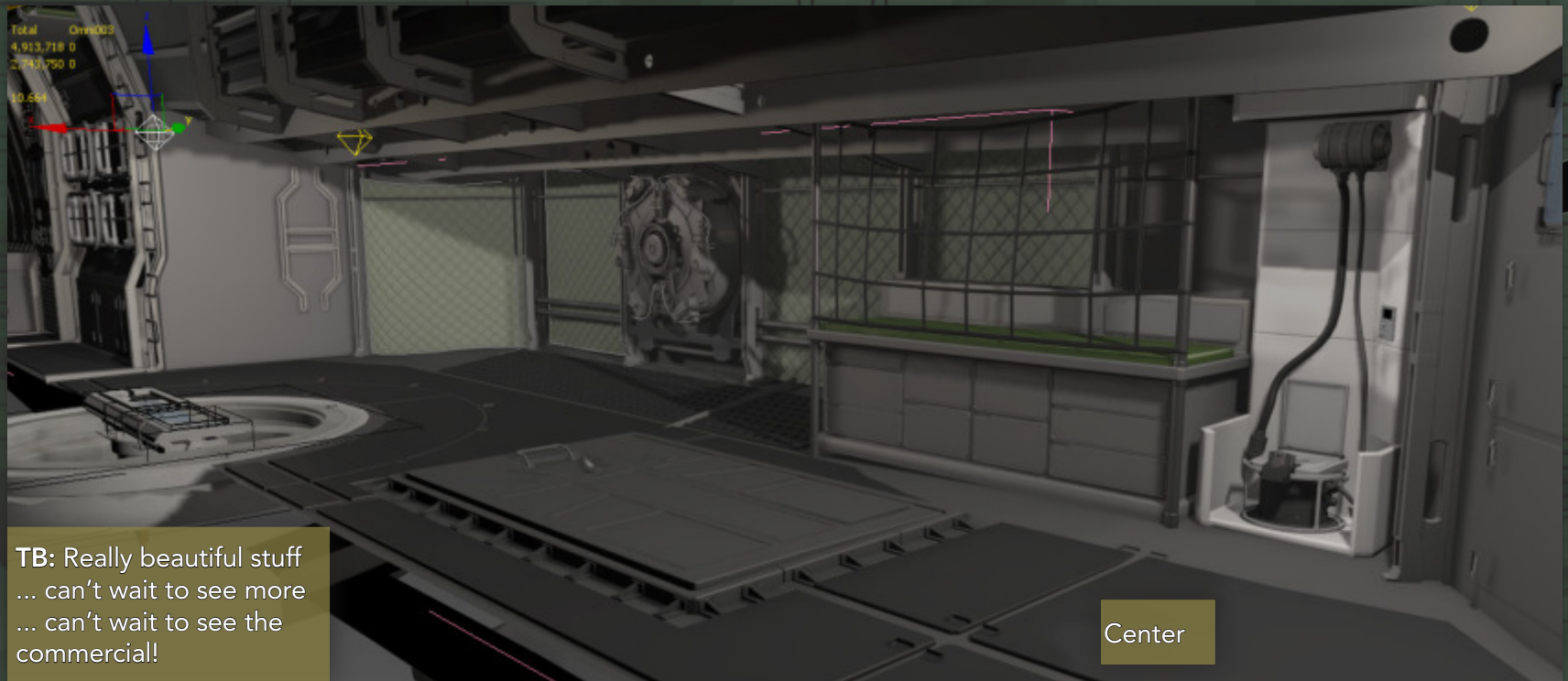


WORK IN PROGRESS

Patrick gave us several interior and isolated images for review, on this and the next few pages.

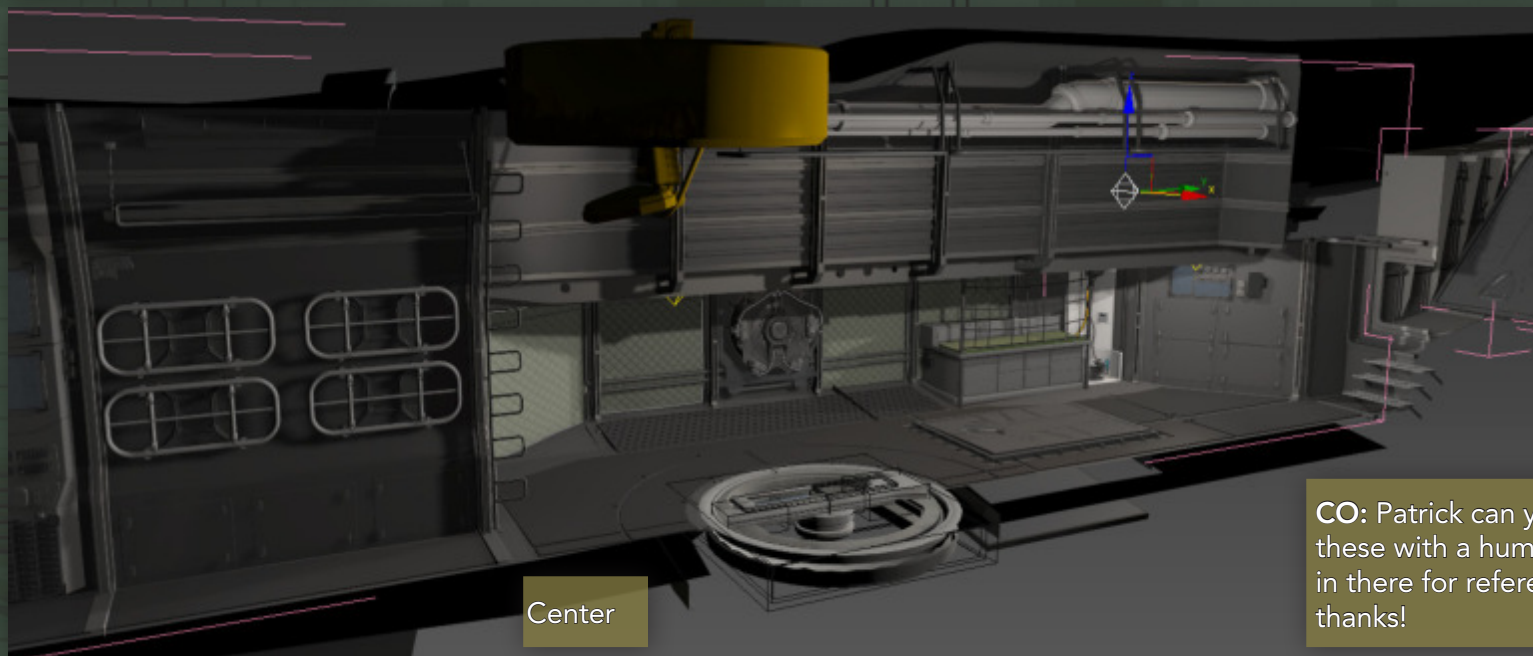


Drake Cutlass Cabin
(some details hidden to see whole interior)



TB: Really beautiful stuff
... can't wait to see more
... can't wait to see the
commercial!

Center



Center

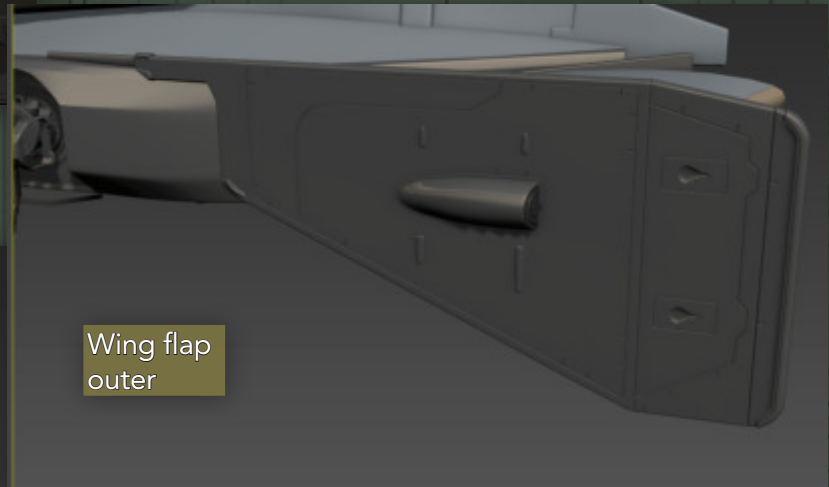
CO: Patrick can you post
these with a human figure
in there for reference?
thanks!



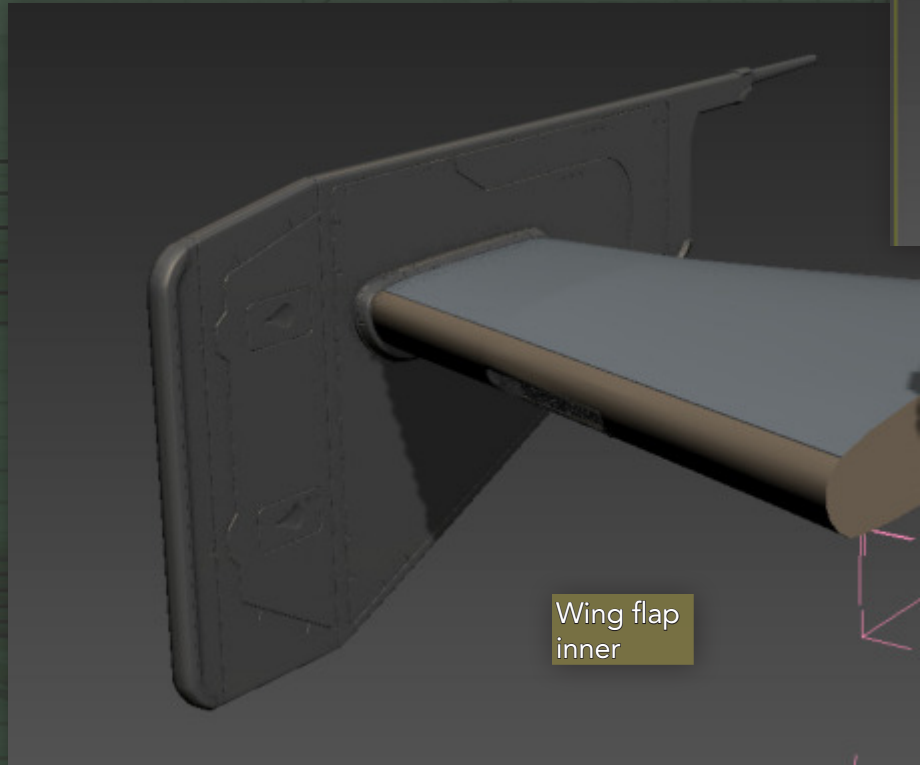
WORKING IN PROGRESS



Console



Wing flap
outer



Wing flap
inner

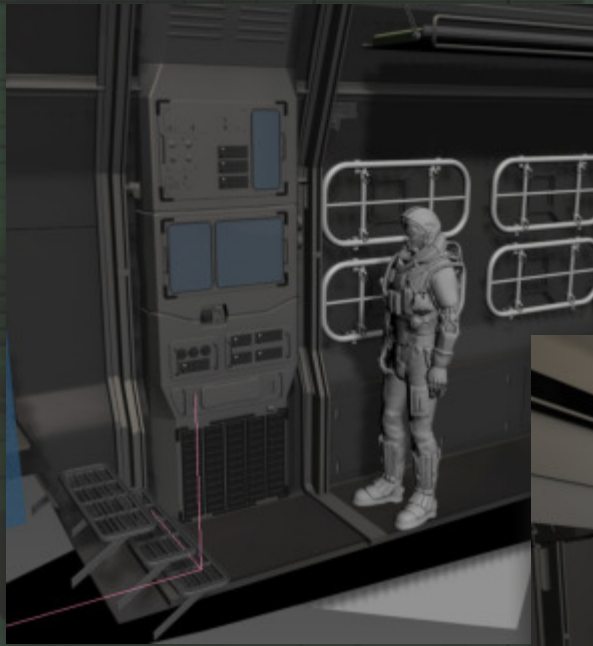


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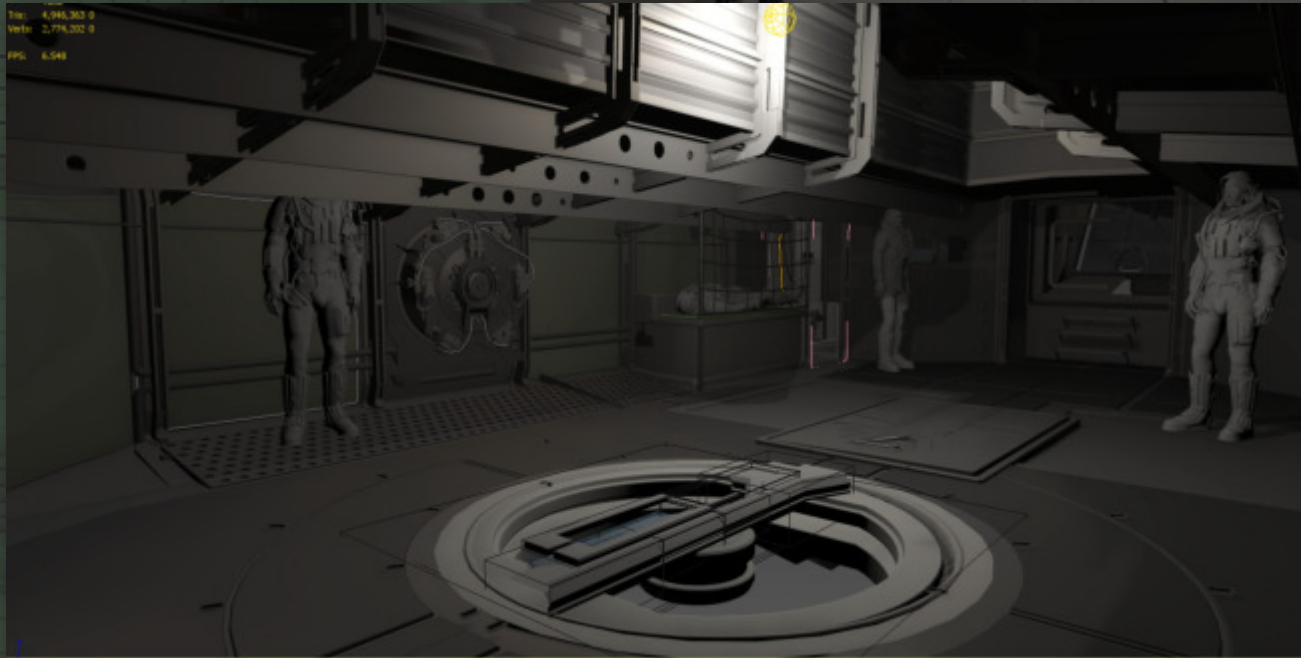
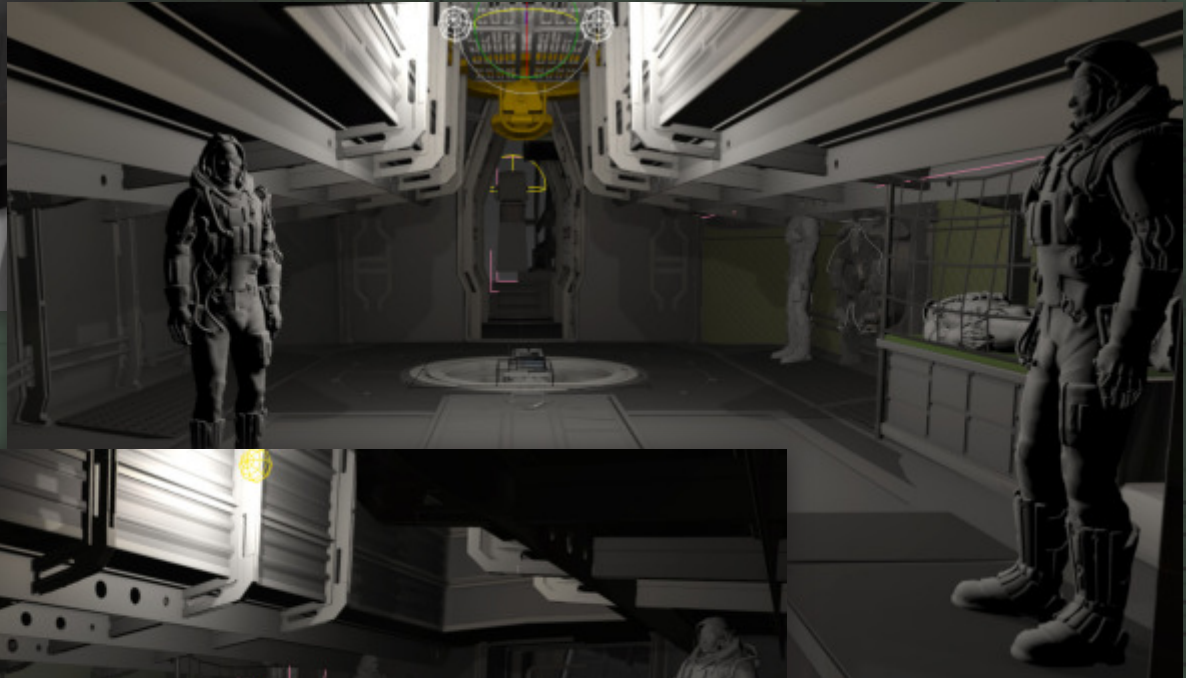
Drake Cutlass
standard engine



WORK IN PROGRESS



Scale images



WORKING IN PROGRESS

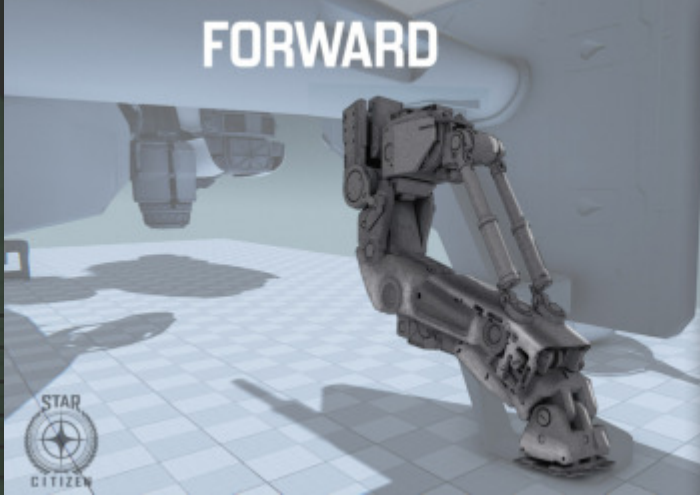


AFT

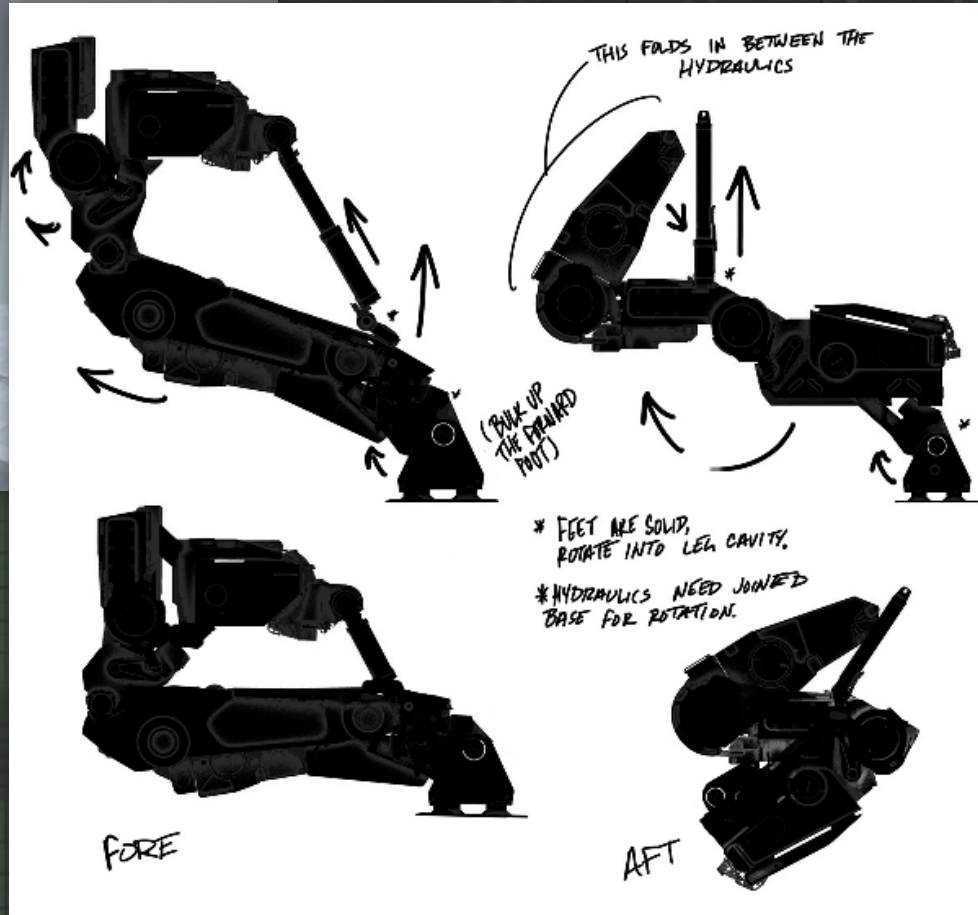
EM: Forward/Aft Landing Gears

PT: Wow! these are sweet!!!

MS: these are awesome. Can you post a quick thumb of how you were thinking they will fold up?



FORWARD



WORK IN PROGRESS



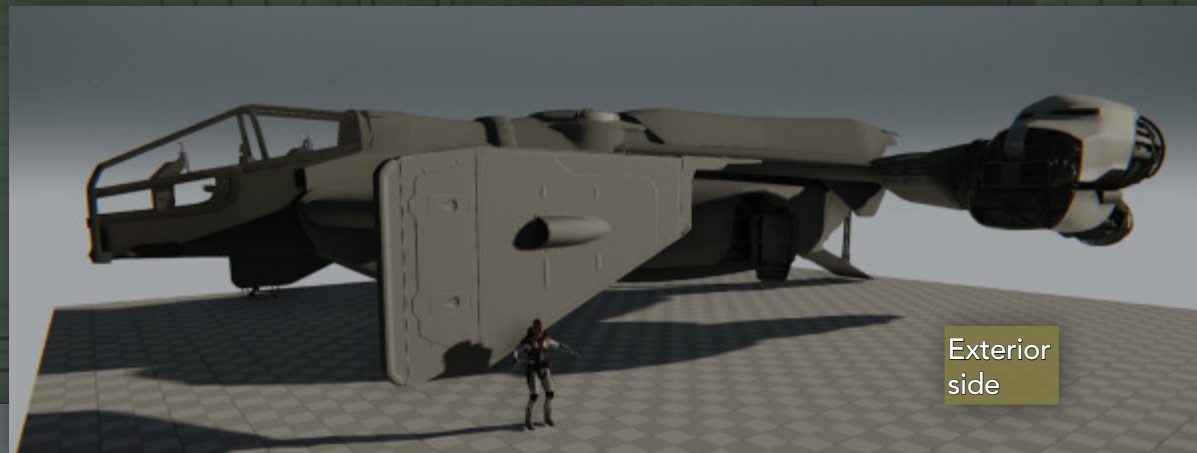
Cockpit

CR: Love the visibility — it does feel a little large though — not as snug as I would imagine the Cutlass cockpit to be.

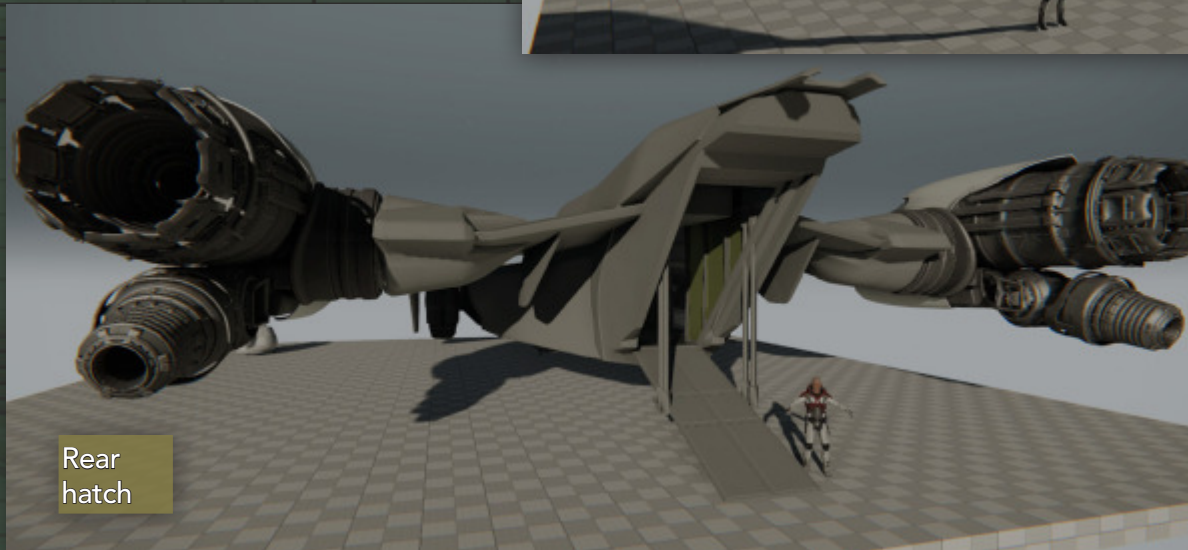
Is it just me or does the Cutlass just feel too large? It almost feels like a baby Caterpillar. This is meant to be a two-seater dogfighting ship with unparalleled maneuverability, not so much focused on cargo. Did we scale this correctly?

PT: I used the widest possible camera angle. (Sorry)

MS: No, it's cool ... that's why it looks huge.



Exterior side

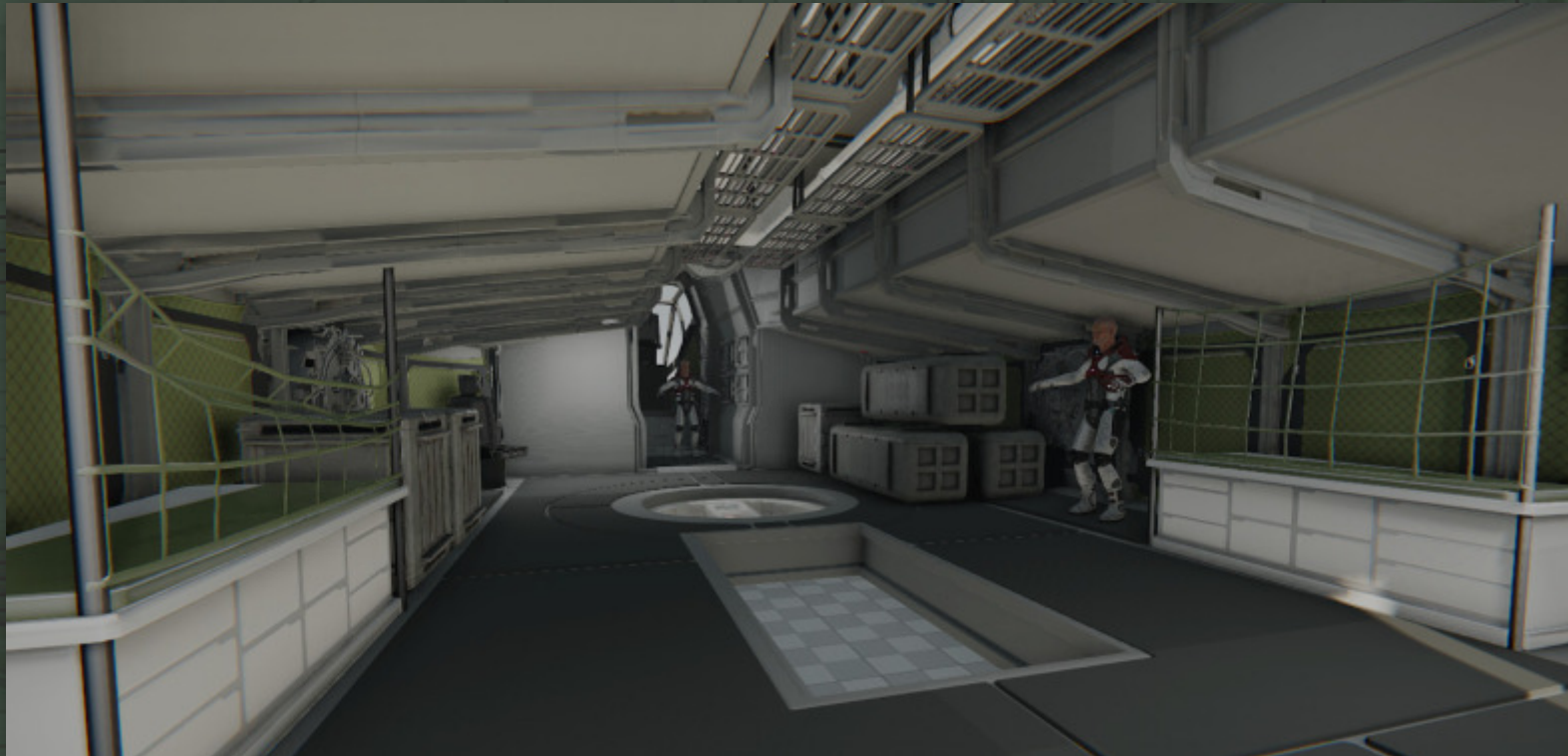
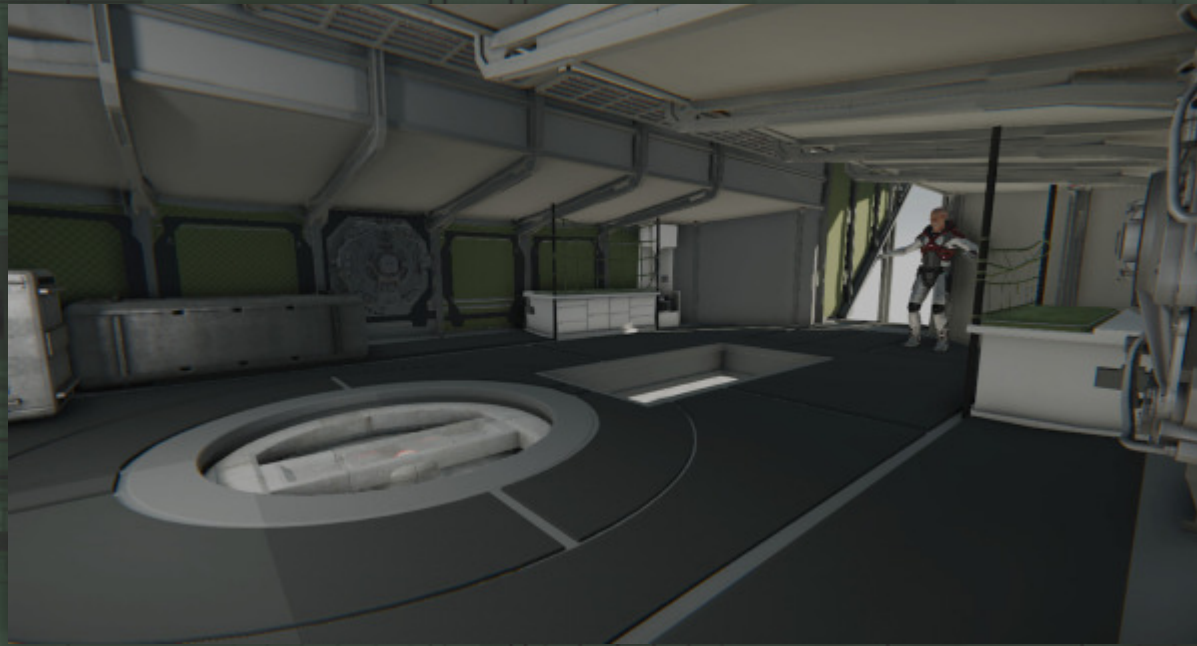


Rear hatch



WORK IN PROGRESS

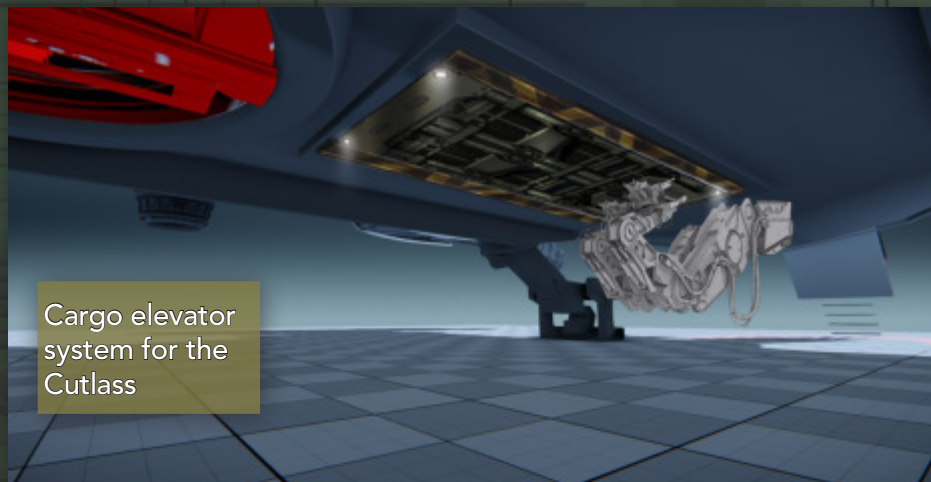
Interior,
with scale



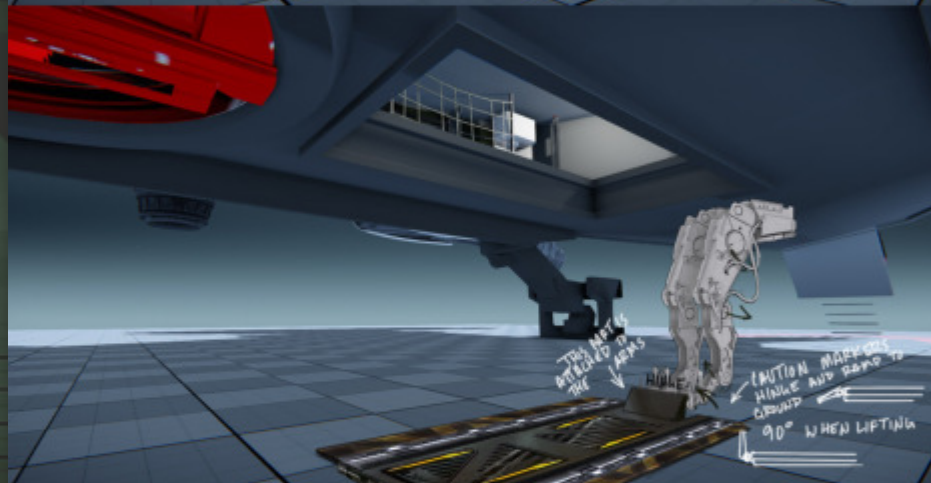
WORK IN PROGRESS



WORKING IN PROGRESS

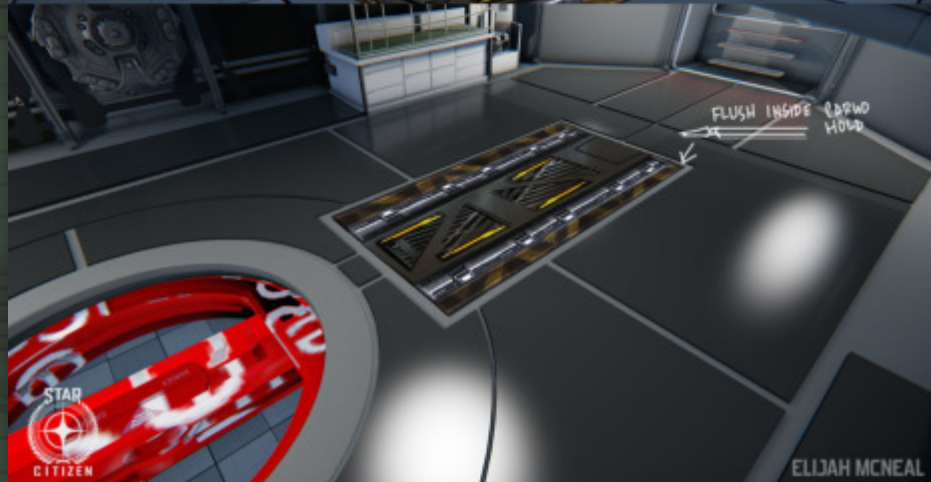


Cargo elevator system for the Cutlass



CR: This seems like an extra complication to me — why wouldn't you just load cargo via the rear ramp?

MS: There was an insinuation of it in the concept. It kind of echoes the Constellation and 300i. We could easily remove it if you would like. It's probably not necessary, although it would be nice to have two different ways out if you block yourself in with cargo.



ELIJAH MCNEAL

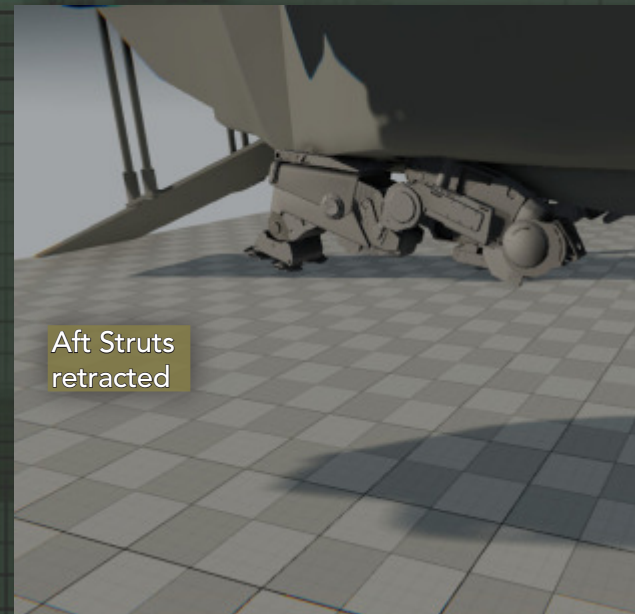
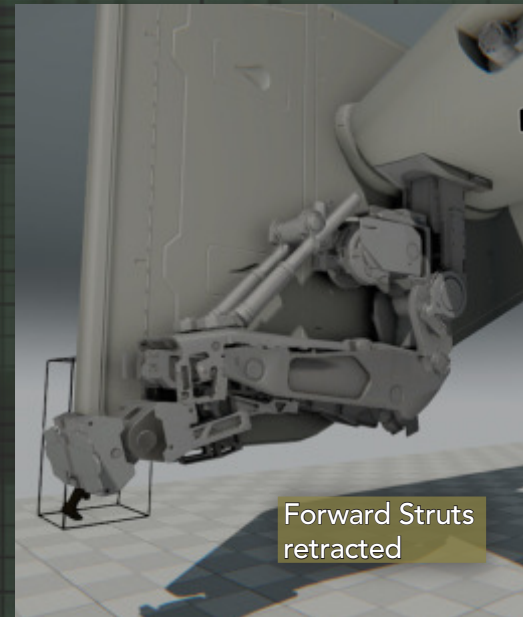
CS: looks pretty cool! How do they retract? I'd like to see a shot with the gear up.

MS: Those look cool!

CR: Again, slight too busy for me and needs to completely fold away.

EM: I would like to make the case that this level of detail is what we've promised to fans and they are noticing. It's helping to enhance the believability of the manufacturing processes which leads to gameplay immersion even in non-action settings.

CR: Detail is fine, but it has to match the look and feel of the ship — detail for detail's sake breaks the illusion of cohesive design. For instance, stuff on the Hornet can look more rugged / functional / basic compared to the 300i, as the two ships have different aesthetics (and manufacturers).

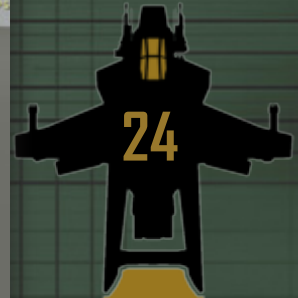
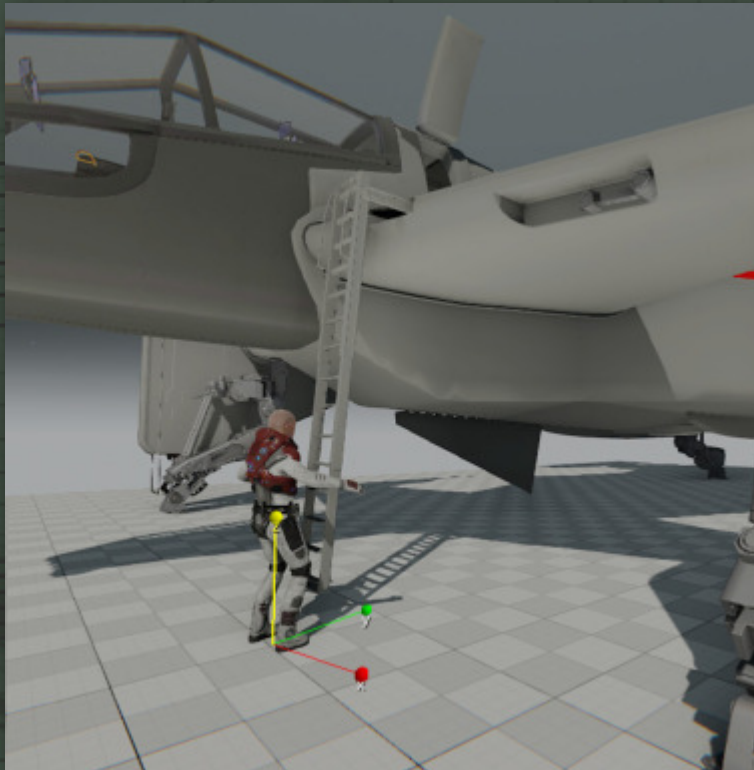


WORK IN PROGRESS



MS: Not sure about the door opening from the top like that.

PT: The mech is based on a passenger jet door. I did this rather than sliding, due to it being too complex.



WORK IN PROGRESS

CS: The strut looks better now, much cleaner. I agree with Chris R, the 'foot' could stand to have a bigger footprint. You don't have to go way big, but just make it a bit more proportionate to the rest of the leg I would say.

I also agree with Chris and think the ship would look better/cleaner with the landing gear tucked away completely. This could be achieved by making the LG swing sideways into the wing's fat part (kind of like the Hornet).

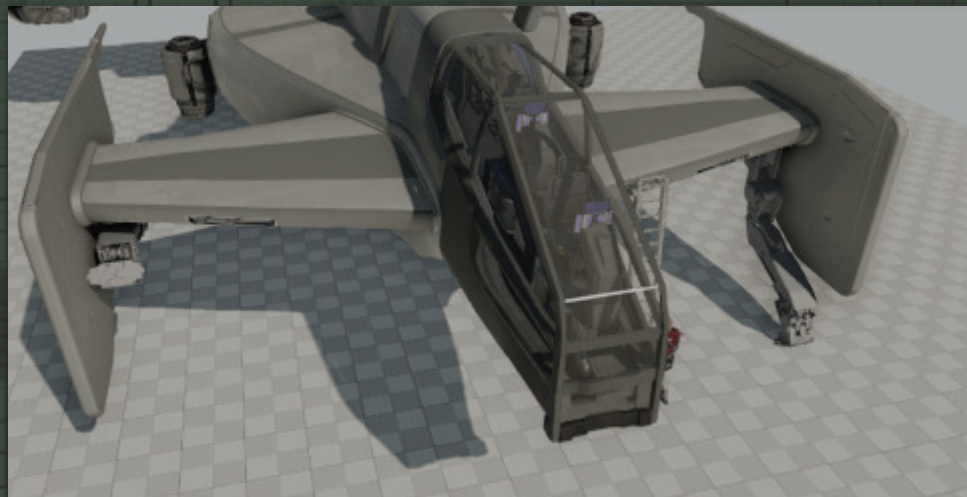
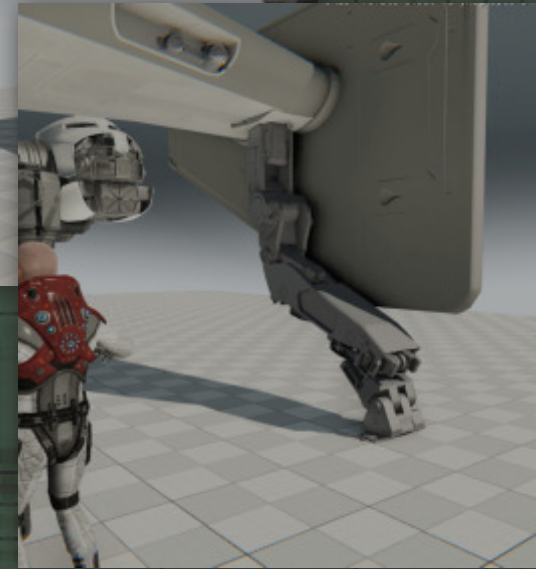
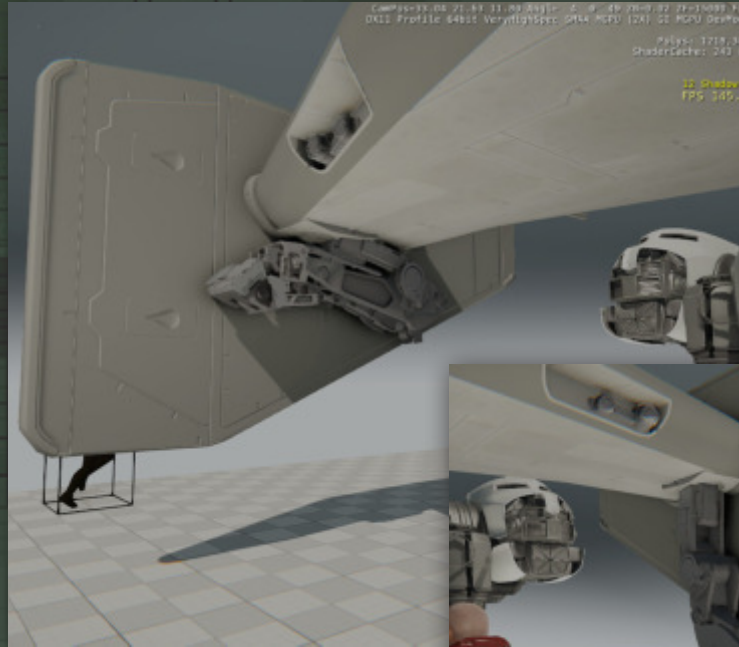
CR: This is better for me and fits in better with the ship's form.

It still needs a larger foot — right now it looks like it was shot off or forgotten on the model.

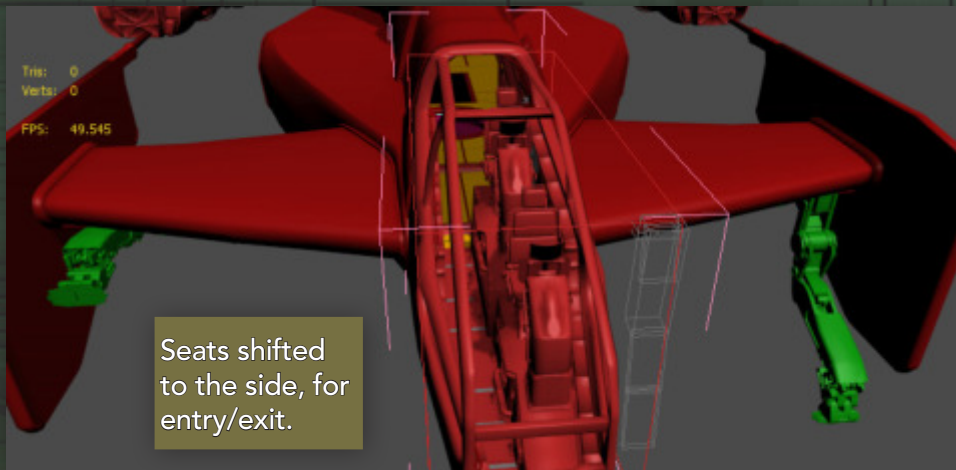
I still have an issue with the exposed landing gear in flight. The ship's concept never showed that and it just looks like we didn't think things through as the rest of the lines indicate a cleaner design.

CR: Where is the rear landing gear? On the shots I saw it looked like it could fold into the wing a la the Hornet.

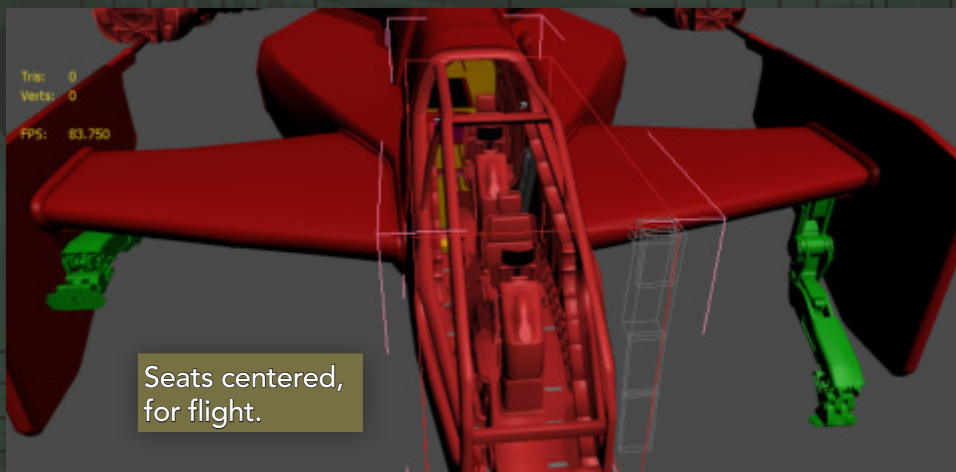
CS: In the rear it looks like there is no space to have them go inside the wing, since it is too thin there. But the gear is sort of 'tucked' into the rear cavity there and is not as exposed as the front LG. Should we just keep the rear LG design for this reason? If you want the LG hidden I would suggest filling in that rear cavity in that area but that, it seems, would mess with the rear silhouette of the ship a bit.



WORKING IN PROGRESS



Seats shifted to the side, for entry/exit.



Seats centered, for flight.

CR: Will the seats slide to the center line position once the pilot has entered them?

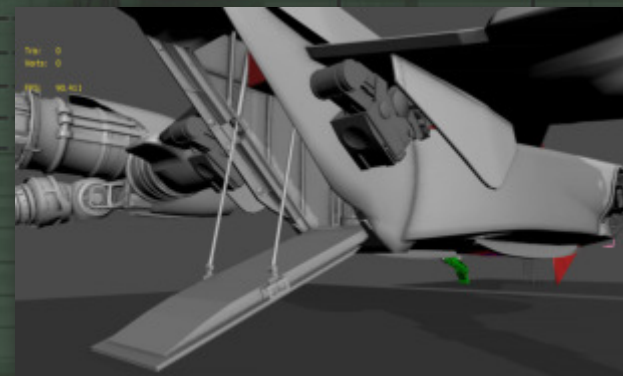
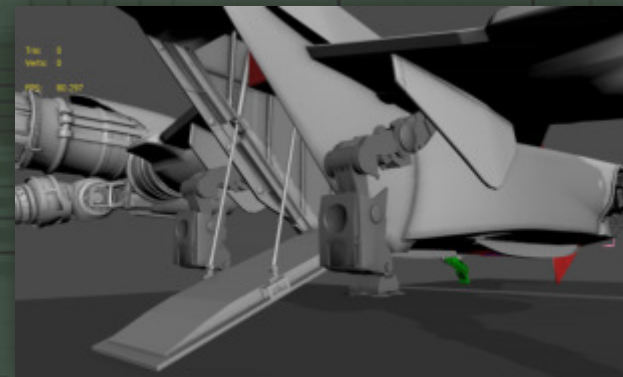
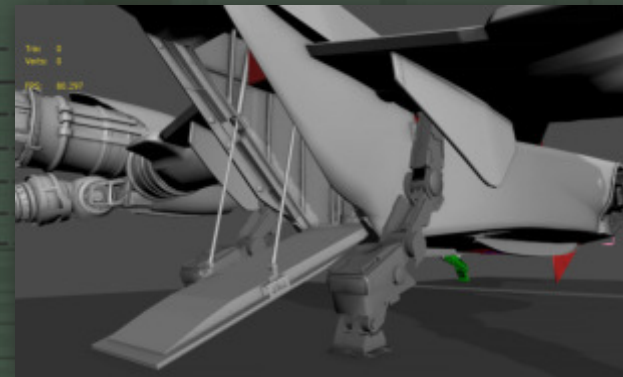
That seems like a good solution (and kind of a cool detail) as it seems they would want to be centerline but you need easy access to them.

PT: Check the attached movie.

CR: Cool. What happens if the co-pilot in the rear wants to dismount and go to the hold mid-flight?

Should we disconnect the front seat from the back for this reason?

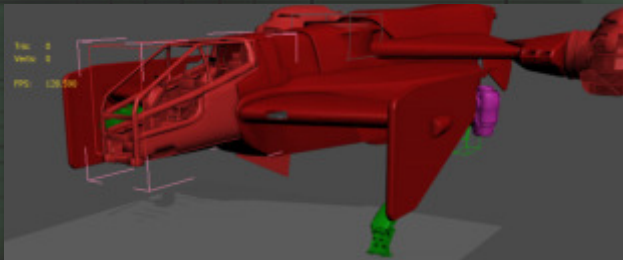
PT: They are already separate, so that's not a problem.



Current sequence for rear strut retraction. (This is still a work in progress, and is likely to be changed further in the finished ship.)

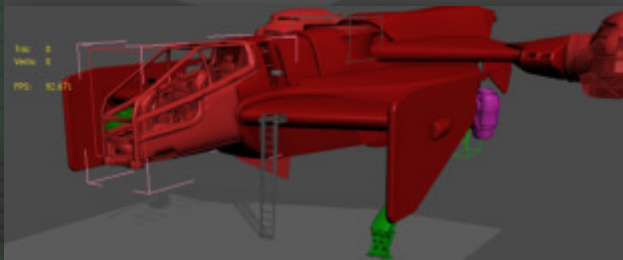
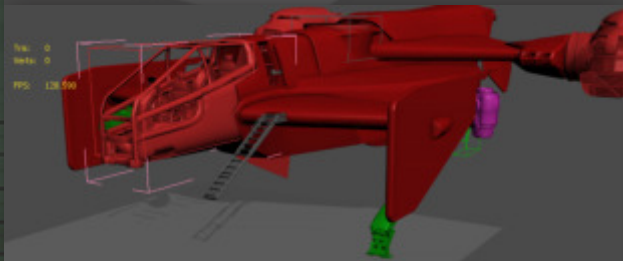
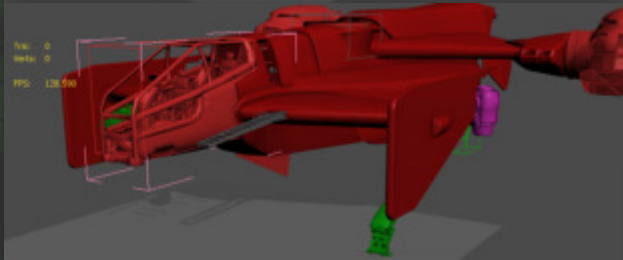


WORK IN PROGRESS



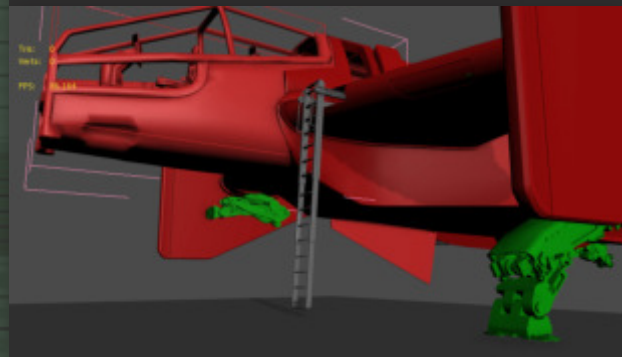
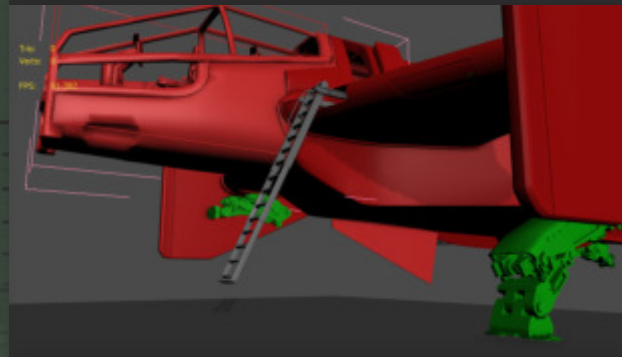
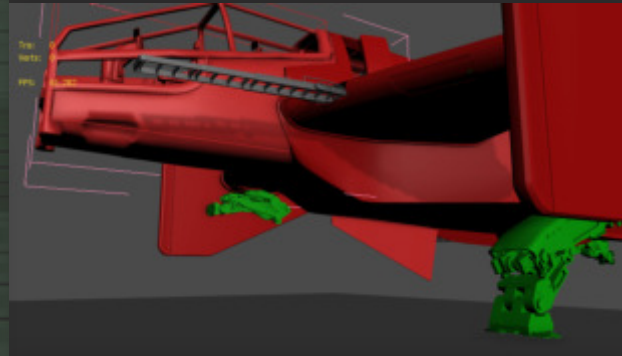
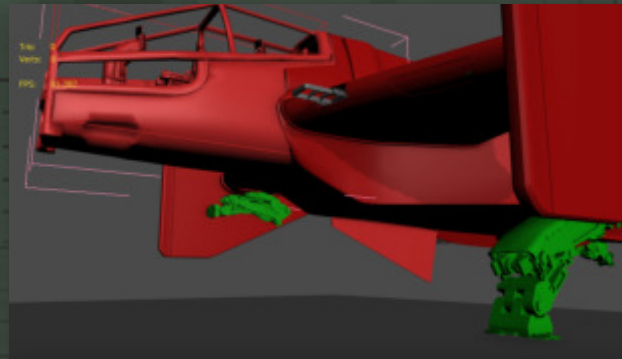
Current sequence for entry animation.

Three actions take place simultaneously (in the current model): the ladder deploys, the hatch above the wing opens to the right, and the two cockpit seats slide to the side. (Note that the hatch no longer opens upward.)



MS: I'm wondering if the ladder should fold in half when it's inside the wing, then deploy out, swing down then unfold in half ... does this make sense?

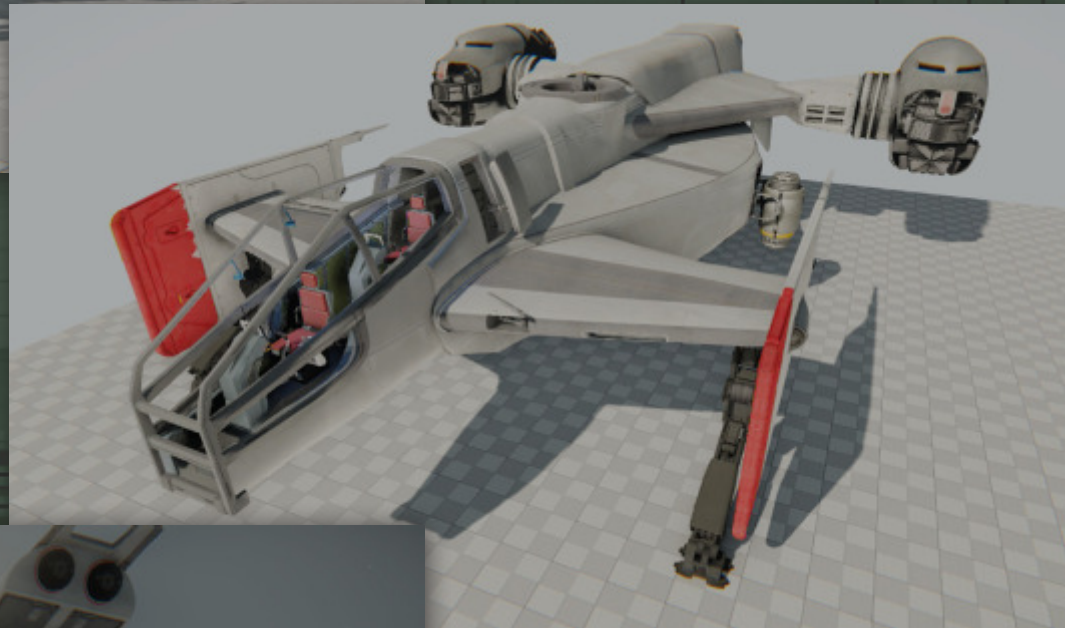
TB: A touch more complexity would add interest. Also, it doesn't necessarily need to reach the ground ... like a fire escape, only not as extreme.



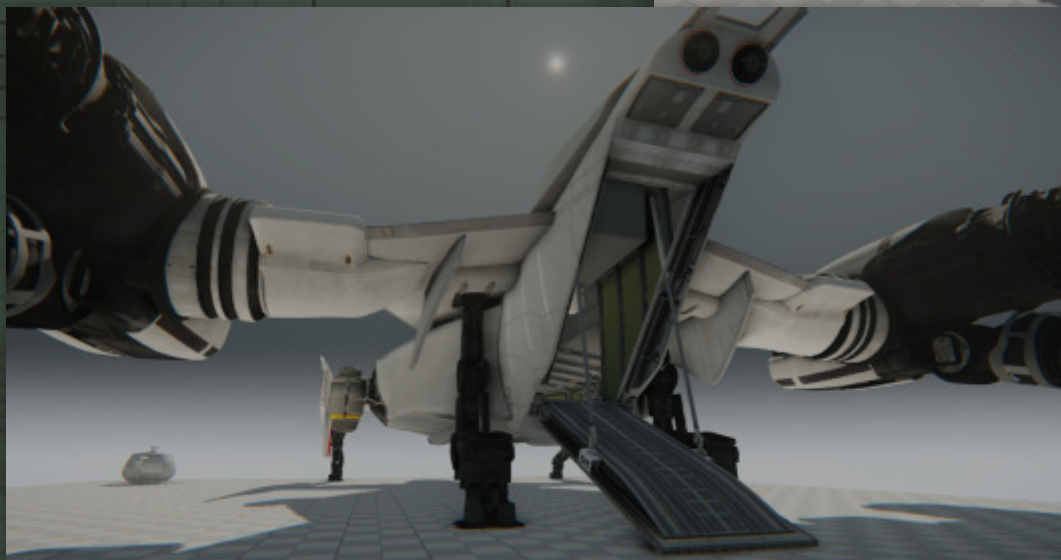
WORKING IN PROGRESS



The very latest:
texturing work in
progress



And that's where the
Cutlass stands at the
moment. It's on its way
to being done, but it's
also clear that important
decisions are still being
discussed. We'll have
more to show you once
it's all done.



WORK IN PROGRESS

DRAKE INTERPLANETARY



Any Citizen knows Drake Interplanetary: the cheesy billboards featuring impossibly plastic women with garish skin dye jobs leaning over the latest model starfighters, the newsvid headlines about frustrated investigations into their criminal ties, the not-quite-aerodynamic look of their silhouettes. The company's footprint is pervasive, an unavoidable for anyone who enters space.

The Cutlass

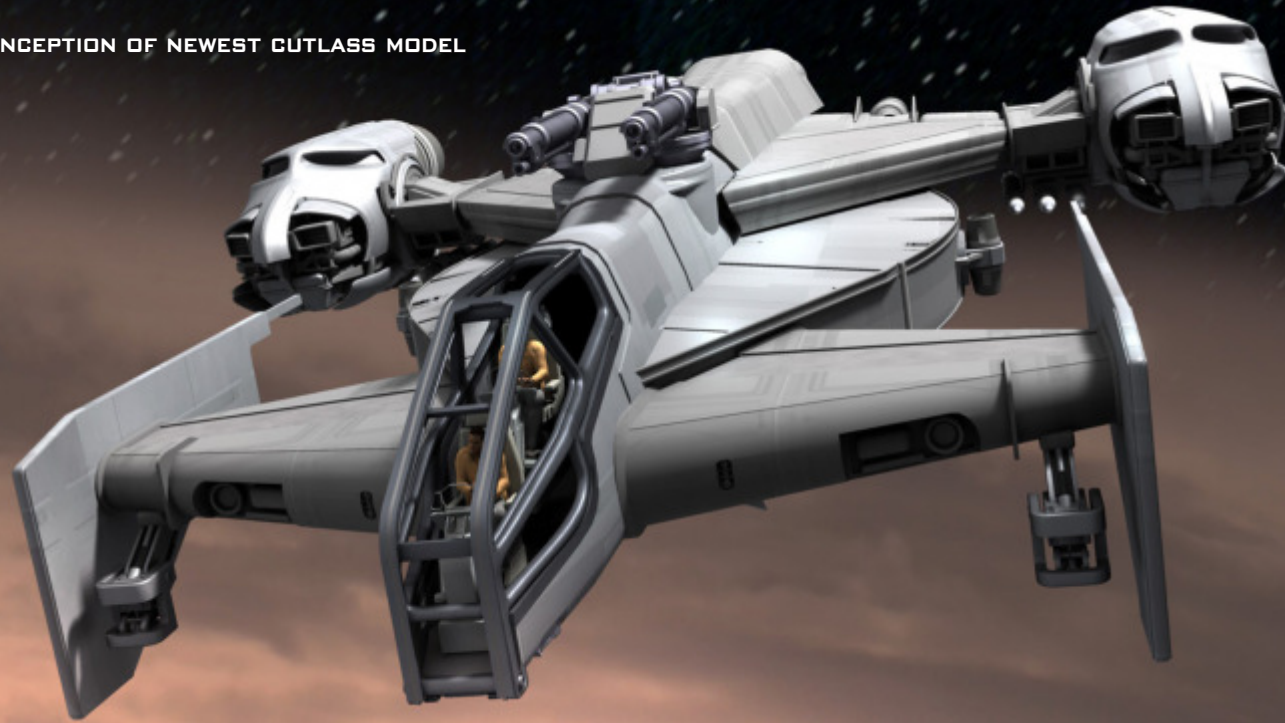
Drake's keystone design is the Drake Interplanetary AS-1 Cutlass. Incredibly inexpensive, Drake Cutlasses are used across the galaxy for thousands of different roles. From search and rescue ambulances to mining prospector conversions to short

hop food transports, the modular nature of the Cutlass means it can be anything to anyone. But there's no denying the fact that it is best known as the vehicle of choice for those skirting the law ... and those outright defying it. If piracy has a corporate face, it is Drake Interplanetary.

The Cutlass' beginnings aren't as sinister as its present status: it was initially developed to UEE specifications as a candidate for their 2922 "volksfighter" specifications. The specs were for a low-cost configurable space fighter that could be constructed rapidly to outfit distant home defense squadrons in times of need. The Cutlass lost out in the bidding to the now-forgotten Wildcat, but the development team opted to re-appropriate the design for civilian use.

DRAKE
INTERPLANETARY

EARLY ARTIST'S CONCEPTION OF NEWEST CUTLASS MODEL



The Cutlass was a spectacular design, all things considered. It lacked the leather seats and silver highlights of an ORIGIN luxury spacecraft and the hard reliability of a Roberts Space Industries Design ... but it could be built quickly using materials common on nearly every inhabitable world for roughly a quarter the cost of any other comparable spacecraft. And for that, it was profoundly reliable: famous test holos show the prototype Cutlass fearlessly navigating a field of stellar debris.

Incorporation

Drake Interplanetary incorporated soon after. Lead designer Jan Dredge became CEO, with a seven member board consisting largely of aerospace engineers who had worked on the project. Drake was not the surname of anyone involved in the project; it was selected as an acceptably "smooth-sounding" name, chosen specifically in the hopes

that it would make their spacecraft more appealing. This was the first of a series of money-over-all decisions that would quickly come to define the company.

The second decision was also telling: rather than incorporate on one of the UEE's traditional "homeworlds" like Earth or Terra, Drake based itself in the economically embattled system of Magnus. Basing both corporate governance and key factories on Borea (Magnus II), Drake's outlaw image became well established before the first production model Cutlass left the factory floor.

The initial pitch was to private militia groups. UEE law allows (and some would say encourages) anyone, anywhere to own armed spacecraft, and so the plan was that private squadrons in more distant areas of the galaxy would welcome a low-cost spacecraft solution. Regions specifically classified high insurance risks, the Drake board reasoned, would especially welcome an easier way to replenish lost spacecraft.



They were right, or so it seemed. Sales were phenomenal: within nine months, Drake had opened six offworld factories and had licensed dealerships in nine systems. In another year, the company had quadrupled again. Within five years they were the fifth largest spacecraft manufacturing concern and couldn't license subsystems manufacturers quickly enough. The company was lauded as a massive business success, credited in financial magazines as the little engine that could — finally a competitor that would change how companies like Roberts Space Industries and Musashi Industrial ran their businesses. From the numbers alone, it looked like everyone would be flying a Cutlass in ten years.

Partners in Crime?

Somehow, no one stopped to notice that wasn't really the case. The galaxy was at peace, or as close to peace as it had ever been. Vanduul raids at the time were disorganized, brush wars on frontier colonies were limited in scope, and the UEE military was in the middle of a several-year stand down. Who was buying thousands upon thousands of Cutlasses and what were they doing with them? As long as the star credits kept coming in, no one at Drake was especially interested.

The answer, of course, was pirate organizations. As long as civilians have had access to the stars, piracy has flourished ... and now, thanks to the affordable Cutlass, it had a new tool of choice. Smugglers and pirates, long cut off from the standard insurance system available to Citizens, had mostly been operating with obsolete discards: an armada of varied designs including patchwork Constellation Mk. Is, military surplus Strike Hawks and even century-old MISC flying wings. Now, they had a readily replaceable spacecraft that fit their budget, and thanks to its larger-than-average cargo hold and extremely customizable nature, one that fit their needs exactly. An analysis found that Cutlasses were

suddenly transporting narcotics, raiding cargo convoys and even daring to engage police patrols with increasing frequency. In time, the bulky, modular look of the Cutlass would even come to redefine pirates as much as pirates did the Cutlass, giving new life to a very old profession.

Here is where the corporate account, which proclaims Drake's "astounding efforts to stop piracy" and their "dedication to making spacecraft available to all sentients," differs from reality. It has become clear, though wholly unacknowledged, that the company realized they had made a deal with the devil ... and the money was too good to step back. Instead of restricting Cutlass sales to recognized military units, they began designing spacecraft with an increasingly piratical bent. The Caterpillar transport, for instance, mounted more tractor beams and heavy weapons than anything in the same class. Advertising became more obvious as well, with showroom model Cutlasses appearing in black stealth schemes and skull-and-crossbones logos (a "tongue-in-cheek reference to the overblown controversy," corporate PR explained).

The Future

What does the future hold for Drake? CEO Dredge plans to unveil next year's spacecraft lineup at the Terra Air and Space Show next month and the rumor is that this year's models are all about streamlining ... a daunting task for the modular, boxy Cutlass, Caterpillar and Buccaneer! Could ship models finally going for look and feel over affordability signal a move away from tacit approval of their use by illegal operators? A corporate representative is quick to point out that the company spent millions lobbying the UEE government for harsher anti-piracy laws ... but the cynic can't help but realize that more anti-piracy forces dispatched to the outer worlds simply mean that the clans will need to buy increasingly larger numbers of Drake Interplanetary replacement spacecraft.





PIRATEY MATTERS



What with highlighting the Cutlass this month, and the upcoming development of the ~~Pirate~~ Asteroid Hangar, pirates were on our mind. We went to Rob Roy, Lead Developer and Scourge of the Scattered Scorpions, to get the low-down on pirates in Star Citizen.

JP: What makes a player character a pirate, and how visible is it? Will I have a little "Pirate" label hovering over my cockpit as I fly around?

RR: Piracy is a choice, rather than a player "class." You don't have to look a certain way, and we're not going to stick little pirate flags on all of the pirate characters in the game. Scanning and recognizing a pirate is more about seeing a list of crimes committed than having to join a specific pirate club.

JP: How can I get rid of the tag (and any bounties on my character)?

RR: Stop committing crimes and become a productive member of society. (By this, I mean doing things that the UEE likes/needs.) And pay off any outstanding bounties.

JP: What's the benefit to piracy?

RR: The most obvious benefit is that you can take what you need without having to buy it! It's also a good lifestyle to choose if you're not too keen on being a part of the UEE.

JP: Does that mean piracy will be a viable career, or is it something limiting?

RR: There are obviously risks to being a pirate, particularly a well-known one. But it is absolutely a viable career. You'll

just need to choose your shopping locations carefully.

JP: *Will a relatively unknown pirate be in more danger from player characters or from the NPC law-enforcement organizations? How about a pirate with high recognition?*

RR: I wouldn't think of it as NPC or PC, since that can vary based on your preferences. You'll always be in danger from both. If you don't have a significantly bad reputation or lengthy list of crimes, you probably won't get much trouble from the Advocacy directly (but we may have player missions from the Advocacy, as well). Well-known pirates with very bad reputations and extensive rap sheets are a different story, as the Advocacy and Bounty Hunters' Guild will actively seek them out.

JP: *What sources do you draw from for creating Star Citizen's pirate experience?*

RR: There have been a number of great pirate games over the years, and we draw inspiration from many of them. Of course, previous *Wing Commander* and *Star/Freelancer* provides significant influence as to how these groups operate. Some other favorites are *Sid Meier's Pirates!* and the *Merchants and Marauders* board game, but inspiration comes from other game types, as well.

JP: *Will pirates have access to anything unique? Will they be denied anything?*

RR: It's more based on your reputation than your career choice, but those who have a good reputation with certain pirate groups might have access to some special equipment that the do-gooders can't have. On the other hand, they will have a much harder time getting their hands on military spec equipment, however, and there will be trouble if the Advocacy catches you with illegal hardware!

JP: *Are all pirates equal, or is there a more detailed reputation system?*

RR: The reputation system is quite detailed, and does distinguish between different groups. It doesn't just impact

your relationship with pirate groups, however. And some pirate packs might even be sworn enemies of other packs, so a positive rep with one pirate group might mean a negative rep with another group.

JP: *How will pirate organizations work? Is there honor among thieves, or is it every man for themselves?*

That can vary widely, just like player groups will. Some packs will be very cutthroat, and you'll have to watch your back constantly. Others will be more organized and operate as a team. Just depends on how you want to play.

JP: *Is Cutlass or Caterpillar ownership a black mark, or will they be common in civilian (non-pirate) hands?*

RR: The Advocacy will not automatically assume that you're a pirate simply because you have a Drake ship. That being said, if there is a lot of pirate activity in a particular area, you might be more likely to be scanned and identified by an Advocacy ship if you're in a ship that is typically associated with that sort of activity. Of course, if you're not up to anything nefarious, scanning won't be a problem, regardless of what type of ship you're flying.

JP: *Is it an "asteroid" hangar or a "pirate" hangar? Is there a difference?*

RR: Asteroid hangar! Not all asteroid hangar occupants will be pirates, nor will all pirates necessarily hang out in asteroid hangars. It's the occupant that makes a pirate hangar.

JP: *So how is an asteroid hangar different from any other hangar?*

RR: It's in an asteroid!

JP: *What's up with the Drake corporation? How does it continue to exist in legal areas of space?*

RR: As they will be quick to inform you, Drake does not manufacture pirate vessels. Although their ships are possibly more attractive to those who dwell outside the law, they are intended for non-criminal activity. (At least



BEHIND THE SCENES
WITH
THE
BOUNTY HUNTERS

MAGNUS SYSTEM BOREA



EDITH HILMVAH

"Magnus: On the Edge of the Unknown!" or so reads the local government's standard travel brochure. In truth, the phrase better describes Magnus a century ago; recent decades have seen increasing settlement and overall civilization in a system that considers itself the unofficial capital of Human frontier culture.

First discovered in 2499, Magnus was a small, entirely undistinguished system: three planets orbiting a type K

main sequence star. Dimmer than Earth's own sun, Magnus did not have the pull to generate a system of outer planets or an extensive network of jump point tie-ins. Surveys have located no protoplanets, gas pockets or asteroid fields in the system's environs; the area surrounding Magnus is the deepest, most desolate space imaginable. A single world, Magnus II, was identified as ideal for terraforming.



That process happened quickly. Magnus' distance from well-traveled space plus the availability of heavy metals and the anticipated ease of terraforming Magnus II resulted in a military-commissioned closed-terraforming starting in 2533. By the late 26th century, Magnus had become a large-scale naval base and the source of a great deal of ship construction. This lasted approximately fifty years, until budget cutbacks and the desire to focus operations in other systems, like Kilian, lead to the large-scale abandonment of Magnus.

For a time, Magnus II was a barren desert world — the effects of terraforming had not yet completely transformed the planet, and a ten-year period of extreme solar flares hampered its transition to a temperate world, increasing the decay of the UEE facilities and generally reducing overall interest in resettling Magnus. The result was an eerie, depopulated ghost world with declining structures full of refining and shipbuilding equipment considered too expensive to move elsewhere. During this period, the system's population declined to less than 3,000, most of whom had no legal right to their encampments.

In 2751, the original military classification for the Magnus system expired and other colonists were technically al-

lowed to move in. Seeing no practical use for the system, the UEE opted not to renew their lease claims for the sole inhabitable planet's landmasses. The age of single-state colonization having long since ended, Magnus' colonials were a ragtag group of outbackers, claim jumpers and an assortment of similar, less-savory types trying to escape their reputations on the core worlds. The result was a system with a reputation for a wild, anything-goes atmosphere, where Humans could live along the margins of the law. A culture supporting this system has since arisen organically, with a 'kill-or-be-killed' attitude that has developed into a strictly held frontier-style code of honor.

In recent years, Magnus II, Borea, has become more civilized, increasingly playing its reputation and fading ghost towns for tourist dollars. It's still among the more dangerous Human-settled worlds: while the government has come to adhere to a more formal system, assassinations are still not uncommon. This culture is not one-sided, however: for all the lawlessness, Magnus is seen as a place where anyone can start anew, a system that strongly believes in ignoring an individual's past in favor of his or her potential. For this reason alone, settlement on Borea is increasing, year by year.

MAGNUS I

Magnus I is a chthonian planet, a former gas giant which has had its atmosphere fully separated by its proximity to the star's sun. The result is a tightly compacted mass of rock rich in high value minerals. The UEE maintains full mining rights over Magnus I, and does not generally contract with outsiders for shipping or refinement. Owing to its cosmology, Magnus I is also a source of high grade diamonds, used both as gemstones and in factory operations. Again, the UEE moderates all sales and criminal elements have never established a significant foothold on Magnus I.

IMPORTANT NOTE Magnus IV does not exist. A common "trick" played by locals (and tacitly supported by Borea's tourism industry) is to claim that the system has a fourth planet located beyond the system's outer buoy markets. The makeup of the fourth planet, usually named **Triggerfish** in the local legends, seems to vary depending on the mark, from an emerald-rich mining world to a Shangri-La style paradise somehow supporting life in deep space. Visitors must be warned that no fourth planet exists and that ships which travel to the supposed distant coordinates will simply be charged a significant overage for the fuel expended in searching.



EMERALD RICH MINING WORLD TO A SHANGRI-LA STYLE PARADISE

MAGNUS II (BOREA)

Borea is the terraformed center of the system. Classified as a near-Earth planet, Borea has a variety of climates and is generally ideal for Human settlement. The planet is dotted with dozens of centuries-old abandoned UEE naval facilities which are slowly fading into overgrowth. Some have been settled by frontiersmen, while other prefab cities have sprung up elsewhere unrelated to the original settlement. Subsistence farms cover the planet's temperate zones, most run by loners who have traveled to Magnus to escape contact with the rest of the Human race. The general feeling is of a world unnaturally stuck between then and now.

The capital of the world is Newcastle. A recent space-based assassination attempt on the whole of the planet's Governor's Council has caused the government to re-direct all in-bound traffic towards the industrial city of Odyssa, which can now be considered Magnus' only starport. Odyssa, formerly a shipbuilding city before the

UEE's abandonment of Magnus, has been revitalized in recent years with the development of Drake Inter-planetary. Vast tracts of empty warehouses and rusting construction yards have been modernized and returned to life building Cutlasses and Caterpillars. Gangs are a serious problem in the city, and squatters have claimed the rights to many former UEE facilities; the result is an interesting place to hunt for questionably legal ship repairs and upgrades.

MARKET DEALS — BOREA

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| BUY: IRON ORE | +2 |
| BUY: SCRAP METAL | +2 |
| BUY: HEAVY MACHINERY | +1 |
| SELL: LUXURY GOODS | +1 |

MAGNUS III

Magnus III is a super Jupiter gas giant, a huge multi-colored sphere hanging at an extreme distance from Magnus' sun. As it is not especially near any of the system's jump points, Magnus III remains largely untapped as a refueling point. Persistent rumors claim that Magnus III's LaGrange points are common meeting places for pirates, although this has never been confirmed. The lack of extraplanetary legal forces (and general cultural disinterest in punishing such crimes in the region) lend such rumors a significant air of believability. At the same time, Magnus III would be a notably out-of-the-way locale for anyone, especially the more significant pirate cartels.



ELIJAH MEAL



The Void Rats

by Doug Niles



CHRONICLES

PART Five

Three UEEN stormen and a rogue captain have taken the cutter Plumetail to the Nul system, where they seek a vicious slaver named Zather Dane. Dane is an ex-military pilot, subject of an experimental neurosurgery that has rendered him uniquely capable of manipulating machinery with his mind, including his very advanced and deadly fighter, the “Silver Spider.”

The temperature inside *Plumetail*'s cabin continued to rise as the ship held steady in her position, on the starward side of the metallic planet Nul I. The cutter remained a good thousand clicks above the planet, her ventral surface facing the

searing inferno of the pulsating star. Through the dimmed Plexi overhead the four Humans could see the smoldering, storm-tossed planetary surface of what looked like a sea of molten iron. The liquid metal glowed red, and in places wicked cyclones roiled. Where these vortexes concentrated, the temperature on the planet's surface rose to yellow-heat.

Volcanoes spewed more crimson liquid from around the rim of the vast molten sea. In places black clouds obscured the atmosphere, though – for good or ill – the cutter currently hung above an area of clarity. Lieutenant Commander Naya Antoinette, in her unfamiliar position in the co-pilot's seat, found that she couldn't take her eyes off the searing, tempestuous landscape.

“Permission to close the screens,” asked D-Jack, the lieutenant’s voice hoarse through the commlink. “It’s getting damned hot up here in the turret.”

Antoinette didn’t hesitate. “Yes, button up and come on down into the hull. You too, Mac,” she added, to the chief petty officer manning the powerful particle cannon in *Plumetail’s* stern. “You guys can work on your tans later.”

It was with visible relief that the two starmen joined the women in the cockpit, where at least the cooling system, at full bore, had a little success in holding the killing heat at bay. The lieutenant’s face was coated in a sheen of sweat, while the normally stoic MacClean allowed himself the luxury of leaning against a bulkhead.

“Seems like the heat is helping with the swelling on your nose,” Naya observed tartly, eyeing her subordinate’s face. Jackson winced, and glowered at Sharona Sirene. The dark-haired, petite pirate captain, who had broken that nose within moments of their first meeting, pointedly avoided the bait.

“How long are we going to wait here?” Jackson asked, finally.

“As long as we can stand it,” Sirene replied. “The ship that was waiting for us at the jump point obviously was a sentinel, so we have to assume that Zather Dane knows we’ve arrived. My hope is that he thinks we got blasted to pieces by that sentry ship – I tried to make it look like we were crashing into Nul, before I pulled around behind this planet. And I don’t think he’ll come this close to the sun to seek us out, so if we can handle a day or two of this, he might let his guard down.”

“While our heat index climbs through the roof,” grouched the lieutenant.

In the end, they were able to last a little more than twenty-four hot, punishing hours in the star-scorched inferno

reflected from Nul I. Mac and Jackson were drenched in sweat, all but passed out in the narrow companionway beyond the cockpit, while Naya dozed fitfully in the co-pilot’s seat. She awakened when she heard Sharona Sirene stir beside her.

“We gotta move,” the pirate captain whispered hoarsely, “but real quiet like.”

Naya nodded, and flipped the switches to activate the power plant. She set the screens to full power while Sirene eased the ship around the curve of the scorched, hellish planet below them. Soon they were out of the reflected glare between star and rock, and though the temperature effect in the cabin was not immediate, they both took heart from the surrounding darkness.

Slowly accelerating, Sirene directed *Plumetail* away from the star and towards the bulk of Nul V, which glowed as light as a bright star before them. She kept an eye on *Plumetail’s* heat displays to monitor other ship activity. Antoinette got out of her seat and went back to where the two men lay sweaty and prostrate on a pair of mats. They stirred groggily when she tapped their shoulders.

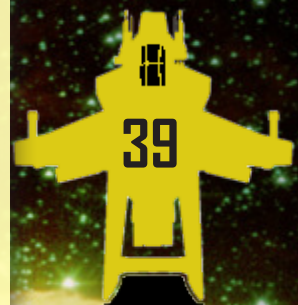
“We’re on the move,” she told them. “Better take up stations at the guns . . . just in case.”

“Aye aye, Skipper,” Jackson replied, while Mac nodded his assent. They returned to the turret and tail gun, respectively, and Naya went back into the cockpit.

“What’s your plan?” asked the officer, as the cooling systems gradually brought the cabin down to a comfortable temperature.

“There’s traffic around Nul V,” Sirene replied, gesturing to the screen of the system display. “Mostly doing stuff of which you would not approve.”

Naya winced, but knew that the pirate spoke the truth. She could see dozens of images on the radar scans, each



CHRONICLES

representing a ship maneuvering or holding in space. Those vessels currently under way swerved and slashed through space, and in at least two places she saw the telltale flashes that indicated laser or rocket fire exchanges. Such violence would have attracted considerable attention in most systems, but here in Nul, she realized, the rest of the ships and crews simply seemed to veer around these sporadic dogfights.

“We’re going to make our way out to that party, blend in from the edges, and see whatever we can see. And then we’re going to move in and take that slimy bastard out.”

“*That’s* something I can endorse,” the lieutenant commander declared. She settled back into her seat, put her hands on the controls, and fixed her attention on that glowing white speck in the blackness of space.

* * *

It took much longer to make the approach, since Sirene took great care not to flare her engines or do anything else to attract attention. By the time they neared Nul V, the scanners were alive with traffic, with a number of ships moving through the space around them.

“Not many of them coming into or leaving the system,” Antoinette commented, after watching the traffic pattern for a few hours. “They’re mostly just circling around out there.”

“I imagine it’s almost market-time,” Sirene noted. “The customers and the vendors are gathering for the big event.”

Naya remembered that this was rumored to be a major slaving outpost, and she stiffened in outrage at the thought of the helpless captives being hauled here to face unimaginable fates. She silently renewed her resolve to take down Zather Dane and avenge her slain Void Rats.

As they drew nearer and zoomed the scanners in for more detail, she became aware of ships taking off from and landing on the planet.

“What’s the planetary surface like?” she asked.

“It’s a desert world. Sand and wind, with a few sharp mountain ranges here and there. Very little oxygen, so breathers are needed for more than a couple minutes’ exposure. Plus, your skin and anything you wear can get sandblasted off of you if you’re not careful.”

“I can tell there’s more than one landing zone, but their specific locations aren’t obvious,” the officer commented. “A smuggler’s dream, I guess.”

Sirene nodded. “The planet is impossible to secure, and they like it that way. Gravity is tolerable: a little less than one point oh. The installations are underground – except for one squatter city they made out of a crashed starship. There’s no central authority, so anyone with a team of workers and the budget to pay for them can hack a base out of the bedrock.”

“And each base has its own LZ?” Naya asked in surprise.

“Some do, some don’t,” Sirene answered. “A few slave lords have their own strongholds on world, but a lot of the smaller operations share hangar and dock space. I know Dane has one dedicated to his own operation – he keeps his ship in a hangar built into the side of a mountain. But he also makes use of the biggest shared station, for landing large cargoes and so forth.”

“Can you mark those spots for me?”

The pirate captain nodded, and punched numbers into her geo-scanner. A contour of the world’s surface appeared, showing mostly the sandy, windswept dunescape she’d described. She zoomed in on a range of massive, blackstone mountains. Jagged peaks jutted like a saw-blade into the airless sky, and a blinking light showed on a cliff near the top of the tallest summit. “That’s his base. He has a good-sized hangar, though I think he only keeps the Silver Spider there. The rest of his men – he calls them ‘torques,’



CHRONICLES

I remember, 'cause of those silver collars he makes them wear – use that commercial site, right there.” She indicated another busy hub, just beyond the base of the mountain range.

“That’s only a hundred clicks or so from his base,” Naya observed.

“Yep. He likes his privacy, but also wants to be close to the action.”

“What kind of security can we expect, if we land there?” the officer asked, her heart sinking. She wondered how they’d ever manage to approach, much less penetrate, Dane’s fortress.

“Not as much as you’d find at, say, a military post,” Sirene answered breezily. “We pirates like our privacy, and are used to carrying weapons. There won’t be any bio-IDs. Sidearms are allowed, even expected. They will stop you from taking a bomb down there, though. There’s a tube system from that hub that goes to Dane’s arena. Anyone who buys a ticket can take the ride.”

In another hour they had joined the queue of ships moving toward the large landing zone Sirene had identified. Ships were touching down and taking off about once a minute, and within a short time they had dropped down to the surface. The pirate captain deftly guided her ship under the overhang of a black slab of rock, through an electronic airlock, and up to a vacant berth along the wide arc of the dock. Several dozen ships, in an array of sizes, occupied the spaces to port and starboard. Surprisingly, to Naya, no one approached *Plumetail* to make an inspection or to check documentation. Instead, the captain just punched a docking fee credit into the commlink, and they were authorized to stay, load or unload as they wanted.

They had decided, collectively, that Jackson and Mac, dressed in civilian coveralls left behind by Sirene’s fleeing crew, would make the initial reconnaissance. Sirene,

who was known to Dane, and Antoinette, the target of his vengeance, would stay on the ship until they got word from the two men.

It wasn’t much of a plan, they all realized. But it was all they had until they could get the lay of the land, and some intel about the opposition.

* * *

“Swallow this,” Antoinette ordered, handing Jackson a small capsule.

“Trying to poison me now?” he asked sardonically, though he recognized the device and knew its purpose. It was a tracking signal, tuned to a very high frequency. It would broadcast only for short bursts, at a pre-programmed interval, but if the skipper used a scanner timed precisely to that interval, she would be able to track his location. The long gaps between broadcasts, on the other hand, were designed to minimize the chance that any hostile forces would be listening in. Also, if he were captured, a simple electro-search would be unlikely to reveal the presence of the sender.

Unless, of course, he was so unlucky that the search occurred at the exact moment of a broadcast. But there was nothing to be done about that.

Naya then handed him a second small capsule, this one with a single switch on its end. “If you find yourself in an emergency, flip that switch. The tracker will emit a steady burst of power that will set off alarms back here, and we’ll do our best to reach you.”

“If the signal gets through,” he said, not at all confident in this newer technology.

“You’re right,” she agreed with aggravating cheerfulness. “But it’s one hell of a powerful transmitter when you goose it with that thing. It’s supposed to be able to overcome just about any interference.”



CHRONICLES

“You’re the skipper,” D-Jack replied, still not convinced.

“Try to gain access to the arena, and see if you can learn when the market is going to start,” Sirene chimed in.

“Judging from the traffic, it should be within a few days – a week at the most, maybe even today. Most times, there’d be hardly any ships moving around here. Dane will be in his fortification, and his ship will be nearby. Get back here to report if you can; send us a message if you can’t.”

“How do we do that?” the pilot wondered.

“There’re comm-posts all over the place down there.” She punched in a code and pulled a small chip out of her panel. “Use this – it’s preprogrammed to communicate directly to this ship. We can talk it over on a secure line, and we’ll work out a plan.”

The odds seemed damned long, but Jackson had lost a lot of friends and comrades to the Silver Spider. He was more than willing to take the chance. He’d examined the LZ from above, but there wasn’t much to see beyond the surface of bedrock, protected by a few land-based weapons installations. Clearly, most of the action took place underground.

As soon as the ship was docked, he and Mac emerged from the cutter’s bow ramp dressed in the old, patched civvies left behind by Sirene’s previous crew and started along the airlock toward the commercial zone. Each starman wore a P4 laser pistol openly on his belt, while Jackson had a sonic knife in his pocket and Mac went old-school with a lead-filled sap. On Sirene’s advice, they had opted against more concealed weapons, since she had warned them they were sure to show up – and attract attention – on a scan.

As they walked along the landing deck, D-Jack looked back at *Plumetail*, deciding that the scruffy, poorly painted cutter, with her collection of gear that appeared to be pasted on the hull at irregular intervals, fit right in with the motley collection of pirate, smuggler and slaver craft crowded along the bustling dock.

Once through the large gate of the landing bay, they entered a dark commercial district of twisting passages. The stench of stim sticks, sweat and urine soured the air as they passed the darkened entrances to a series of bars. They heard shouts of anger from within one, blaring music from another. A scruffy, bearded man came flying out of the third, aided by the forceful heave of a couple of burly bouncers. The man fell to the deck in front of the pair and began to retch.

“This one looks like my kind of place,” Mac commented drolly.

“Suits me,” Jackson agreed. They ambled into the bar, ignoring a pair of grimy mates who were working themselves up to a fistfight, and found places at the moderately crowded bar. The customers were mostly Human, male, unshaven and covered in tattoos. They took no notice of the newcomers.

Bitter smoke filled the air, and lights of every conceivable color flashed and blinked from the ceiling. A number of very supple dancers, all Human females, gyrated on a stage, while bartenders – again, mostly Human, but including a couple of lanky Banu as well – poured an exotic array of drinks from a variety of spigots. The drinks, Jackson noted with surprise, were as brightly colored as the flashing lights.

“I gotta cut myself off – takin’ the next train in to the show,” remarked one of the spacers to Jackson’s left. He looked at the digital clock above the bar for several seconds, as if trying to make calculations in his addled head, then pushed back and stood shakily. Finally he started for the door.

“I have a feeling that’s our ride,” Mac said. He swiped his MobiGlas to cover the tab, and he and Jackson followed the drunk out into the maze of companionways that made up this station’s commercial district. A few minutes later they watched him stumble up to an arched entryway. He fumbled through a pocket and came up with a MobiGlas,



CHRONICLES

which – after several attempts – he swiped at a reader to one side of the arch. A ticket emerged from the wall, and the scruffy spacer snatched it up and shuffled through the arch into the lighted tunnel beyond.

Jackson looked at Mac, who shrugged. They couldn't see any sign of guards or a checkpoint, so the young pilot pulled out his MobiGlas and headed for the ticket machine with the petty office close behind. They saw a screen blink and flash their images beside them, with their side-arms, knife and sap clearly illuminated, and Jackson felt relief that he hadn't tried to sneak any heavier firepower through.

There were no markings on the ticket machine, but the pilot repeated the process he'd observed, trying not to obviously hold his breath as he waved the MobiGlas at the reader, twice. The wall before them slid to the side, revealing a narrow passage sloping slightly downward, and they proceeded along like two men without a care in the universe. Coming around a curve in the corridor, they dropped their tickets into a turnstile gate, then followed several other passengers through an archway and across a rubberized connecting seal to enter the tubular chamber beyond.

A dirty, dimly lit train of four connected cars waited on a rail within the tube, and the two spacers followed the other passengers inside. Their car was a windowless, sparsely-furnished cylinder with seats along the outer walls and standing room for perhaps a dozen people in the center. The seats were all occupied, and the central floor space was about half full as Jackson and Mac made their way through the doors and took up standing positions on the side opposite the entrance. Not sure what to expect, the two starmen looked around for grab bars, but no obvious means of support was visible.

The other people on the car were mostly similar to the half-drunk spacer they'd followed from the commercial

district, plus a few men and women who were dressed in metallic or leather finery and, by appearance alone, seemed to stand aloof from the riff raff. Most of these were accompanied by big, muscular escorts. Jackson suspected they were ship captains or influential traders, and were protected by a personal escort of guards.

A blinking clock clicked down the seconds until departure. When it reached zero the door *whooshed* shut. Immediately a series of hand bars dropped from the ceiling overhead. Copying the other standing passengers, Mac and Jackson each took one handle and held on.

Within another couple of seconds they felt the car lurch and accelerate. The motion was surprisingly smooth, but the acceleration continued for more than a minute until Jackson guessed they were going very fast indeed. With nothing to see, the lieutenant tried, unsuccessfully, not to worry about whatever it was that awaited them in the unknown base.

* * *

"They're taking a train toward Dane's base," Antoinette announced, eyeing the scanner as she and Sirene waited in the cutter's cockpit. The buzz of the scanner's broadcast flashed from the screen, showing Jackson's – and hopefully Mac's – location a dozen clicks toward Dane's base.

"Makes sense," shrugged the pirate. "That's where the arena is. And the Silver Spider."

"I wish they'd reported back here first," the skipper said nervously.

"Probably didn't have anything to tell us," Sirene replied. "So keep an eye on that sensor, and let's be ready to move out."

* * *



CHRONICLES

The feeling was eerie since they could see no visible proof that the windowless car was moving; it was strangely quiet and peaceful as they careened along. The trip lasted no more than ten minutes; arrival was signaled by the pressure of deceleration as the series of cars gradually came to a stop.

They emerged into a large corridor, apparently underground – judging from the cut stone on the floor and the walls to right and left. Lighted panels formed the ceiling, and numerous apertures opened into small hallways to the right and left. The passengers in the car dispersed as they emerged, with what Jackson had decided was the riff-raff going into a wide entrance leading to the left. Most of the more well-dressed passengers, each accompanied by a brace of guards, started down the main hallway in the opposite direction, toward a brightly lit atrium.

They heard a commotion from a side corridor and followed the example of the other pedestrians, who all moved to the edges of the passage. A trio of personal hovers emerged from a side passage, banking and turning sharply as they shot down the main corridor. Each was a floating vehicle, basically a rocket with handlebars, and the riders were intimidating, bearded Humans with dark visors over their eyes. The two in the lead were solo bikes, while the third carried a passenger – a slender, scantily-dressed woman—on an extend seat. The three drivers leaned forward, balancing against the thrust of acceleration, as they blasted away.

The thrusters were heat-free, but powered the nimble machines with an audible hum – a sound that dopplered down from a shrill moan as the three vehicles quickly left the walking Humans behind. The hoverbikes vanished into the distance along the long, dimly-lit main roadway.

After a moment's thought and an exchanged glance wherein Mac simply raised his eyebrows, Jackson followed the wealthier passengers who were strolling down the

path taken by the P-hovs. There were four of them, three men and a woman, and they strode along without speaking, but with a visible sense of purpose.

The two starmen strolled more casually, a hundred paces or so behind. Thankfully there were a few other people, apparently workers and attendants, moving in the same direction, so that they didn't appear completely out of place.

All four of the wealthy visitors turned in unison and passed through a wide entrance to the right. There were armed guards here, men in poorly matched uniforms carrying laser assault weapons, and they stepped forward to examine the small cards each of the four presented. After a quick scan, the guards stood back respectfully and let the party through.

Eyeing those guards, Jackson was beginning to think that their route was thwarted, when a crew of movers emerged from a side corridor. They were wearing coveralls similar to the disguises of the two starmen, and they were wheeling a series of power carts that carried large, square objects. With a shudder of revulsion, Jackson recognized the containers as cages, secured with electrical bars, each capable of holding a half dozen or more Human adults.

Sharing the same thought, Mac and D-Jack fell into stride with the workers, who were guiding their loads toward the same entryway the wealthy visitors had used. Once again, the armed guards stood back to open the entryway. The workers pulled their floating carts through the gate, as another P-hov, thruster idling with a straining groan, eased past them and out into the main corridor.

The two starmen and the work party came through the entrance to find themselves on a large platform in a huge underground chamber, an enclosure that rivaled in size the cargo dock of a larger space station. The level that they occupied formed a ring that passed around the entire perimeter of this coliseum-like space, while the floor,



CHRONICLES

far below, was covered with cables, blinking lights, and various pieces of mismatched equipment. Several P-hovs prowled and grumbled along the various balconies, each of which seemed to circle the whole amphitheater.

The workers took the cages to the edge of the platform where an elevator rose up to meet them. More armed guards rode the platform, and this time the lead worker presented a document card. The first sentry started to check the card, lifting his head to compare what he was reading to the loads on the hover carts. As he did, Jackson noticed a silver collar around his neck, remembering Sirene's description of Dane's 'torques.' This metal ring was unadorned by gemstones, but had a series of blue lights that blinked periodically.

Sensing, again without speaking, that this document check was trouble, the two starmen stepped to the right, away from the work party, and moved back into the shadows of the wall that rose toward a ceiling so lofty that it was barely visible overhead. A number of passageways led into the rocky base that framed the huge space, and they picked the nearest, ducking into a tunnel that was even more poorly lit than the main roadway outside.

Jackson caught a flash of movement in the peripheral vision to his left. He spun, too fast for his casual act, but couldn't see anyone, or anything, in the shadowy entrance to the side corridor.

"Did you see that?" he asked, as Mac followed the pilot's stare. The chief shrugged an inaudible negative.

"I want to get down there and see about those cages," MacClean said, indicating the floor of the auditorium. "You see any way down besides the elevator?"

Jackson looked around, and his attention returned to the side corridor. He stepped back a few feet to confirm his first impression. "This looks like a ramp leading down. Maybe it'll come out on the bottom."

The two starmen, still trying to stride purposefully along, entered the corridor and found that it was, indeed, a descending passageway that curled through a complete circle before coming out onto another platform, one level lower than where they had entered the huge chamber. The upper level extended above them, while connecting passages, also screened by the overhang, extended to the right and left.

Welcoming the concealment offered by the upper deck, Jackson stuck his head around the corner to look at the platforms. He saw that they connected to another complete ring, a circle that extended all the way around the huge chamber. This walkway was much narrower than the balcony they had first entered, and lay perhaps ten meters below their original position. It was hard to tell because of the vast scale, but the pilot guessed that the arena floor lay another fifty to sixty meters below them.

"Let's see if we can find another ramp," he suggested — then grunted as Mac grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him roughly into the passage.

A blast of something hot and violent impacted the wall, right where his head had been. Jackson spun to see two armed guards charging toward them. One was holding a handgun — apparently the laser pistol that had just snapped off that shot.

Another laser blasted right beside Jackson and he realized that Mac had drawn his P4 and returned fire. A scream of pain indicated that his blast had found meat.

"This way!" the pilot snapped, sprinting into the corridor, which seemed to continue downward. He came around a corner, and then another, sensing that he was circling back toward the arena. Moments later they emerged onto another of the wide balconies. As he tried to decide whether to turn right or left, another P-hov, this one with a passenger in the rear seat, shot along the edge of the wall to



CHRONICLES

block their path. The man on the rear seat carried a long gun, and swiveled the barrel toward them.

The two starmen reacted instinctively, Mac shooting at the passenger while Jackson blasted the driver. Both men tumbled, blistered, onto the deck of the balcony while the machine, idling loudly, rested just off the surface.

“Get on!” Jackson cried, leaping across the saddle-like driver’s perch. The P-hov settled slightly as Mac leaped into place behind him. Jackson, an instinctive pilot, grabbed the handlebars and quickly saw how the throttle and steering controls worked. With a twist of the former, he accelerated away from the two wounded men, following the curve of the level deck that extended around the rim of the vast arena.

“There!” snapped Mac, pointing to a wide opening to their left, a space that suggested they could get away from this huge open space.

Jackson twisted the steering control, aiming for the opening—but to his surprise the machine spun and shot away in the opposite direction, carrying them both away from the platform and out into the yawning space. Jackson wrestled with the controls, but they wouldn’t respond, and the P-hov instead swiftly zoomed upwards until they were sixty or seventy meters above the floor.

There the machine came to a stop, wobbling frighteningly so that the two men were forced to clutch the handles and grip with their knees just to prevent a fatal fall. D-Jack’s heart pounded in his chest as he cursed and pulled at the stubborn controls.

Abruptly a small video screen at the head of the P-hov’s central post flashed into life before him. He saw a man’s face — at least, it looked like a man, though there was a chrome plate of metal covering half of his skull and extending as far as his left cheekbone. The eyes were dark, perfectly black, and a full-lipped mouth was pursed into a

look that might have been mild amusement.

“Don’t bother with the controls. This machine will do what I want it to.” The words came out in a wicked buzz, as if some electronic device were modulating human vocal chords.

“And who the hell are you?” snapped Jackson, even though he already knew the answer.

“I am Zather Dane. You are my . . . *guests* . . . for as long as I choose to let you live. So please, relax.”

The pilot was unsuccessfully trying to come up with a witty reply when the machine shot forward again, accelerating so quickly that the two men had to cling desperately just to keep their seats. They flew toward the side wall of the vast arena, and Jackson instinctively hunched down and braced for a collision.

Instead, the surface of the rock wall slid away to reveal a dark hole. The P-hov shot into that hole and continued forward at high speed. The concealed door slid shut behind them, leaving them in utter darkness, hurtling forward at blazing speed, toward a destination they could only imagine.

To be continued . . .

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