

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Red Dead Redemption

Platform: XBOX 360, PlayStation 3

Genre: Action-Adventure, Western

Release Date: May 18, 2010

Developer: Rockstar San Diego, Rockstar North

Publisher: Rockstar Games

Game Writers: Dan Houser, Michael Unsworth, Christian Cantamessa

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Overview

Set in 1911, *Red Dead Redemption* follows the retired outlaw John Marston as he hunts down members of his old gang in order to free his wife and son from the hold of a corrupt agent of the federal government.

Characters

As a sandbox game, there is a vast pool of characters for the player to meet and interact with in *Red Dead Redemption*. The ones listed below are the core personalities of the narrative that drive every beat of the plot in some small way.

- **John Marston** – The player avatar; John was an outlaw in the traditional “wild west” sense. After developing a sense of morality, he abandons that lifestyle and settles down on a farm with his wife Abigail. The need to have the calm, frontier life that seems to elude him is what drives John. His actions in *Red Dead Redemption* are barbaric, especially when juxtaposed with his reasons for committing those actions.
- **Edgar Ross** – The corrupt federal agent that separates John from his family and uses him as a bounty hunter. Edgar represents the decline of the western frontier beneath the weight of greed and law.
- **Jack Marston** - While not a major character until the game’s final act, John’s son Jack becomes the embodiment of the western struggle between peace and aggression. He becomes the player avatar after the death of John towards the end of the story.

Breakdown

In order to see his family again, John Marston must return to the barbaric life he left behind and capture or kill members of his former gang. Along the way, he meets a broad spectrum of personalities that either help or hinder his overall quest. Early on, it is obvious that Marston laments reliving the lifestyle he abandoned years before. He

expresses remorse for all of the killing, even though the men that fall beneath his bullets are “evil”. As the body count rises, the brash, cocky gunslinger begins to reemerge, a subtle shift that John himself realizes. It becomes painfully obvious that the more he fights to recapture his humanity, the more he must sacrifice. In the end, Marston’s dream for a tranquil frontier life goes unrealized. After returning to his family, Edgar Ross sends soldiers to kill the Marston family and John sacrifices himself in order to save his wife and son. It almost feels that with his death, the old ways of the west also fade away.

Inherent within the open-world, sandbox style of game is the challenge of pacing. If John is in such a hurry to return to his family, then why does he spend so much time doing side jobs or playing poker? Of course, this is to give the player freedom to explore and live within the world as they choose to. Unfortunately, *Red Dead Redemption* does suffer because of the lack of urgency.

The game also relies on John’s motivation to be with his family too much in the first act. Every action seems to be counter to John’s manner of speech and nature, almost to an unbelievable point. Because of this, the game allows him to be more two-dimensional than the side characters surrounding John. On the opposite side, when John reaches Mexico it feels like the game puts his family on the back burner. Yes, his actions stem from his orders, but it feels like John becomes less of the unwilling participant and more of the stereotypical outlaw.

Strongest Element

The narrative really hits its peak with the contrast between John and his son, Jack. Both men represent different ideals of the American west: vengeance and peace. John comes from the “eye for an eye” era of the frontier while Jack is from a more peaceful generation and background. What *Red Dead Redemption* does best is portray the shift of both characters to the other’s way of life. John, a product of a barbaric lifestyle begins to realize that only monsters commit monstrous acts of aggression. That realization is the catalyst for a change in desires. Meanwhile, the brutal execution of John leads Jack to take up the mantle of vengeance and, in many ways, become the man his father was. The sublime way that this element plays out is summed up in the achievement the player receives for killing Edgar Ross as Jack Marston: **Nature or Nurture**.

Unsuccessful Element

While there are some characters in *Red Dead Redemption* that come across hollow or some missions that seem counter to John’s character, the greatest failure of the narrative comes from its most successful element. After spending an entire game bringing up the issue of morality and losing one’s humanity to gain their freedom, the final, optional mission in the game seems counter to the message. Players are not given the chance to subdue Edgar Ross or to let him live. Sure, the player can simply not do the mission, but that would come across as unfulfilling. In a game where the choices a man makes are the forefront of every narrative moment, a choice after confronting the man responsible for the death of your father would have made the ending more rewarding.

Highlight

Staying with the elements mentioned above, the highlight in the story is right before Ross' soldiers storm the Marston's stead. Jack and John share a moment of awkward small talk in which they discuss tools, guns, and flying machines. It is obvious that they have nothing in common except for their mutual love of one another. Jack asks his father if there is anything John does not like to shoot, and John replies that if he ever finds something Jack can "put it in one of them books you read". In a game filled with water cooler moments and explosive set pieces, this conversation is where the characters seem to be the most realistic and identifiable.

Critical Reception

IGN.com writer Eric Brudvig gave *Red Dead Redemption* a 9.7/10. Though he criticized John as being too "divorced from the action" in the early part of the game, Brudvig goes on to say that the narrative "builds towards a shattering climax that is amongst the best I've ever seen in a videogame." Matt Bertz with Game Informer gave the game a 9.5. He liked how the game moved quickly in the first part, but was critical of the pace in Mexico. To him, it seemed the Mexican missions spent too long setting up the civil unrest and would have been better suited getting to the revolution faster. However, Bertz did commend the game for having an ending that "strays from traditional storytelling techniques".

Lessons

- **Give the players meaningful choices.**
As stated above, giving the players choices that effect the development of the character's personality should be paramount in an epic narrative. If Jack had been able to walk away, could he have earned the life his father so desperately sought? Choice is especially important in this instance because the game has delivered excellent context and emotional weight to scenario.
- **The small moments set up the big moments.**
Never skimp on the small conversations characters have. The obvious affection John has for his family make the quiet moment before he willfully walks into his own death so much more poignant.
- **No character stays the same.**
Many games feature protagonists that end the game largely as they began. While there might be a superficial change, it is important that characters evolve organically, as John and Jack do.
- **Set up player expectations and then challenge them.**
In a game about vengeance, it is obvious when Jack meets Edgar Ross by the river that game is driving towards the death of an antagonist at the expense of the protagonist's soul. Writers and designers should see what expectations that are creating through the story and gameplay, and turn it around at the right moment to create a resonance with the player.

Summation

While *Red Dead Redemption* is not without its flaws, the narrative delivers in ways that many games do not. The player can easily forget that the characters on screen are just lines of code delivering pre-programmed dialogue. The immersion in the game depends not only on the world, but also on the characters and their convictions. John Marston takes many lives as he struggles to regain what makes him human, but it is ultimately his own life that he must spend to capture that dream. This type of character view is prevalent throughout the game, and as such it is a great study of where narrative can go: the creators let the characters dictate the action, and not the other way around.

Without forcing the evolution of the characters, players buy-in to the experience and allow themselves to remove emergent facets from the game and focus only on what is going on in game. This is how narrative in video games can surpass narrative in any other form. By allowing the player to act as a catalyst for the growth of the character, video games offer a wealth of emotional depth that is unparalleled in any other medium. *Red Dead Redemption* makes great strides towards a brave new world of video game storytelling.