Video game hacks straight into US surveillance storm

June 13 2013, by Michael Thurston

Attendees stand at the "Watch Dogs" display at the E3 conference in Los Angeles June 12, 2013. The video game, whose protagonist controls the world around him by hacking into computer systems, is generating growing buzz for its eerie parallels with the current storm about US surveillance.

A video game with a protagonist who controls the world around him by hacking into systems is generating growing buzz, for its eerie parallels with the current storm about US surveillance.

Games typically use weapons ranging from guns and swords to zappers to special powers to defeat enemies, overcome obstacles or simply score points, and hundreds are on display at the E3 gaming industry conference in Los Angeles.

But in "Watch Dogs", the player-controlled anti-hero can access everything from the cellphone conversations and medical records of passers-by to computers which control traffic lights, to advance through the game.

"We knew we had a relevant topic," Canadian Ubisoft developer Dominic Guay told AFP, recalling how he arrived ahead of the gaming mega-gathering this week, and checked into his hotel.

"I turned on CNN, and the first sentence I heard was 'invasion of privacy', switched channel and on Fox they were like, 'surveillance', and I said to my creative director, 'Those are all our key words.'"

Ubisoft, the French company behind top gaming titles including "Assassin's Creed" and "Prince of Persia: Sands of Time", showed off "Watch Dogs" on Monday, at a pre-E3 press conference in a downtown LA hotel.

Set in Chicago, the game centers on Aiden Pearce, who uses his smartphone to access the city's Central Operating System, which controls everything from power grids and traffic management technology to bank accounts and phone networks.

That kind of hacking evokes the stunning recent revelations about electronic surveillance by US authorities, revealed by ex-government contractor and whistle-blower Edward Snowden, who is in hiding in Hong Kong.

Ubisoft developer Dominic Guay stands beside a screenshot of "Watch Dogs" at the E3 conference in LA on June 12, 2013. In "Watch Dogs", the protagonist starts off seeking revenge for a loved one, but as he finds out more about the city, through hacking into its systems and inhabitants, he becomes a "vigilante", Guay said.

Under the classified PRISM program, the US National Security Agency (NSA) has gathered call log records for millions of American phone subscribers and targeted the Internet data of foreign web users.

The debate was also fueled by the April Boston marathon attacks, which killed three people and injured over 260, with New York mayor Michael Bloomberg notably saying people will have to get used to more cameras than in the "olden days".

Guay said technology is now making it possible to foresee a world not unlike that in British writer George Orwell's classic novel "1984", in which Big Brother watches and controls everything.

Orwell "had an extreme view of that dystopian world at that time," he said. "I think we're seeing a time where the technology has caught up to his views. where the technology would enable his dystopian world to exist.

"Happily ... most of us live in democracies that are not going there ... but it's scary to think that a government that would be as ruthless and evil as the one in '1984' would theoretically have the means to reproduce that system."

In "Watch Dogs", Pearce starts off seeking revenge for a loved one, but as he finds out more about the city, through hacking into its systems and inhabitants, he becomes a "vigilante", according to Montreal-based Guay.

...

This frame grab recorded on June 6, 2013 shows Edward Snowden, who has been working at the US National Security Agency, during an interview with The Guardian in Hong Kong. He has revealed himself as the source behind the leaks of US monitoring of Internet users and phone records.

"Most of the hacks that we have in the game are based on stuff that's happened in the real world. We just happened to give them all to a single player," he said in the sidelines of the E3 conference.

He added: "It's actually happening as we speak. It makes a more efficient city right? But it also creates the vulnerabilities we have in our game," he said, insisting the game makes no value judgment on the complex and sensitive issue.

"We're not trying to be moralistic about it. But we're hoping that players, when they've finished the game, maybe start a conversation. They can form an opinion about it," he added.

"Watch Dogs" will be released in November, including versions for play on on Sony's next-generation PlayStation 4 (PS4) and Microsoft's Xbox One consoles.

Sony Computer Entertainment of America chief Jack Tretton said the game "reflects mainstream entertainment and what's culturally relevant—I think it's a game based on what people are seeing out there in modern culture.

"I think it's less of a statement on our industry and more of a statement on a cultural situation what could create a good storyline," he told AFP.