

# **BLADE RUNNER**

Nearly 20 years after the debut of Blade Runner the movie, this cyberpunk drama can still draw a mean crowd with its film-noir styling and artful depiction of a futuristic L.A. Westwood entered the picture hoping to capture the richly detailed environments and let the player run loose in an adventure more fantastic than any gamer had experienced...and they did.

## ***OF RUNNERS AND REFS***

One of the most interesting elements of the game is its close relation to the movie. Both game and movie are set in the exact place and time and the game is played as Blade Runner Detective McCoy of the same LAPD unit as Deckard. Familiar faces from the movie continue to be seen in the adventure, as will be discussed shortly. However, you, enter the game to replace Holden who, as is seen in the movie, has just been shot while performing a Voigt Kampff test on a replicant. You begin by entering a world that has strong ties to the movie, but is not limited to the same linearity. The great benefit from absorbing the detail of the movie into the game is that you are permitted to explore and experience areas that the movie only glanced over. For example, the game begins with you investigating a case of animal murder. As it turns out, most real animals have long been extinct in the game's world, and there are industries churning out artificial animals, beyond just human replicants (which also explains Tyrell's Owl in the movie).

## ***HOT YOUR STANDARD SKIN JOBS***

Generally speaking, your job is to track down the replicants who have illegally landed on earth and are causing widespread havoc. These replicants are after some DNA evidence that they hope to use in lengthening their short four-year lifespan. With the scrolling text introduction, you start the game knowing about the Nexus 6 replicants and discover that you are a Blade Runner- whose purpose is to "retire" earth-based replicants. The "ending" is a great tribute to the movie. Just like in the movie (director's cut), where you never really know if Deckard is a replicant or not, the game's ending leaves you to wonder by offering 13 possible endings. By offering multiple endings that can be reached in a multiplicity of ways, Blade Runner ensures greater replay value. This author has been able to personally confirm 7 of the 13 endings. In classic adventure style, you travel from one rich environment to another, interviewing people, making contacts and collecting evidence. You have numerous tools at your disposal including: your Police Spinner (hovercar), ESPER (for analyzing crime-scene photographs and video), Voigt-Kampff (for detecting replicants), KIA (your PDA that holds all your clues, notes and ammunition) and of course your firearm. An interesting feature of the game, is that some of the forks in the plot line are decided randomly before the game starts, ensuring even greater variation in the game play process.

## **RETIREMENT BONUSES**

All game play is point and click and is fairly intuitive. You always see you character in front of you, viewing him from a fixed camera position in any given scene. To move around, you simply click once to walk where you want and click again to run to that location. Usable objects are denoted by a green cursor and, when clicked, are briefly magnified for the player to view and then stored in your PDA-like KIA database (more on that later). The game also implements a very sensical save functionality: save whenever you choose. The adventure in Blade Runner is random and challenging to the point that the mediocre challenge of save points becomes irrelevant. Moreover, in replaying the game you'll often find yourself using the save feature to manipulate the plot to go down another fork, by reloading the game and playing until you achieve the desired result.

Conversations are a very interesting and well-crafted part of the Blade Runner interface. First off, you can choose from the option menu what demeanor your character will present automatically, or you can choose custom to always have a full selection of conversation topics. When speaking to another character, if there are multiple dialogue options, or if you have chosen the custom demeanor, you will be presented with a small dialog box with multiple topics. Selecting one causes McCoy to continue the conversation with pre-scripted dialogue. Moreover, these conversations are situational as they can change depending on the numerous random events that have occurred and the results of the player's efforts thus far. With this type of variable dialogue the game changes every time it is played.

A game as immersive as Blade Runner would not be complete without a gamut of technological tools that aide you in your quest. These tools are a big part of the game play. First, there is your Knowledge Integration Assistant (KIA) which is essentially your clue and suspect database. This sophisticated device helps you manage, sort and search all the clues you have found and all the conversations you have had in a fashion that aides in meaningful interpretation. Moreover, this data is also updated from time to time by the work of fellow Blade Runners. The second tool is probably the most interesting, game-play wise, in the game: the ESPER image analyzer. This tool allows you to select areas of a photograph and zoom in on them. With careful and thorough use, you can even get it to extrapolate images that are not immediately visible. For example, one of the first photos in the game is a still from a video camera inside Runcitter's animal shop. Surprisingly, you use this still to acquire the license plate and model of a car just barely visible behind the open door by rotating the scene 20 degrees. Finally, there is the Voigt Kampff Empathy Judgement Machine. As any Blade Runner junkie will tell you, this is how you "sniff out a skin job". Basically you use this tool on a non-player character and ask a series of emotion exposing questions, all the while watching the needles on the left side of the device. When you have a positive match, human or not, the test will end. This can be invaluable in making sure you never accidentally retire a real human being.

## **GRUNGE AND POLICE SPINNERS**

According to Westwood, the goal in making Blade Runner was to create "an experience virtually identical to being in a movie. [By] creating the most technologically advanced video game in history." Did they achieve their goal? Look at their implementation and decide for yourself.

Start with the simple fact that the game has 1600 clues and 6800 lines of dialogue. Then add in the virtual actors that bring life to the cinematic goal. The game includes 70 AI controlled characters, including new ones not directly from the movie. Each NPC was painstakingly motion captured by the actual actor portrayed and then his movements were combined with 3D scans of him. Finally their voices were recorded separately and dubbed over resulting in a very convincing digital persona. In fact, this is the reason that Rachael looks so much like Sean Young from the Blade Runner movie- because it is Sean Young! Sean Young (as Rachael), James Hong (as Chew), Joe Turkel (as Tyrell), William Sanderson (as J.F. Sebastian) and Brian James (Leon, the Rep that shot Holden) all appear in the game. Most notably absent was Harrison Ford as Deckard, who apparently still hates the Blade Runner "falling in love with a toaster" deal.

While on the subject of AI, it is fascinating to observe the randomness of character's property of being replicants and the fact that every single character you meet has his own AI and own agenda. For example, if you miss a clue, sometimes an AI character will pick it up after you- and that may not always be beneficial.

Visually the game aims to wow as much as the movie. According to executive producer Louis Castle, the engine can render millions of polygons on the fly by taking short-cuts which allow it to re-render only those polygons that move as the character's perspective changes. This is how they manage to get such a rich game to run on a Windows 95 system with a Pentium 90, 16 MB of RAM and no 3D hardware acceleration. Scenes are beautifully rendered, with enhancements brought about by the moving and attenuated lights, steam, volumetric fog, and shadows. All those cinematic details which brought so much ambience to the movie are found in the game. In fact, many of the environments come from the movie, The Bradbury, Chinatown, the Tyrell Building, The Yukon, DNA Row, etc. are all places you get to visit as McCoy. The technology definitely captures the ambience of the grungy, neon-lit, rainy LA of 2019. All of the game's immersive, hi-res artwork is inspired by industrial designer Sid Mead- the futurist who worked on 2010, Star Trek and of course the Blade Runner movie.

The movie is often remembered for its highly "digital" soundtrack and the game also makes tribute to this by featuring 90 minutes of music digitally remastered and recomposed from the original by multimedia superstar Frank Klepacki. Moreover, many of the in-game sounds, like gunshots, are sampled directly from the movie and sound great.

## **IN A SEA OF KIPPLE**

The game itself is very well designed. Taking the time to learn the ins and outs of the tools at your disposal really makes the game. For example, the KIA takes a little time to learn, but when used correctly it will always get you unstuck by giving you direction. Sometimes it seems that putting a KIA into other adventure games would help the player so

much as to make the game trivial. This is an obvious impediment to players who would rather just rush through the interactions and clue collection- skipping analysis wherever possible. A big part of the immersion of the game comes from the fact that there is a rich, detailed world around you and those details are often only brought to light through the use of your in-game tools.

The interface, described earlier, is a testament to simplicity. Its point and click model allows new players to quickly grasp the game without having to memorize complex keystroke combinations all the while allowing the player to do what he needs to with little restriction from the interface. The only downside to this design, is that sometimes you find yourself mouse-hunting- that is moving the cursor over every area of the screen until it turn green indicating that you've found a usable object. Overall the game design is excellent, boasting high replay value, non-trivial, balanced play and a low learning curve.

### ***DREAMS OF AN OFFWORLD EXPERIENCE***

For a game that has been described by other reviewers as "A leap in technology" (PC Gamer) and "Gorgeous." (Computer Games Online) and has received the Academy of Interactive Arts and Science's 1998 Best Adventure Game of the Year award, there is no question that Blade Runner has left its mark. Much like what the movie Blade Runner did for establishing the cyberpunk genre, the game has left a new hallmark for which coming adventure games will be hard pressed to meet.

Moreover, Blade Runner is one of the few games following a hit movie that actually deserves to bear the name of the movie. Clearly Westwood and the Blade Runner partnership took every measure to be certain that the game would live up to the expectations of the movie's followers.

With its rare balance between hardware requirements and graphical detail Blade Runner shows that a game can be consistent, beautiful and playable. It is really the balance of all the game's elements that make it so successful, it never feels like eye-candy graphics were added to mask poor game-play, or that the game follows a strict, limiting script because of development time constraints. The point of equilibrant quality is one that should be transferred to any and all genres of video games.

#### ***GAME PUBLICATION FACT SHEET***

- Developed and published by Westwood Studios in November 1997.
- In collaboration with the Blade Runner Partnership.
- From the Blade Runner Partnership:
  - Executive Producers: Bud Yorkin, Jerry Perenchino
  - Supervising Producer: Josh Gutfreund
- From Westwood Studios:
  - Executive Producer, Art Director: Louis Castle
  - Producer: Donny Blank

Full credits available at:

<http://westwood.ea.com/games/bladerunner/beh/html/beh01w.html>