

Red Dead Redemption:

Adventure in the Old West with Old Friends

for PS 3 and Xbox 360

This is a great game, in my personal opinion a top 50 game of all time. It scores a 95 on metacritic.com, which is a great source for game reviews (movies, music, and TV too). If you don't already own Red Dead Redemption and you have an Xbox 360 or PS3, trust me, get it.

The world of Red Dead Redemption is set in the old west in 1911, and it is the best example of a 'sandbox' game that I've seen to date. By "sandbox" I mean the game presents an open world for the player to freely travel and explore. And no matter where you go, there is always something to do. Rockstar spent 100 million on their new franchise title so there really aren't any gaps or dead spaces. Of course you can also choose to follow the main story of the game, which is for me one of the best written stories about the Old West from *any* medium. The characters are engaging, the graphics fantastic, and the missions well paced. Whether you choose to follow the main story or simply explore, the game is so well crafted that you can be assured of a satisfying experience.

What makes Red Dead special to me are the limitless varieties of individual and group narratives that the game allows for. Each time you play you create and participate a new narrative, one that has never been played out quite the same way before. To illustrate, I co-opted two of my friends to play the game with me. In this case we were all together in one room (this can be played online together as well). We selected the multiplayer "Free Roam" mode, which is closest version of the game to the old west sandbox I described earlier. I observed and took notes as they played and narrated. When playing together we have adopted a method whereby one of us plays, and the others watch. When we die we pass the controller. And so, without further ado, I bring you the old west adventures of Edd and Adam.

First up, Mr. Adam Huckle. Adam is the least experienced player among us. For his part he brings great passion and emotion to the game, and he is really great to play with. As he jumped on his horse and began riding he turned to me and explained "Since I'm such a goodie-goodie in my everyday life, I like to get into the game and shoot people willie-nillie." True to form he rides into town, gun blazing. It doesn't take long before the local Sheriff takes him down.

Next up, Dr. Edward Schneider, who explains his play style as a “rule defier and experimenter.” He explains that he likes to test the limits of the game engine. For example, “If a cowboy is shot while riding a horse at full speed, will he fall off realistically? Will the horse act appropriately and get spooked? Does he cowboy fall the same way every time, or are they actually simulating physics?” {answer: yes, yes, and yes} Edd is a little more experienced, and realizes the repercussions of gunplay in town, so he rides out to an isolated gang hideout, a place where the long hand of the law doesn’t reach. After taking out a couple of the guards, he approaches the front gate and turns to me to explain “This is a great mission to do at night because there are lanterns all over the place.” What he is describing is one of the hundreds of small details that were added to the game. In this case it is the ability to shoot the lanterns and create small fires, a great tactical tool in the game, but only available at night. After clearing the exterior guard he enters through the front gate. He is shot dead by one of the gang members and passes the controller back to Adam. His character respawns just outside the gates.

Adam is very cautious in his approach, and he waits outside the front gate to see if any gang members wander toward him. They don’t, and he is forced to walk inside. The bandits are waiting in ambush for him and he is quickly surrounded. After a brief gun battle he is getting shot up and about to die. In a move of desperation he runs through a door into a small house. He then exits through the back door, safe, for now. He pauses to explain “I’m still not that great with my aim.” From behind the building he starts targeting bandits and working his way around the hideout through the back alleys. He then turns a corner to be confronted by a bandit hiding behind a crate and gets shot, the screen goes red, the music picks up to a frantic pace, and Adam panics. He starts running, dare I say “willie-nillie” toward the back gate. He makes it to the gate and then is shot in the back by the bandit behind the crate, dead. The character respawns outside the hideout and Edd takes up the controller.

Edd approaches the front gate and peaks out from around the entrance. In a move that shows his experience, he has narrowed his potential enemies to those visible through the gate. This creates a ‘fish-in-a-barrel’ scenario. After taking out the bandits he can see, he walks in the front gate and heads to the back of the buildings. He walks slowly, ducking all of the way, with an effort to explain and show Adam how to survive. After taking out multiple enemies he pokes his head out from around a wall and gets shot by a waiting bandit. Rather than panic, he uses the puff of smoke from the gunshot to locate the bandit on the roof and kills him. Having thinned the enemy ranks, he then proceeds to go on a wild rampage, taking out bandit after bandit. Adam, watching, reads the mini-radar and tells Edd that there are seven enemies left. Six, then five, and finally he clears the hideout, only to have a wave of reinforcements approach from the north. This new wave is significantly harder than the last, and Edd and Adam get killed over and over by enemies hurling Molotov cocktails at them.

At this point I ask if I can join in. If I had to explain my take on games, I generally view the game as an interaction with the developers. I really appreciate everything that they put into the game, and I love to explore and interact with their design. From my point of view, I figure the developers made this wave tougher, and programmed a couple of bandits to run around the *outside* of the hideout, hurling the fire bottles inside at me. So I make a break for the gates and narrowly make it outside. I run around the outside, searching for the prickly enemy. Half way around I find him and take him out, picking up his fire bottles. I then locate a second enemy with fire bottles, this time inside the compound. I make a suicidal run to take him out, managing to do so, just as I am killed by another bandit. Adam comments, "This is literally like watching a movie." My turn is over, and by taking out the tough enemies I've balanced the odds for Adam and Edd to finish the mission.

As Adam picks up the action I notice that his targeting is off. I explain to him how to target, and explain how the developers programmed the game so that if your targeting reticule is near an enemy when you raise your gun, it will center on the enemy. He practices this new technique, and before long he is taking out bandit after bandit. As I watch him improve, I can't help but be astonished at a sequence where he uses his new targeting technique to take out an enemy on a porch from 100 feet away. One shot, the enemy staggers. Two shots, he staggers sideways, hits a wall and tries to straighten himself, then bang, bang, bang, three more shots and he staggers back into a wall and slumps dead in a fantastic cinematic sequence. Adam is right, this is like watching a movie, although better in my opinion because we are writing the script as we go.

Moments later Adam guns down the final bandit and the level is clear. He was sitting when he first started playing, but he finishes playing standing up. He then jumps into the air, raising his hands over his head and exalting an emphatic "yes!" We then watch as his character levels up and more features of the game become available to him. I should note that Red Dead has included a generous and robust RPG in their multiplayer mode, in my opinion making the game truly complete.

With our old west sandbox adventure script played out the conversation moved on easily to our 'real' lives.