Watch Dogs Extra Points

ALTERNATE BEGINNING

What is that draws me back to Watch Dogs, back to a game so ostensibly compromised? Well, it's a shame to undermine the admirable will of the internet towards redemption arcs, calling just about anything underrated - but the answer isn't that it was secretly a masterpiece the whole time. Something overlooked. Something we all missed.

Still, it's natural to think of Watch Dogs differently over a decade since release. Disappointment is a short lived pain - and no one now expects this game to set the standard for the next generation of gaming, or to compete with GTA V, or to look that good. Today, at last, Watch Dogs is expected to be nothing else but what it is. Well, the results of my latest playthrough are in. And what it is, is... average. But there are two kinds of average. There's the boring kind - where the game is average because every part of the game is average, or the fun kind, where "average" is the mean of higher peaks and lower lows - where there's good that's actually good, and bad, which as oppose to average at least elicits an emotional response - with the unique blend of both becoming an essential part of the game's character. Watch Dogs is that kind of average. The kind people remember, and talk about, a decade hence, while a thousand other dull games are forgotten by the day. And it's that distance between the best of Watch Dogs and the worst of it, that stood out to be the most on my latest trip to Chicago.

In a gaming landscape dominated by formulaic side content, Digital Trips are genuinely inventive - dreams sold as drugs to Aiden, where different aspects of his personality are exteriorised in the form of atmosphere, and made interactive as play - allowing the audience to explore, understand, and feel these parts of his mind, with a depth and a success never reached in the story, or the surface world.

Madness is a rampage - a running down of demons to a raging synthwave beat. The use of Christian imagery - Chicago as hell, your victims as demons, your pursuers as aligned with Satan, speaks to Aiden's belief in the moral righteousness of his cause and particularly of his use of violence. It's the thought police who want to stop us - as though, those who don't see it like him, are sheep, the controlled, the complicit. But the thing is, it also tells us that he's not sure about all that. The demons are notably helpless. This is a slaughter. And we're egged on throughout by a voice, a devil in our ear, impressed with our cruelty. He laughs at our killing. He suggests that we need him. That we're no better than him. That's the demon in Aiden. The demon Aiden fears he'll become.

Alone works better - both because it is vastly more intense, and inventive with it's atmosphere, but also because it connects to a common human fear, rather than something only a vigilante would understand. Alone is about the pain of childbirth. No I'm kidding, it's about being alone - but not so simply. In the liberated parts of Chicago, alone summons a powerful sense of loneliness through a literal absence of people. In addition to the obvious contrast with the bustling city you're familiar with, Alone chooses clear skies and a bright sun to make the absence and silence of the life that weather symbolises feel so dramatically empty. It's beautiful in a way, and melancholic inevitably - what's particularly effective is that

the game makes it so this is where you feel safe. It's precisely when you're not alone that Aiden feels danger. Others are dangerous. Others are watching you. Others have the worst intentions.

To be perceived is literally to burn - so you must make yourself invisible. Of course, I could be describing pretty much any stealth game - it's the artistic context of Alone, that allows it to connect with something bitterly familiar to so many. Too many. Not all who'd let it rule them - but it's clear to see, Alone is speaking to something true, and dark, deep inside the hearts of the avoidant, the anxious, and the antisocial introvert. Indeed, perhaps especially to the biggest fans of Watch Dogs - these are the fears, from which one of the game's most strongly expresses fantasies arise - that is, to see without yourself being seen. That's what the profiler allows us to do - that's what the camera allows us to do. It's a fantasy of being invisible - one way connection.

Alone doesn't have any ideas about how to fix a person like this but the point of these dreams isn't to heal Aiden, it is to expose Aiden - and exposure can by itself, all alone, be a powerful thing. To be seen, to be forced to confront and reflect. It's an especially powerful thing for Aiden Pearce - because it makes for a startling exception.

Once upon a time, long before release, Watch Dogs wanted to make Aiden Pearce a questionable protagonist. The games writers have commonly cited Walter White as an inspiration - not for his connection to drugs, or his prestige, but for not being an aspirational figure, in a position that we usually associate with badassery. Aiden's path was not of ascent, like Batman, but descent - driven by twisted notions of what it is to be a man, all excused and rationalised as a heroic act in the name of his family, even as it puts them in danger, again and again and again. This, was Watch Dogs' idea. It was not the story it told. Ain't that a familiar tune.

In the actual game, and in spite of his actions, Aiden is painted never as anything but a gritty, grim hacker batman badass - call him Microsoft Edge - he's super strong, and never wrong, and in possession of a footlong dong. His speech at the end of the game - where he declares his righteousness and commitment to his violent crusade - is intended to disturb, not inspire - but it's almost never read that way. And that's exactly the Digital Trips stand out so interestingly. Aiden is not a badass on the drug addled dream-plane. He's disturbed. He's haunted. He's deeply, deeply fearful. He is exposed. Only here does it truly feel natural to ask ourselves - is this the man we want protecting our streets? Is this a figure to aspire to? Aiden's cool is built delicately atop the broken glass of his psyche. That's an interesting character. Then, and only then.

CUT COMMENTARY ON THEMES

But Watch Dogs wasn't just noir, it wasn't really neo noir in the usual sense either - it was cyberpunk - but unique for not being set in the future. Watch Dogs was the techno dystopia of the present - assembling it's fears and foresight, from technologies that exist today. Well, not quite. Because of course, Watch Dogs' today, is now over 10 years old. But it's still relevant, and now fascinating too, as a time capsule of the anxieties of our recent past.

Anxieties, now vindicated. As the prodding of data corps has become ever more invasive, privacy ever more illusory, and as algorithms ever more visibly steer thought for profit. It's funny how clearly the fashion in big tech's graphic design can date a period - and CTOS never really did mean anything besides excusing Aiden's magic spells, but Blume is something true. The one with all the data, and all the means to process it. They're trying to make this shit real, man. They're trying hard. And there's not much else that's talking about that. Watch Dogs was one of the most overtly political games of its time. That's not a comfortable thing to process, now, is it.

But drawing attention to something is one thing - Watch Dogs' proposed method of resistance was "just become Batman bro". Right. Well, I'll put that on the to do list. And I don't think I've ever seen a story quite this disinterested in the themes of its own world building. And then there's the way it completely undermines its own critique. Best way to criticise pre-crime? Make it completely infallible. Brilliant.

So I wouldn't exactly call the game effective in its messaging. But there was one thing that worked. One thing that always did. The tone. The art of Watch Dogs made it's high tech a part of it's noir - a strange marriage, and a remarkably beautiful one - and really, more than just a part, it was the centre - Blume was almost implied to be the root of this darkness, their machinations, as cloaked as you, in guarding shadow. If Watch Dogs ever managed to say anything, damn, that was how.

CUT MENTION OF EXTRA MODS

And the lethal takedowns mod by Miru97 forces Aiden to use his gun in places he'd usually use his baton, so if you want to play Aiden lethally, congratulations - no more really awkward, and limp looking bonks going off just because a guy was round a corner or crouched instead of standing. The people who enjoy Watch Dogs the most, are the people who enjoy it's exceptional ability to make you feel cool - this removes the slip hazards - and basically anywhere there's gameplay feels the effect that has on catharsis and tone. You flip some 1s and 0s in a file somewhere, and the game gains half a point. Or you make it so gang hideouts still have enemies in them even when you're not in the corresponding gang hideout mission - which makes the game look much less stupid, for that not being the case - and ensures you always have access to gameplay besides the police. Probably another half point.