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Holy balls this game is good. I’ve heard form multiple friends that it is really, really good but I stubbornly kept it on my backlog for some months after release. But man, it sure was good. A prime example for haters who think videogames are bad to see how far the medium has come, and how it can bring forth something so beautiful and emotionally moving. I’ll avoid spoilers but I nearly cried a bit at some point. You need to play this shit right now if you haven’t. Rockstar did it again. What went so right?

1

It’s been nearly about 10 years since Red dead Redemption came out on the PS3 & Xbox 360. A Rockstar game in a western setting. Basically just GTA but with cowboys. And if beforehand someone would’ve told me that “just GTA with cowboys” would turn out so well, I probably wouldn’t have believed it. The prime concern I had beforehand was that great part of what makes GTA so great is the feeling of playing out this story in this living city. How would this turn out in the rural early 1900’s America, which per definition is much more spacious and empty? Pretty damn great, as it looked beautiful, was filled with huntable animals and most of all the random encounters and various settlements and people you came across kept it interesting.

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And Red Dead Redemption 2 builds onto exactly those strengths very well. The world looks absolutely beautiful. The game starts off in a snowy region after some outlaw stuff the main character’s gang has been doing went horribly wrong. I remember being amazed at just how good the horse tracks in the snow look. The PS4 gen has had some fine looking games but this is a whole new level. The devs make good use of this by presenting the cutscenes and horse riding conversations with great looking cinematic views. The early game allows you to get used to things, as you go hunting a bit, have your first gunfights and ride around on your horse. Life as an outlaw with your gang. Especially a bit later in the game I loved this addition since the first game, it felt good to upgrade tents and stash money for the gang in your camp. There’s even celebrations after certain key missions with drinks and music around a campfire.

2

And this is the best part of the game, really. I mean the gameplay is good, but if the same gameplay would be slapped on some generic action game it wouldn’t be that great. This game is just magic. It gets the best after you’ve had the mandatory “let’s introduce this game mechanic this way” missions, and when you get involved enough with all the characters to know who is who and learn their traits and backstories. You will grow attached to them (and especially the main character Arthur). And caring is important. The game basically revolves around core issues of what freedom and humanity mean. In a world without safety and where survival is something you can’t depend on if you don’t make it happen yourself, how do you navigate the line between respecting human life and others, but making sure you get yours? There’s good people, and plenty of bad ones too. The beauty of the world and the atmospheric storytelling will take you through highs and lows. Sometimes you’ll feel the heartwarming satisfaction of helping a stranger out, sometimes the agonizing feeling of unfairness when someone who’s a good person gets robbed or worse by some sneaky bastard. That’s the wild west. And even though the game allows you to be as good or as bad as you want to be, it’s all about balancing out doing good and doing good for yourself. How far would you go in these situations?

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Just one more score. The charismatic Dutch Van der Linde is a man who (especially for wild west standards) seems bright and educated, always reading and always has a plan. He doesn’t always have a good plan, but he always has a plan. The first time you set up camp somewhere and see all the gang members around and you hear Dutch speaking politics you’ ll find yourself in the true wild west. The last period before the modern nation state. And in that time people, like Dutch and his gang members still asked questions which since then have been predetermined, but in todays world with all the available individual-empowering tech should become more relevant again. Why should everyone always say goodbye to a large portion of their resources to have other people decide what needs to be done with them. Especially if these are not always the brightest and best people the world has? And even if one would instantly agree with the idea that individuals contributing resources for the good of a larger group, who says these people are either integer or smart enough to truly do that? Dutch basically leads his gang into a “truly free”, and one might say “ truly American” life style of making your own path with your own community. But small problems pile become big problems and the one big success they need to get out of the game gets further and further away.

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And the best thing about this game is the way it lets you think about humanity. The world is not only alive because so much different things happen, but also because the people are like real people (well at least any character of significance for the story). The gang members are all human, and besides the mandatory story cutscenes it really pays off to see the interactions in the camp to really get to know them. The first RDR game doesn’t hide the fact that Dutch kinda lost it at some point, and seeing the painful decline of a great man and the cowboy dream lifestyle is one the best tragedies I’ve ever seen. The main character Arthur is also struggling with his place in the world in a very relatable way. I won’t spoil anything, but for those who know what I mean when I quote “I’m afraid”… teared me up, man. You can feel the pain in being forced to let go of ideas he once truly believed in, at a time that one civilization (the one you belong in) seems to just disappear. A crash of worlds. And then gone with the wind.

3

There is very little to be critical about in this game. I have encountered a few buggy situation here and there, like a wagon or horse getting stuck in a fence of characters taking a very strange posture during conversation, but considering my playtime and the scope and complexity of the game this is noting really noteworthy. Occasionally I have been frustrated when the cover mechanic worked out in a silly way, for example when the character ends up taking cover on the wrong side of a rock or tree and thus taking full fire, but again this didn’t happen often and it is what you find when you are really searching for flaws.

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Some of the criticism I have seen on the internet is something along the lines of “every mission is the same, it’s always just ride a horse somewhere and shoot some guys”. But in my opinion that’s kinda stupid. I mean technically it’s not completely untrue but yeah any game follows the broad formula of do stuff that fits with your character and his role in his world until you win the game so the game can’t really be blamed. Besides, there’s also some home improvement & fishing missions as well. Especially if you count all the non-mandatory content & the easter eggs there’s A LOT to do in this game. Even very late in the game I still got rattled by surprise ambushes, and once even encountered some naked wolf man. I haven’t even touched the multiplayer by the way, but form what I’ve seen it’s pretty decent as well. But based on just the single player mode, it’s just amazing.

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Easily game of the decade. After finishing it I recognized this rare feeling of being sad you just finished a great game magnified by the fear of knowing it will probably be a really long time until you play something this good again. The insane graphics, polish & detail, a lively world with secrets, great scenery and character development, good gunfights and character customization, it’s all there. Rockstar proved again they’re just the best of the best. Arthur’s story is one that’s still with me months after completing it. The way this game portrays the wild west is just beyond great. It’s like think what a really good movie can do, and than multiply that by 100. Unless you absolutely hate any form of visual media you need to play this shit.

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