

AFRAID OF THE DARK?

Starbreeze aren't, and thankfully now you don't need to be thanks to the incredible new game acting as a prequel to Pitch Black (and therefore, is also chronologically before the new Chronicles of Riddick Movie.

Given it's full title, Escape from Butcher Bay sets up the back story perfectly as Richard Riddick, played by you (and voiced expertly by Vin Diesel himself) is captured and locked away in a maximum security prison on a desolate island. With no weapons, no friends and some nasty guards, escaping is going to be tough...

GSO

GAMESTYLE OFFLINE

w w w . g a m e s t y l e . n e t

A cinematic image of Richard Riddick, played by Vin Diesel, in a prison cell. He is wearing his signature black goggles and a dark tank top. The cell is dimly lit with a strong orange glow from a light source, possibly a fire or a lamp, creating a dramatic and gritty atmosphere. The background shows the metallic bars and structure of the prison.

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK

ESCAPE FROM BUTCHER BAY

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK

Pitch Black was fun, nothing too serious and wasn't ever going to clean up at the Oscars. For what it was, a fairly low budget sci-fi horror flick, it did its job and importantly, nicely set up Vin Diesel as the dark, mysterious (and somewhat quirky) Riddick and left the ending wide open for a potential sequel.

The movie *The Chronicles of Riddick* follows straight on from *Pitch Black*, albeit with a much larger budget as the trailers for the film illustrate. What *Gamestyle* is most concerned about, however, is the prequel to *Pitch Black*, *Escape from Butcher Bay*. Whilst there's not a movie of this section of Riddick's tale, Swedish developers Starbreeze have thoughtfully provided anyone with an Xbox the chance to learn a little more about the character and his back story.

Whilst it should come as little surprise that Riddick eventually escapes Butcher Bay (or how else would he be in *Pitch Black*?) Starbreeze have spun a twisting story around what could have been a very formulaic plot. With only a start point and the ultimate ending set in stone, much of the tale was left up to the game team and as such even fans of the films won't guess what happens next.

Lars Johansson, Producer at Starbreeze, says the game "ties heavily into the growing *Pitch Black*/*Chronicles of Riddick* universe. Actors from both films are lending their talents for the game. The game itself is told as a prequel to both films - diving deep into the back story of Riddick himself." He goes on to reveal that "the game explores things like how Riddick got his eyes shined and his relationship with the Bounty Hunter Johns."

Indeed, it's Riddick's unique Eye Shine capability (that comes about a third of the way through the game) that is just the start of the game's amazing array of first-time special effects. When the game starts, you're introduced very quickly to how the game wants you to think - whilst effectively a training level awaits before the main game starts (although *Gamestyle* won't reveal the particulars of how and why) this first trip into the game world manages to throw pretty much everything at you in the space of half an hour that you're going to have to deal with for the rest of the 6 hour game. Obviously Starbreeze hold back on most of the best weapons and keep a few surprises even until the dying minutes of the last level itself, the introduction is perfectly formed, and very welcome.

The story proper begins with Riddick's arrival at Butcher Bay - the most notorious prison in the Galaxy. Johansson explains that "Butcher Bay is a Triple-Max correctional facility, and Riddick is sent there for a reason unexplained. The prison itself is divided into three different security ratings."

"On the surface we have the Max facilities, underground is the Double Max, and finally, the "Tower" has the highest security rating in the whole universe - the Triple Max classification. Riddick's one goal is to bust out and escape from this hell hole. It's all about getting out." Indeed. However, getting out isn't that easy and Riddick will eventually need to progress through each classification of security before he finally escapes Butcher Bay...

LIGHTING THE WAY

What does strike you immediately, however, is the sheer amazing quality of the graphics. The first few seconds you get control you'll sit there motionless, assuming it's still FMV, or at least, a processor-intensive cutscene that cannot be controlled (MGS 2, anyone?). This is partly due to the bleeding edge lighting technology used throughout the entire game - everything is bumpmapped, everything is capable of casting shadows and is shaded per pixel. This creates an incredibly solid looking environment, and not only that - all the characters, weapons, pickups and even bullet holes are given the star treatment. Never before has a game looked so lifelike and offered such a gritty, real feel to it.

The game might take place in relatively small areas (there are no Halo style outdoor sections) meaning the game doesn't have to worry too much about large landscapes, but even in condensed jail areas, corridors and exercise yards, the sense of depth is unrivalled. Distance objects and walls are blurry and out of focus, yet remain sharp under close scrutiny. What's most impressive is the constant frame rate - locked at around 30 fps the game seems to scale the resolution in real time a little when there's lots on screen; this might seem an odd way to go about it but it keeps the action going.

The truth is, this way of maintaining the frame rate is pretty much revolutionary. Much has been said of the game's Normal mapping routines (more of that over the page) but even without the apparent high polygon models the game would have still looked amazing.

Throwing every visual trick in the book at a high resolution screen would surely have brought the Xbox to a standstill, so Starbreeze's decision to compensate with the resolution might make the character edges appear slightly blocky and aliased but *Gamestyle* feels it's a fair exchange to keep the game moving along at a nice smooth rate, especially towards the end of the game when you're really under fire.



OUT-DOOMING DOOM

Everyone gasped when they first saw the initial batch of screenshots for id's Doom 3, and rightly so - it looked (and still does look) great. It's major selling point (apart from great real-time lighting) was the use of Normal mapping. Normal mapping effectively gives current generation consoles the visual look of what many in the industry predict to the first batch of next-gen games (on Xbox 2 and PS3) will look like. Obviously, the more polygons a model is built from, the rounder and more realistic it can appear.

Naturally, though, graphics processors can only draw so many polygons on screen per second, and if you're talking about a game running at 30 frames a second, the current crop of game machines can only manage so much per frame. With Normal mapping, the game studios model a fantastically high polygon version of everything in the game (sometimes in the scale of hundreds of times more complicated) then take that model, scanning it in from every angle.

With that scan, which can work out how light reacts with the high res version, the designers wrap it around a much lower resolution model (see images to the right). The GPU can easily throw lots of these low res characters around, but because the lighting and texture engines are using the high resolution scan as reference, the model looks practically as good as the high polygon model does, even at point-blank range. Because of this, everything in Riddick looks like it's shouldn't be possible on this generation of consoles. When Johansson was asked what aspect of the game Starbreeze are most proud of, he said "I'd have to say the visuals. It's just amazing what the super talented artists have done with the technology that our ass kicking programmers have put together."

It's not just talk, Riddick really does look that good. Even on a few of the NPCs that you'll only talk to once, it's clear that a huge amount of effort has been expended to create the believable, tangible environment and atmosphere. Of course, graphics do not make a game, and we'll come to that later, but seeing as Riddick is the pioneer for this style of visuals (with Doom 3 still some months away) it's only fair to give Starbreeze the credit. With all the real-time lighting, shadows and texturing, Riddick is leaps and bounds above everything else on the system, and the ball really is in id's court to see what they can pull off with Doom 3 this Christmas, but they must be disappointed that Chronicles of Riddick has effectively come from nowhere with so little hype to steal the graphics crown for this generation of consoles. Time will tell...



High Resolution (high poly) model

For Riddick, Starbreeze Studios has created a rendering engine that allow for next generation graphics on today's console systems through the use of normal mapping.

Normal mapping begins with the creation of an extremely detailed model with a polygon count in the hundreds of thousands versus 1,500 polygons for a standard in-game model.



In game model (with normal map applied)

The development team then generates a normal map, which is basically a scan that records the way light reflects and responds off the surface of the high-poly model. The normal map can then be applied to a lower polygon in-game model, making it appear much more detailed when in-game.

As a result, all the objects and characters in The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher have incredible depth and detail, giving the player a greater sense of realism and immersion when playing the game.

INTERACT

Riddick can interact with most things with just a tap of the X button. These include switches, doors and elevator buttons. Here, Riddick is overriding the DNA control system, an action that most certainly will make his escape attempt somewhat easier.

THIRD PERSON

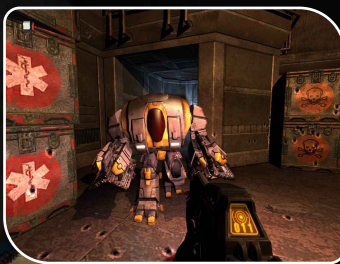
Whenever Riddick uses a ladder, presses a switch, chats to another inmate or uses a health centre the game switches to a real-time third person cutscene camera, showing off the graphics but also cutting the risk of falling from ladders and so on.



THE TORCH

Once Riddick has his Eye Shine ability you'll be able to make a decision to shoot out lights and plunge the surroundings into darkness so you can avoid being seen as easily. Naturally, Riddick can see just as well in the darkness, but beware of light sources once you have your goggles on as even gun flashes can be blinding.

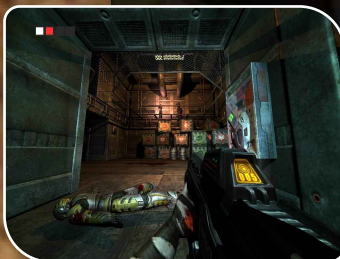
In Chronicles of Riddick, everything can cast shadows, use them to your advantage...



MECH ATTACK

Heavy metal plays a large role in the game - most of the rooms Riddick will visit are mainly industrial, dark and gritty. Not only that, the game contains numerous battles with large mechanised robots (albeit controlled by humans).

Not wanting to spoil any surprises, though, but don't expect a complete lack of rather more organic, xenomorphic creatures in and amongst the prison walls, after all, Butcher Bay is set on an long abandoned planet...



LEVEL DESIGN

Clever, almost Zelda like level design means that you'll often loop back around to a familiar place, having opened a more convenient path back should you get into trouble. This helps to convey a feeling of being part of an existing, workable building structure.

ENEMY AI

The Artificial Intelligence in Riddick varies from character to character, with armoured foot soldiers probably the trickiest to deal with, often hiding behind walls and leaning out to take pot shots. The less-human opponents generally just 'Doom' their way towards you.

AMMO

The only on-screen displays are your health as a series of white boxes, and an icon for whatever weapon you are using when you cycle through them.

Most weaponry requires you to manually check the ammo level on the actual gun.

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PUNCH DRUNK

Of course, with this being a prison, Riddick doesn't start with any weaponry, at all - once in his initial cell the only way out is with his fists, and apart from the odd shard of glass and a couple of tools it's going to be some time before you get hold of some actual guns.

Thankfully, the first-person fighting is handled extremely well, with both triggers being used (along with the left thumbstick) for multiple moves, blocks and even combos and reversals. Much is made of the fighting, there's an entire (but optional) gladiatorial section mid way through the game where you'll face off against increasingly tough opponents using only hand to hand weapons.

This no-projectile enforcing throughout parts of the game also allowed Starbreeze to incorporate a certain amount of stealth to the gameplay mechanics. Even until the very end, Riddick can put away his guns and make use of Splinter Cell-style grabs and chokes from behind, and once crouched in a dark area becomes just as hard to spot as Sam Fisher himself (Riddick's vision tints blue to signify this).

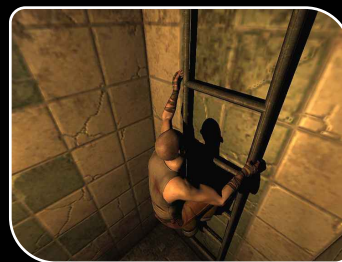
It's impossible to describe why you'll be without guns for a good portion of the game without spoiling the story, but we'll let Johansson describe a particular pivotal moment in the game: "[at one point] Riddick has to break out of a heavily guarded prison area, in order to get to a DNA Sampler machine that will allow him to use the prison assault rifles, which are DNA encoded - and shock anyone who isn't in the system. This will involve fighting and brutalizing other inmates, trading money for prison weapons, killing guards for access codes, sneaking through monitored areas, and eventual firefights with legions of prison guards that sadly don't know they're already dead!"

Indeed, it's this organic development of the story that keeps the player interested, much like it did in Half Life (and Halo, to some extent). The storyline is constantly changing and adapting to the actions you take, and although the game is actually quite linear (with only minor junctions at set points that eventually end up back together anyway) it never really feels that way. Repeated play will highlight this fact a little more, given that all your choices remain the same no matter which way you choose to speak with fellow prisoners and guards, but given the strict storyline-driven experience that can be forgiven. The game drives you along towards your ultimate goal, surprising and teasing you right until the very end.

Helping immerse the player is some of the finest voice acting Gamestyle has ever heard. Although some may find Diesel's voice a monotonous and dull one, he delivers the lines in the game with authority and conveys a real sense that he's the main threat in the prison. Xzibit also plays the part of Riddick's initial nemesis convincingly enough, and we'll no doubt be hearing from him again in future titles.

All the lines in the game are spoken in full (along with optional subtitles) and there's plenty of background chatter, radio communications and the typical computer voices. Where the player has a choice of what to say next, you get a Monkey Island style selection list to pick from. It's worth mentioning that there's a fair amount of adult language throughout, but without it the game wouldn't have sounded half as authentic, given the setting and the environment the player finds himself in.

Musically the game isn't quite as strong - whilst the sound effects are great, from slashing, punching and some effective gun sounds, the background sound track suffers a little from repetition and is often lost amongst the chaos of a hectic battle. There's nothing particularly wrong with it, it's just not that strong emotionally.



Sadly, there's absolutely no multiplayer features within the game at all, and the only Xbox Live hook is the Friends section so that people can spot if you're online whilst you're playing the game.

Gamestyle can't see how the story (or indeed, the graphics engine) would have supported a co-operative mode but it would have been nice to have some kind of multiplayer side stories like EA did with Everything or Nothing. However, Gamestyle is aware that the game had to be released early enough to tie in with the film so can understand Starbreeze releasing the game as is.





THE VERDICT

So, with stellar graphics, convincing sound and intuitive controls, surely the game's a winner? Well, nearly. The lack of replay is one thing, but how does the first time through actually hold up?

The Chronicles of Riddick plays out very much like an extended movie. It's not the longest game, taking Gamestyle around 6 hours to fully complete, although that was neglecting a couple of the optional side quests, but whilst it lasts the experience is mostly good. The learning curve isn't particularly sloped, though; the later levels are actually somewhat easier than the earlier ones, with the last two or three levels being especially simplistic and not as satisfying as Gamestyle would have liked.

In contrast, there's a vast variety of levels and although most FPS veterans will have seen every trick Starbreeze pull during the game, there's one or two little touches towards the latter stages that really show innovation and a genuine love for the game, especially the way Riddick finds himself back without his arsenal of weaponry again and again, making the player shift tactics and gameplay styles on the fly.

Sadly, the most destructive weaponry is kept until the very end, and although the option to use the toughest enemies totally defenseless against you. One weapon in particular (that's commonplace in most FPS) can only be used four or five times, and isn't nearly as destructive as we're used to.

However, it's these quirky differences that highlight just how good Riddick can be in places - it constantly requires you to think on your feet and adapt as everything around you changes. There's a huge variety here, and we just hope that you'll feel confident enough to give it a try. It's a defining moment in terms of visuals - no other game looks nearly as good in terms of the raw special effects being thrown around, and the look probably won't be matched until Doom 3 and Halo 2 - it's just a shame that we have to wait for the PAL version which is still some weeks away.

If you're prepared to forgive the lack of multiplayer and just take the game for what it is - a solid, story based single player adventure that fits nicely alongside Pitch Black and the new Riddick film - you won't be disappointed. If you're a sucker for eye candy then this is the ultimate show off game - not quite the Xbox killer app, but definitely it's graphical showcase. **AC**

Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay

Developer:
Starbreeze

Publisher:
Vivendi Universal

Platform:
Xbox

Rating:
M (Mature)

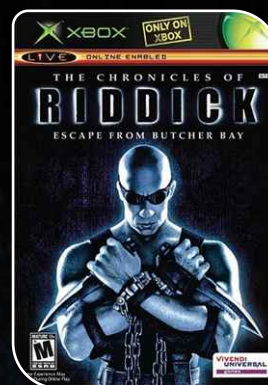
Version reviewed:
NTSC (North American)

Online play:
Friends list, possible future DLC

In Brief:

Graphically incredible prequel FPS to Pitch Black movie, with excellent voice acting throughout. Well paced and with a decent storyline, but just a little too linear for repeated play. No multiplayer or online play also limits replay, although collecting smokes unlocks concept art and movie bonuses.

Gamestyle score: 8 / 10



"Vin Diesel's involvement has been phenomenal, and the cooperation and support of the Film Studio has been just as spectacular. The benefit that the license has brought is that it's allowed us to create more than just a game, but a piece of a larger puzzle - and a piece of a mythology that we're very excited about. We believe people will really love The Chronicles of Riddick, and we're very happy to be a part of that universe."

Lars Johansson - Producer - Starbreeze

Written and produced by Alex Carroll for Gamestyle.net. Thanks to Kat at Vivendi Universal and Gamespress.com for the invaluable assets and assistance. Stay tuned to Gamestyle.net for the full Chronicles of Riddick review online

GSO Issue 8 / coming soon

Photo Credit: Joseph Lederer/Universal Studios