

Musings on the Red Dead Redemption ending

Posted At : 19 August 2010 23:03 | Posted By : Shaun McCran

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Anyone who knows me will tell you I'm an avid gamer, I love gaming, I get properly involved in the story, the setting and the characters. The latest offering from Rockstar is a very fine example of modern storytelling, it is also a very good example of where the modern games industry is in comparison to the other major media channels (Books, film and TV).

I've read a few negative reviews of the last section of this game, and having just finished it I thought I'd document my spin on it, be warned though, if you haven't finished Red Dead Redemption this article may spoil some elements of it for you.

In this game there are essentially two endings. The first ending is the conclusion to the overriding story arc where you are pressured into helping the government into catching your old gang leaders. This is around 90% of the game time, it is within this story that you will form your attachment to the main character John Marston.

The second story line is much shorter, and really concentrates on a short period of time where you can play the family man. You teach your son, Jack, some cowboy skills, you learn more about your wife, and become a rancher. It is in this last section that you become acquainted with the younger Marston, Jack.

Rockstar have created a fantastic atmosphere in this sequence of 2-3 hours of game play. The script is slightly different in writing and focus, the language used between characters all points towards an impending peril, that is never spoken out aloud, but is ever more present the closer you get to it. It is very enjoyable gameplay, but there is a distinctly uneasy atmosphere lurking in the background.

Events play out with John being ambushed by the government and sacrificing himself for his family. People have expressed the idea that he could have fought off all the government forces and escaped. I think they are missing the point of the 'Redemption' in the title, and the very tangible 'Western' flavour of the game. In the Western setting no deed goes unpunished. Despite his best efforts John Marston's criminal past was going to catch up with him, in the way he accepts it and sacrifices himself he allows his family to escape, giving his son the future he wanted him to have.

Unlike other media where you are fed the background of a character, and the story just plays out without your involvement, in games you are actually creating that history, and shaping the future of the game, and story, with your actions. This may sound obvious, but it is the fundamental principle as to why people feel cheated with John's death in a cut scene.

It is difficult to accept the enforced change from a character that you have invested hours in, and actually shaped the world around you with. It is also difficult to accept the jarring change to Jack, a character you know little about, and essentially you are taking over at the end of the entire story arc.

Rockstar have crafted a fantastic story with Red Dead Redemption. It really shows how well the games industry has matured, and easily rivals the film industry in terms of story-telling and emotional draw. You are genuinely drawn into the story, and when John dies it feels like the violent and visceral event that it is shown as.

I defy anyone to not feel genuine sadness when he dies, and a slightly surprised and indeed happy to see the story continue with his son.