Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Spider-Man: Miles Morales

Platform: PS4/PS5

Genre: Action Open World

Release Date: 2020

Developer: Insomniac Games

Publisher: Sony Interactive Entertainment

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Benjamin Arfmann

Overview

Miles Morales is a kid from Brooklyn who was bitten by a genetically altered spider and gains

the powers of Spider-Man. After training Miles for several months, Peter Parker, the Original

Spider-Man, leaves on vacation and leaves all of Manhattan for Miles to protect. During this

time, Miles encounters a militia group called "The Underground" who seek to destroy the similarly weaponized Energy Corporation Roxxon by any means necessary.

Miles finds out who the leader of The Underground is, why Roxxon is being targeted, and how he is personally connected to this brewing war. Spider-Man must step between both of these forces and save the city he swore Peter he would protect.

Characters

- **Miles Morales/Spider-Man:** Miles Morales is a 17-year-old from Brooklyn who was bitten by a genetically altered spider, giving him the powers of Spider-Man with a few new ones. He was Trained and taken under the wing of the original Spider-Man, Peter Parker. Miles has a strong sense of justice and right and wrong, with his mother being an up-and-coming politician and his late father being a police officer. With his mom being Puerto-Rican and his Dad being black, Miles has a strong cultural identity. He speaks Spanish not an insignificant amount, and his movements and style ooze personality influenced by the culture around him.

- **Phin Mason/The Tinkerer:** An old friend of Miles, Phin is fighting for a cause she believes wholeheartedly in. Her brother was made sick by the new Energy source (NuForm) Roxxon is introducing, and when she and he tried to shut it down and blow the whistle, her brother was killed. With no hard evidence to give to the authorities, Phin takes it into her own hands, joins the Underground, and wages war on Roxxon. She is unwavering in her beliefs. Phin is incredibly smart, designing and engineering all of The Underground's weaponry and tech.

- **The Underground:** A militia group waging war on Roxxon. Phin mentions she joined them as they were forming and only care about Power, indicating that the Underground has no real stake in the sickness that NuForm will cause the people of Harlem.

- **Ganke Lee:** Miles's best friend and "Man in the chair", acting on the tech and hacking side to help Spider-Man. Ganke is unsure of how to feel about the war Phin has declared. Ganke acts as a person on the fence to discuss ideologies and morality with Miles.

- **Simon Krieger:** The CEO of Roxxon, Simon is aware of the sickness NuForm causes but is uncaring about it. He only cares about the profits that it will bring. When Spider-Man is intent on destroying the NuForm and saving the city, Krieger is quick to capture and kill Spider-Man. Krieger is Selfish, brutal, and uncaring.

- **Roxxon:** The Energy company that developed Nuform. They have their own private militia who fight back against The Underground. They are quick to blame Spider-Man for the events of the destruction of the Braithwaite Bridge. When the force encounters him on the bridge, they attempt to shoot him and silence the civilians watching. Roxxon is a brutal military organization that is not afraid to kill innocents.

- **Aaron Davis/The Prowler:** Miles' uncle who quickly figures out Miles is Spider-Man. He is very protective of Miles, constantly giving him advice to look out for himself first and damn the rest. Aaron is hurt and scarred from his falling out with

his late brother, and doesn't want to lose Miles too. He joins Roxxon specifically to track down Miles and contain him so he doesn't take part in this war.

- **Rio Morales:** Miles' Mom, an up-and-coming politician running for the City Council seat. She has a strong sense of right and wrong and will fight for what is right even if she gets hurt in the process. She breaks her arm during The Underground attack at one of her rallies, but still fights on.
- **Peter Parker/Spider-Man:** The original Spider-Man and Miles' Mentor. He is away on vacation during the game but calls Miles every few days to check up. He is the figure Miles looks up to for guidance and a template for how to be "Spider-Man".

Breakdown

"Spider-Man: Miles Morales" is a 3rd person action game where the player completes story-based missions in a linear order while stopping crimes and doing short side missions around the city in between these main story-driven missions. The central narrative is a large part of this game and integral to the experience the developers are crafting for the player. Each main story mission usually consists of an intro cutscene, gameplay, cutscene to show the "twist" of the mission, more gameplay, and a resolution dialogue encounter. Each side mission usually consists of an intro cutscene, gameplay, and a resolution cutscene. This form of mixing gameplay with cutscenes reinforces the importance of the story the developers are trying to tell. This story isn't always about the major central narrative but also shows what kind of person Miles is, what kind of Spider-Man he is, and how the city around him reacts to this new Spider-Man.

This game seems to closely follow the standard Action-Adventure beat map that is prevalent in a lot of Action-Adventure works from various media, which is a slight variation of

the "Save the Cat" narrative structure by Blake Snyder. The story is broken into three acts, with a total of 18 beats. The first act consists of the intro sequence up to when Rio Morales's rally is interrupted by the Underground and Miles fights on the bridge. The second act consists of Miles' suit-up sequence to when Miles and Phin are captured by Roxxon. The third act is Miles Escaping from The Prowler and his final showdown with Phin on top of the Roxxon Plaza. "Miles Morales" has all of the major narrative beats explained in this beat map. The break into the second act is the big fight on the bridge. This was in all the marketing, as break beats usually are. The fall beat is when Miles and Phin are captured and Miles finds out about his uncle working for Roxxon. The death beat is Spider-Man fighting the Prowler while they argue ideologies.

Strongest Element

"Spider-Man: Miles Morales" excels at its characterization, making each character feel dynamic and real. One of the main ways they accomplish this is by having every facet of the game (Mission intros, phone calls, scripted sequences) be fully voice acted. This combined with the fact that the game is very narratively driven allows the writers and developers to *really* flesh out these characters.

Miles, for example, is a 17-year-old Afro-Latino kid from Brooklyn living in Harlem. This is a very strong representation of what that kind of kid would look and act like. He laughs and jokes with his friends, geeking out over things like old records and video games. Miles just oozes character. From the way he talks to the way he dresses, to the way he web swings, all tell you

something about his character. He is distinct from Peter Parker, which is a major theme and growth point for Miles in this game.

One of the most realistic and refreshing things that this game does is the frequency with which Miles speaks Spanish. When Miles is talking with his mom they throw in Spanish phrases like "Te quiero mucho" and "Pero que paso" like it's natural and second nature to them they do this on a regular occasion. The characters also do the "English repeat" not infrequently. This is where the character will say something in Spanish then immediately repeat it in English for the English-speaking audience. The Spanish dialogue also is usually secluded to a line or two rather than half or the entirety of a conversation, which is not uncommon for bilingual people. It's understandable that the developers made this decision to appeal to the larger non-Spanish speaking audience of their game.

Phin is also another character who feels like a genuine person placed into a digital world. She isn't the player character so everything we learn about her is through the eyes of Miles. We are introduced to her when she shows up for Christmas Eve dinner. She is a good friend of Miles but they haven't spoken in months. Their banter and dialogue feel like a conversation between old friends. They poke fun at each other and it feels as if they've known each other for years. We get the first glance of more layers to Phin's character when she dodges a question about her brother and becomes visibly uncomfortable and sad.

When Miles, and us as the audience, finds out about Phin's brother being killed by Roxxon, the writers and developers drive the story in a unique and emotional direction. Miles immediately confronts Phin about being the Tinkerer, so instead of a twist reveal that flips her entire character, we see her genuinely explain to Miles why she is going to war with Roxxon. It's not out of

malice or revenge or retribution, she is just finishing what she and her brother started. She *has* to stop Roxxon from releasing this deadly new energy source and save the people of Harlem. Throughout the rest of the game, we get to see Miles' and Phin's ideologies and practices collide. The game becomes less about stopping some faceless hidden enemy or figuring out who the villain is, but about trying to help your friend and stop them from accidentally hurting people.

Unsuccessful Element

A failure of "Spider-Man: Miles Morales" is its use of what I call the "Don't Forget They're the Villain" trope. This is where the villain is all but justifiable in their cause which allows the audience to more easily connect with the villain and their motivation. Since the villain's cause is so justifiable, the writers need to have them "go too far" by doing something heinous or unbecoming of a hero, usually through acts of violence and hurting innocents. This is a common trope in recent Superhero fiction. When done right, villains like Thanos shine become iconic, when done wrong, the villain can become boring or unforgettable, like Karli Morgenthau from the recent "Falcon and Winter Soldier".

This Country has shown time and time again that the best way to enact radical change is to go outside of the system. To say that going through the "correct" channels is the best way to enact change sends a problematic message, *especially* since this game is very POC-centered. Phin is justified in her war against Roxxon. She joins her brother in trying to shut down the energy plant themselves, leading to her brother, Rick's, death. She tries to gather physical evidence and pass it along to the correct authorities and fails. She has no other choice than to attack Roxxon head-on. In a world filled with super-beings and extremely high tech, it's not a particularly radical idea.

But in so doing, she forgoes a bit of her humanity and starts thinking that the ends justify the means, even if civilians get hurt. This is where the bulk of the narrative's issues stem from. This trope pushes the idea and mindset that violence is never the answer, regardless of what is being fought over. It tells us that to enact real change you have to go through the proper channels like the police and politics. Rio Morales is running for office on the platform that Roxxon is gentrifying and destroying Harlem. Rio is doing things the "right" way. This argument pushes a centrist mindset and can even be harmful because it is historically inaccurate to claim that politics and working *within* the system always works. Slavery was ended only because of a war, the bloodiest war in US History. Civil Rights were only achieved after hundreds of rallies and riots.

Outside of the thematic messages this trope pushes, it causes Phin to lose a bit of realism and takes away from her character. When calculating how much damage the explosion she is going to cause by blowing up Roxxon, she underestimates, meaning that Miles has to stop the explosion before it destroys all of Harlem. But we are specifically shown time and time again how much of a genius Phin is, one of the smartest people in the series. She creates all of the Underground's weaponry. She and Miles won a science competition for building an energy converter. The very first time we meet Phin she fixes Miles' doorbell that's been "broken for years" according to Rio. To say that she would miscalculate one of, if not the most important things she's ever done, is unrealistic and takes you out of the story. I understand that this is most likely pushing the theme of "violence and anger can blind you" but it feels like a contrivance to make Miles and his moral compass the correct one.

Highlight

The most memorable and emotional moments in "Spider-Man: Miles Morales" were the final Cutscene of the Campaign. It is a lengthy Cutscene that lasts seven minutes. In it, Miles absorbs the energy of the imminent Roxxon Generator explosion. It is too much energy for him to hold, meaning that when he releases all that energy it will cause a large explosion killing anyone within his vicinity. Phin grabs him and flies hundreds of feet into the air, getting him away from civilians so he can explode safely, sacrificing herself in the process. This is an emotional moment because, as previously stated, Phin is a very relatable character and we, as the audience, are connected to her just like Miles is. We barely get any goodbye and she is sacrificing herself to save the city, just like her original goal.

Miles then falls back down, and the citizens of Harlem see that Miles is Spider-Man. These are all characters you've interacted with both as Miles and as Spider-Man. These are *your* neighbors and friends, just as they are Miles'. As the press come to see what happened and see who this new Spider-Man is, the residents of Harlem block their way, protecting Miles just as he protected them. When the press asks if they know Spider-Man's identity, one man speaks up and says "He's *our* Spider-Man".

The final scene in this Cutscene is Miles walking around Harlem, mirroring the opening cutscene, interacting with the residents and neighbors. The mural of OG Spider-Man is now a dual mural with Miles Spider-Man alongside OG, signifying that the people see them as equals now. Miles now walks down the street actively vibing and dancing to the music, unafraid of who sees. He dances with the locals and is friendly and familiar with the people he encounters. This

juxtaposition from the opening cutscene mirrors the player's emotional and personal journey/connection to this game and characters. At first, we were intrigued but unsure where we, as well as Miles, belonged in this world. But after interacting and growing with these characters and neighborhood, we feel a connection and are happy to see them safe and enjoying themselves. When Peter compliments Miles's suit on the roof, Miles says a phrase that encapsulates the major theme of this game: "Gotta be me". Meaning that no matter who you look up to, who your role models are, you have to be yourself, put your own spin on things, be creative in *your own* way. This is a particularly important message for younger people who are the target audience for teenager Miles Morales.

Critical Reception

"Spider-Man: Miles Morales" released to "generally favorable reviews", according to the review aggregator Metacritic, receiving 8-9s at most game review sites. Destructoid's Chris Carter praises the story and the characterization of Miles Morales. He writes "this is a much more personal story...with a large focus on the people close to Miles that most players haven't quite met yet" (Carter, 2020). "Miles Morales" shines because it tells its story and characterization not just in cutscenes and dialogue, "Insomniac manages to showcase his personality not just with the narrative, but with subtle in-game animations too. Sometimes Miles will struggle with an attack or even look off-balance" (Carter, 2020)

Jonathan Dornbush from IGN celebrates "Spider-Man: Miles Morales" on the same level as "Spider-Man" (2018) "it stands out as an essential story in Insomniac's Spidey Universe. It earns

its spot as a fantastic follow-up, telling a wonderful Miles-specific story" (Dornbush, 2020). He states "Insomniac has done a flat-out fantastic job of adding depth to Miles' movement and fighting skills to allow him to stand out as his own character instead of feeling like another cosmetic reskin" (Dornbush, 2020). Insomniac has done a great job of creating a unique and distinct character from Peter Parker. They achieved this in their characterization through dialogue, animation, even moveset, and swing style.

Lessons

"Spider-Man: Miles Morales" highlights two major lessons when it comes to Narrative Design. Firstly, as Narrative Designers, we work with video games, an interactive medium. We're not *just* writing a story that the player passively experiences. The world-building and characterization must be ingrained into the gameplay itself. "Miles Morales" shows us this by having Miles' personality shine through all of his actions, major and minor. The way he swings, the way he fights, even the way he lands all point to and give us a clear picture of who he is. To keep the player immersed in this world, every phone call happens while you're out on patrol, not locking you to a needless two-minute cutscene. This allows the player to keep *playing* while staying invested in the story and characters.

Secondly, on the more story and writing side of things, "Miles Morales" shows that creating a sympathetic character while simultaneously posing them as the villain is tough. It leads to tropes that are easy to fall into, making it difficult to ride that line between justification vs morality. The lead writers aren't bad storytellers, they've probably had a conversation similar when creating the story and they thought this was the best route for the story *they* wanted to tell.

Summation

"Spider-Man: Miles Morales" is a great game that excels at everything introduced previously in "Spider-Man" (2018). The characterization of its cast and combination of narrative and gameplay elements hold it above many recent games. It is a near-perfect example of how to use the medium of Video games to extend past the capabilities of television and film.

Aside from that, it is an incredible leap forward with representation in games. We are coming out of a "dark age" where every video game protagonist was a brown-haired white man with a 5 o'clock shadow. Developers are branching out and creating more unique and visually interesting characters from various backgrounds and cultures. Miles is a beacon for young black and brown people. This is exemplified in the game and marketing itself. One of the suits you can unlock is a black and yellow BLM suit and the major tagline for the game is "Be Yourself". This game is targeting a very specific audience. One who needs encouragement and needs to see that they are represented in the media they consume. Miles stands as a way to break that mold, on one hand, he is Spider-Man, the *most* popular superhero in the world, on the other he is a dark-skinned Afro-Latino kid from the inner city. There is no one better to usher in a new age.

Work Cited

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