Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Marvel's Spider-Man*
Platform: PlayStation 4
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: September 7th, 2018
Developer: Insomniac Games
Publisher: Sony Interactive Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Jon Paquette (Story Lead), Kelsey Beachum and Benjamin Arfmann (Game Writers); Christos Gage (Co-Writer), Dan Slott (Additional Story Contributions) and Brian Horton, Bryan Intihar and Marcus Smith, (Creative Directors). Original Spider-Man character and stories created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko.

Overview

While Spider-Man himself needs no introduction, *Marvel's Spider-Man* takes the much-famed Marvel superhero and puts him in a new context. Now 23 years old, Peter Parker has spent eight years balancing his ordinary responsibilities, like a job and relationships, with his secret life as Spider-Man. When he finally defeats the crime lord Wilson Fisk, one of his greatest foes, it seems like things might be looking up for New York's favorite web slinger. But new enemies, like the mysterious Mr. Negative, fill the void in the crime world that Fisk leaves behind, looking to claim a dangerous bioweapon called "Devil's Breath" and use it to exact revenge on New York City's mayor at the cost of citizens' lives. It quickly becomes clear that things are going to be harder for Peter than ever before.

Marvel's Spider-Man is filled with enough fighting, action and adventure to satisfy a power fantasy, but its narrative elements balance this by humanizing Peter and making it clear that he fights both on behalf of and alongside other people, as a hero that stands with the citizens of New York City, not above them. The game succeeds in this by making players play as non-superpowered characters in select story missions, emphasizing Spider-Man's role as a hero of the people by rewarding interaction with them in the open-world, and bringing Peter down to earth as an ordinary human by enabling the player to collect objects that show his past during gameplay. The game also arguably emphasizes Peter's willingness to work alongside others when it makes Peter work for, and fight alongside the NYPD, but this approach also has drawbacks, as

exhibited by the controversy they created, which are worth acknowledging. Overall, however, these narrative elements emphasize the great responsibility Peter Parker has towards others, doing justice to the Spider-Man character, and create a narrative in which it takes a village to save New York City rather than a lone-wolf hero.

Characters

- **Peter Parker, a.k.a. Spider-Man** – Compassionate, courageous, intelligent and struggling to hold his life together, Peter Parker is the titular Spider-Man. This particular version of Peter embodies much of the traditional aspects of the character, such as his desire to use the powers he got from a radioactive spider-bite to help people, his affinity for light hearted jokes and the anxiety he feels about having to balance his double life. This particular incarnation of Peter is in his early twenties and approaches crime fighting with a level of experience and maturity that comes from his eight years as a superhero. As a protagonist, Peter spends a lot of the game talking to himself, meaning players become well-acquainted with the hope, fear and determination that he expresses through his frequent and candid self-talk.

- **Captain Yuri Watanabe** – Yuri is a determined, no-nonsense police captain who calls upon Spider-Man for help keeping the peace, though her seriousness often puts her at odds with his proclivity for jokes. She functions as one of player's most frequent sources of objectives, story context and positive reinforcement for completing goals (when she's in a good mood). She also serves as the face of the NYPD, as far as the player's interactions with them are concerned, and represents the greater police "faction" on behalf of which the player often works.

- **Mary Jane Watson** – A daring investigative reporter for the Daily Bugle, Mary Jane Watson, or MJ, is determined to help stop the rising tide of crime and villainy threatening New York City. A close friend and former lover of Peter's who knows that he's Spider-Man, the two often coordinate and share information. However, their partnership is complicated by the baggage of a failed romance between them and MJ's frustration at being stifled by Peter's protectiveness of her. MJ is the first of two characters besides Spider-Man that the player controls from time to time (the other being Miles Morales), and her story missions add the perspective of an "ordinary" person willing to go the distance to help others but who must do so without super powers.

- **Miles Morales** – An earnest teenager and eager fan of Spider-Man's, Miles is motivated to help others in part by the memory of his father, police officer Jefferson Davis, who is killed partway through the game in an attack by a group of criminals called the Demons. As a supporting NPC, Miles' character helps show Peter's compassion by being a mentee that Peter takes under his wing. As the second of two playable non-superpowered characters, he provides another "ordinary person" perspective on the harrowing events that befall New York City.

- **May Parker** – A volunteer at the F.E.A.S.T. shelter, a refuge for the homeless of New York, May is Peter's kind and generous aunt. She serves as an inspiration and mentor to her nephew, giving him advice and positive reinforcement, as well as encouraging him to accept his limitations as a human being rather than see himself as a failure for what he doesn't accomplish. As such, May is a key voice in the game's overall themes of learning to share one's burdens with others rather than go it alone. Towards the end of the game, Peter has to choose between using a cure for a plague gripping New York City to save her life, and using it to synthesize more of the cure and save everyone else in the city. Peter chooses the latter, resulting in his Aunt's death. Her loss becomes the final, and greatest, loss to befall Peter in the game.

- **Wilson Fisk** – A seasoned crime lord and one of Spider-Man's greatest foes, Wilson Fisk's defeat by the player at the beginning of the game enables criminals like Martin Lee and his gang, the Demons, to come to power and threaten New York. Like Otto Octavius, Fisk is an antagonistic character who fuels the responsibility that Peter feels for all the bad things that happen in New York on his watch.

- **Martin Li, a.k.a. Mr. Negative** – Kindhearted manager of the F.E.A.S.T. shelter in his public life and super-powered crime boss of a gang called "the Demons" in secret, Martin Li lives a negative (pun intended) version of Peter's dual life as a superhero. He serves as the game's main antagonist until Otto Octavius takes that role in the last third of the game's story. Revealed later in the game, Martin's motivation, is to get revenge on NYC Mayor Norman Osborn, who oversaw the scientific procedure in which he received his strange energy-based powers and accidentally killed his parents as a result of being unable to control them. Martin will stop at nothing to achieve this goal, even if it means hurting innocent people. Like Otto Octavius, his status as a villain is connected to Norman Osborn and helps reinforce Norman's own villainy.

- **Otto Octavius, and his team of supervillains** – An intelligent scientist, Otto Octavius is a mentor and close friend of Peter's who ultimately succumbs to his desire for revenge on Norman Osborn, becoming the supervillain "Doctor Octopus." Peter is in close touch with Otto in the game before and during his descent into villainy, giving players a chance to witness his heartbreaking transformation from Peter's hero to one of his most ruthless enemies. Because this transition is enabled by a faulty, personality-influencing brain-machine interface that Peter helps Otto develop for use in his prosthetic technology, Otto's status as a threat to the city in the game's final chapters adds to the weight of responsibility that Peter feels for what happens to New York City as the game goes on, much as the defeat of Wilson Fisk does early in the game. To help him terrorize the city, Otto breaks five other supervillains out of prison, namely Martin Li, Electro, the Vulture, Scorpion and the Rhino, and offers to help each of them get something

they want if they follow his orders (Because they're relatively lesser characters in the narrative of the game aside from Martin Li and act more as agents of Otto's will, they are not separately analyzed here).

- **Mayor Norman Osborn** – Norman is the arrogant, self-interested mayor of New York City and also the wealthy cofounder of the science and technology company Oscorp. As the story progresses, it is revealed that he oversaw the experiment that accidentally gave Martin Li his powers as a child and caused Martin to inadvertently kill his own parents, and that he seized control of Oscorp for himself from its cofounder Otto Octavius, resulting in both of the two men striving to get revenge on him. As such, Norman is the root cause of many of the crises that befall New York, but due to Peter's belief in saving lives, even those of corrupt people, he ironically finds himself protecting Norman from the game's other antagonists who would otherwise murder Osborn. While Martin Li, Otto Octavius and most of the other villains that appear in *Marvel's Spider-Man* represent the openly criminal side of Peter's foes, Norman represents the side that claims to be acting in the people's interests. He hires Sable International, a group of armed mercenaries, to help restore order in the city and hunt down Spider-Man whom he publicly blames for the results of his own actions. As such, when players fight NPCs working for Sable International they are resisting Norman Osborn, even if they can't ever fight him directly.

- **Silver Sablinova, a.k.a. Silver Sable, and Sable International** – Silver Sable is the heavy-handed leader of the mercenary group Sable International, and commands their forces in New York on behalf of Norman Osborn. In a way she acts as Norman's general, leading her forces in the field against criminals/villains and Spider-Man alike. The soldiers of Sable International are responsible for imprisoning civilians in detention camps with the express purpose of finding out what they know about the villains threatening the city and are noted for their highly lethal approach to dealing with crime. As such, they act as a foil to Spider-Man, who protects citizens and captures criminals nonlethally. Silver Sable threatens Peter and his allies at multiple points, but ultimately saves Peter's life after seeing his willingness to save Norman Osborn's life towards the end of the game. This character change happens rather suddenly, perhaps due to Silver Sable not being given much on-screen time for character development, and as such her character arc is the least satisfying of all the characters in the story.

- **J. Jonah Jameson** – An outspoken and vitriolic detractor of Spider-Man, Jameson is the host of a radio talk show in which he offers his commentary on current events in New York City, usually those involving crime and/or Spider-Man. Players can hear different segments of his radio show while exploring the open-world in which he makes various comments depending on how far the player is into the story. He frequently places blame on Spider-Man for whatever bad thing has befallen the city most recently, making him a

representation of civilians in the city who *don't* like Spider-Man (as opposed to those who do), and placing the player's actions in a more diverse context.

Breakdown

The Narrative in a Nutshell: A Crash-Course on the Game's Story

Right from the get-go, *Marvel's Spider-Man* humanizes its protagonist by presenting him with a familiar life struggle. In the opening cutscene, Peter launches out of bed to suit up and take down Wilson Fisk, one of his greatest adversaries, only to notice a rent past-due warning slide under his door. He takes a few steps towards the notice before taking a running start in the other direction and leaping out his apartment window to fight the villain of the day, being forced to choose one responsibility at the cost of another. Ultimately Peter defeats Fisk, but as the crime lord is being taken away by the police he warns Spider-Man that by putting him away he is removing the one thing keeping New York's criminals in check. This fact is referenced throughout the game in both cutscenes and gameplay dialogue, and remains an ever-constant spectre looming over Peter as the lives of New York's citizens are torn apart by an ever-escalating onslaught of crime and chaos at the hands of various criminals. Whether it's dealing with apartment issues or the results of putting away a crime lord, *Marvel's Spider-Man* makes it clear that being Peter Parker comes with a lot of responsibility, in spite of how fun it may be to fight criminals or use strands of webbing to swing around the city.

Marvel's Spider-Man handles its story much like many open-world action-adventure games of recent years, introducing players to an open-world Manhattan where players can take on missions in the game's main story, or otherwise freely explore and find crimes to stop, civilians to help, collectibles to collect and various quests to pursue related to fighting villains or helping the citizens of New York City. Time that the player is not spending on critical path mission is narratively contextualized as Peter going out on "patrol" to see if anyone in the city needs his help, and is framed by the events of the main storyline. For example, after a story moment when Peter and Mary Jane have a big argument, Peter says that he should go on patrol to "blow off some steam," and the emotional weight of their argument hangs in the air as the player goes off to explore the open world. As a result, all of the player's non-critical path activity still feels consistent with the timeline of the game's main story. In general missions often require the player to be Spider-Man, but often the player is called on to be Peter Parker and engage in various activities relating to his civilian life as well. For example, players can help residents of the F.E.A.S.T. shelter and complete science-related minigame puzzles at the lab where Peter works with Otto Octavius. The interplay between Peter's ordinary life and his superhero career, as expressed by the fact that different story missions focus on different parts of Peter's existence, makes the player experience his life as a mix of two worlds rather than a continuous superheroic adventure.

The game's cutscenes and gameplay dialogue do a great job of showing Peter as a down-to-earth human being, contributing to the game's themes of accepting one's limitations, even as person with superpowers. Peter's attempts to reconnect with MJ, his day job working with Otto and the life advice he receives from Aunt May give the story a

lightness that balances out the more serious moments of superheroic drama and grounds Peter among the ordinary people he protects. Moments like these also show Peter grow as a character by learning to accept his own limitations and allow others to help him shoulder the burden of his mission to protect New York. This comes through most overtly in conversations Peter has with his aunt as well as Mary Jane, wherein Peter will often muse on how he is to blame for the bad things that have happened in the lives of either of his dual identities, only for Aunt May or MJ to push him to accept that he isn't perfect or that he no longer has to do things alone. The game emphasizes this even further by providing the player missions in which they have to play as either Mary Jane or Miles Morales.

Playing as Non-Superpowered Characters

Marvel's Spider-Man highlights the plight of the ordinary people without superpowers that Peter fights to protect through story sequences that require the player to play as them. Not too far in, the game introduces Mary Jane missions, and later Miles missions, wherein the player switches perspective and play as either of these two non-super-powered allies. These missions, which make up around seven of the 44 or so missions in the main story, tend to revolve around sneaking past hostile NPCs and solving puzzles. Occasionally they involve using new skills that Spider-Man does not have, such as hacking, which ensure that these characters are not helpless. That said, MJ and Miles have drastically reduced ability to use violence or force to solve problems (with the exception of a stun gun MJ gets to use in a later mission). This serves as a strong mechanical reminder of what it's like to experience the events of the game as an ordinary person, with all the associated vulnerabilities and limitations that a player may forget about when playing as Spider-Man. This is highlighted particularly well by later missions, namely the MJ mission "The One that Got Away" and the Miles Morales mission "Supply Run."

"The One that Got Away" highlights how a character like MJ must make considerably greater sacrifices of herself to save others from situations that players could without much consequence if they were controlling Spider-Man. The mission sees players control MJ when her investigation of Martin Li and the Demons causes her to be held hostage by the gangsters at Grand Central Station in order to draw out Norman Osborn. The unique twist of "The One that Got Away" is that Peter actually assists MJ during this mission, allowing players to clearly see the contrast between how difficult saving people is as MJ and how difficult it is as a superhero. For example, a cutscene plays in which MJ witnesses another hostage trying to attack one of the Demons only for the gangster to subdue him and hold a gun to his head. When playing as Spider-Man, rescuing hostages from this exact situation is routine. The player frequently saves civilians from criminals in the open world using the combat system, representative of Peter's incredible physique and reflexes, and there is even a quicktime event within the first few missions of the game wherein the player uses Spider-Man's webbing to rescue a hostage from a situation similar to the one MJ witnesses. MJ doesn't have the physical strength, the speed or the ability to shoot webs that Spider-Man does, and instead offers to contact Mayor Osborn to ensure his timely arrival if the thug lets the hostage go. The thug agrees and gameplay resumes, at which point the thug forces the player to march off to their boss Martin Li, depriving the player of the ability to move in any direction other

than where the thug allows them to go. Highlighting this contrast even further, the player is freed from their predicament when Peter appears around a corner and quickly knocks out the thug, showing how Peter's abilities allow him to easily resolve the situation in a way that MJ's do not.

A similar situation befalls Miles Morales in the mission "Supply Run," which takes place after Otto Octavius unleashes the Devil's Breath bioweapon, as well as numerous formerly-imprisoned criminals, on New York City. Miles has been tasked with retrieving antibiotics to help treat people infected by Devil's Breath, at the F.E.A.S.T. shelter, only to discover that criminals have taken control of the shipment. If that wasn't enough the player also has to contend with the Rhino, a massive, muscular supervillain working for Octavius who can destroy metal shipping containers by ramming into them with his armored body. Sneaking past the Rhino as Miles is the closest a non-Spider-Man character gets to a 1-on-1 boss fight with a supervillain in the game, except that Miles can only run and hide, as he lacks Spider-Man's abilities. Through Miles, the player experiences what it's like to be a civilian in a New York City where a routine errand can turn into a dangerous stealth mission to steal antibiotics from armed thugs. While the game wants you to enjoy the fun of using Spider-Man's abilities, it doesn't want you to forget how hard it is to be a normal person.

Centering Gameplay Actions as Spider-Man on Ordinary Civilians

When controlling Spider-Man, the game makes the player focus on civilians by framing helping others as the player's means of becoming stronger in open-world side objectives. Like in other open-world games, the player is rewarded for completing these objectives with XP and/or "tokens," which the player uses to upgrade Spider-Man's abilities. Narratively, however, Peter takes on these objectives purely out of his desire to protect other people, even strangers, and do some good for the city. Requiring players to do "good acts" in order to progress reinforces the idea that compassion for others is Peter's guiding principle, and that acting out this compassion is what embodies the Spider-Man experience. Moreover, civilians are made prominent figures in brief, rewarded interactions the player can perform with NPCs in the game's open-world, such as waving, shooting finger guns, giving out high-fives, and so on. The player actually gets a small amount of XP whenever the give a fan a high-five or handshake, rewarding the player for a moment of their time spent engaging with a person on the street. This reinforces the idea that Spider-Man is willing to engage positively with ordinary people rather than live above them, and provides incentive for the player to do so as well.

Spider-Man receives some goodwill from civilians, too, with NYC citizens and police officers often praising the player and their actions when encountering them in the open-world, encouraging players to think about their relationship with ordinary people as Spider-Man. One example is the way civilians cheer on Spider-Man when the player gets into a fight with criminals or Sable agents on the street, or the way pedestrians may stop to applaud for or offer praise of Spider-Man when a fight isn't in progress. Moreover, the player periodically receives usually positive feedback from New York residents with social media accounts via Spider-Man's social media feed, which is shown on the same screen as the open-world map. These moments make the player feel good about being Spider-Man, and make them associate positive reinforcement with ordinary people. Thus,

the player begins to see their relationship with civilians as valuable and worth caring about.

 To be fair, not everything the player hears from citizens or police is positive. That said, the negative feedback Spider-Man gets is framed as something the protagonist wants to overcome, further showing Spider-Man's care for how he stands in his community. The most prominent source of this kind of negative feedback are the tirades of J. Jonah Jameson, a famed detractor of Spider-Man's, on his radio talk show that the player can hear while traversing the open world. Although these rants are often comical, they still emphasize that at least some New Yorkers do not want the player in their city. The fact that the player can hear them at all, however, is because Peter is *choosing* to listen to them, as proven by a piece of dialogue early in the game's story in which Peter muses, after listening to a segment of Jameson's show, about how he'll get Jameson to say something nice about him someday. Eventually, Jameson does in fact have a few kind words for Spider-Man in a broadcast that occurs after the player completes the main story (entitled "No Apology" in the in-game menu of old Jameson radio broadcasts where the player can go to listen to them again). This represents the player fulfilling an aspiration of Peter's by saving the city, improving the civilian opinion of Spider-Man by a margin of one person that Peter is so concerned with, even if only temporarily.

Showing the Protagonist's Humanity Through Rewarded Collectibles

 The player is incentivized to collect backpacks that Peter left webbed to the walls of various buildings in the open world during his initial days as Spider-Man, backpacks that contain objects that indicate a lot about Peter's humanity and personal history. Gameplay-wise, the backpack quest means a chance for the player to unlock additional tokens, specifically called "backpack tokens," which are a required ingredient for crafting certain new outfits and powers the player can use. Narratively, collecting one of these backpacks unlocks a new object that players can view in a special gallery in their pause menu, an artifact of Peter's life from the past eight years. The items range from a piece of a supervillain's costume, to an unfinished job application, to a greeting card from old coworkers. Each of these is accompanied by a line or two of monologue from Peter himself about what that object means to him, grounding Peter's character in a wide range of memories and moments from his life, allowing players to understand more about him then is immediately apparent from the main story alone. Offering players a reward for finding these (tokens) helps encourage players to find them, providing incentive for learning more and more about who Peter is as a *person* rather than a simple gameplay avatar.

Aligning a Traditionally Independent Protagonist with the NYPD "Faction"

 On a more controversial note, the game often frames Spider-Man as an ally of, and sometimes even an agent of, the police rather than an individual vigilante, thereby using a more politically fraught strategy of portraying a hero who accepts help and works with others. The player's alignment with the police is demonstrated by the inclusion of Captain Watanabe as an informative and quest-giving ally of Spider-Man's, the number of police-focused quests and objectives that the player takes on and the frequent cutscene/dialogue moments in which Spider-Man is shown to be a close ally of the police force, in addition to moments when police officers actually aid the player in combat, such

as when Jefferson Davis uses a taser on enemy NPCs during the mission "Wheels Within Wheels."

This is both an odd choice for the Spider-Man character, who was typically shown to be disliked by the police in the original comics, and a controversial choice for the political climate of 2018, as shown by the online controversy about this in the context of the contemporary views of policing in the United States, but it does serve a purpose from a game narrative perspective. Players of a video game often need guidance ("What are my objectives?") and positive reinforcement ("Hey, Yuri told me I did a good job after I took down Mr. Negative!") in the form of NPCs. In addition, this also explains how the player has access to police digital surveillance towers as Spider-Man, which the player uses to discover more quests in areas of the open world. However, as some journalists have noted, activating these towers seemingly makes the player/Spider-Man complicit in establishing increased police surveillance, another controversial issue in today's climate. As such, while aligning the protagonist with a faction emphasizes that this protagonist is a team player and serves other practical game narrative concerns, the cultural and political connotations of aligning Spider-Man specifically with the police raises contemporary controversies, potentially distracting from the benefits this faction-association strategy could otherwise have. Politics can and should certainly be approached by game narratives when they approach it in a thoughtful way, but *Marvel's Spider-Man* seems more to stumble into a political issue rather than address it effectively.

Strongest Element

Depicting Peter as a normal human with relatable problems in addition to superheroic ones makes playing as him much more relatable, entertaining and unique. In the mission "Home Sweet Home," for example, players find themselves swing around the city *not* expressly to hunt down some supervillain or rescue civilians from mortal danger (though a bit of this ends up happening along the way), but to find the garbage truck carrying items from his apartment that were thrown away in the course of his recent eviction. For help, he contacts a sanitation worker named Eddie over the phone, and the two compare notes about things like local pizza places they both know in order to help Peter narrow down where his belongings might be. His interactions with Eddie, as well as more significant characters like MJ and Otto, allow players to see the more heartwarming, positive side of his life. Without these elements, *Marvel's Spider-Man* would lose its connection to Peter's humanity and down-to-earthness and undermine the hero-of-the-people persona that gives the game its heart.

Unsuccessful Element

Silver Sable's redemption arc, where she starts off working against Spider-Man before ultimately helping him, feels overly rushed. This is probably due to the game's many other plot arcs and interesting character moments crowding out any chance for Silver Sable to get much character development or any deep characterization. After her and Sable International's introduction a third of the way into the game in the mission "Dual Purpose," Silver Sable doesn't get a lot of screen time, appearing briefly to

threaten Peter every now and again. Near the end of the game, however, in the mission "The Heart of the Matter," Silver Sable teams up with Spider-Man when she sees that he's trying to protect Norman Osborn from Martin Li and the Demons, who are at the moment trying to assassinate Osborn. Afterwards, Sable is suddenly very sympathetic to Peter, not only helping him receive medical attention after a near-deadly encounter with Otto Octavius but speaking to him as though she's concerned for the safety of a good friend rather than a mere ally. This change feels sudden and a little unnatural, which is understandable given that he inclusion of an additional antagonist is a lot for the story to handle. Silver Sable functions perfectly well as a secondary antagonist, given that she is meant to represent Sable International and support the interests of Norman Osborn, who is a more significant character, but this falls apart when the game tries to give her character more individuality in how she's willing to help Spider-Man in the end. Having characters on the same side who have differences is an excellent way to approach creating characters in factions, but it only works if all of those characters get a chance to show their individuality from as soon after their introduction as possible.

Highlight

Much of Peter Parker's story in *Marvel's Spider-Man* revolves around how his life is being stretched to the breaking point, how the crises he faces are too much for him to bear alone. This is perfectly encapsulated by the mission "Into the Fire," taking place after Otto Octavius has unleashed Devil's Breath and his supervillains on the city, in which the player has to help two police precincts under siege by two separate super villains at the same time. What's more, Peter is also getting phone calls from May, Miles and MJ about a sister location of the F.E.A.S.T. shelter being attacked by escaped Rikers Island inmates, foreshadowing that yet another bad situation will be pushed onto Peter's plate in the near future. As such, it's clear that the pressure on him is beyond intense.

In the end, the player learns in a panicked call from MJ that the inmates have started a fire in the F.E.A.S.T. sister location, and that Aunt May and Miles' lives are in danger. Peter urges MJ to stay back and let him handle things, but when he arrives he is only able to save them because of MJ's help. What's more, Miles and MJ end up rescuing Peter from a near-deadly fall that he otherwise wouldn't have survived, by catching a line of webbing that Spider-Man fires upward towards him to save himself. This takes Peter's ongoing struggle with the weight of the world pushing down on him and his growing acknowledgement that he can't save New York alone and pushes them to the forefront in a dramatic and exciting way at a point when the circumstances are at their most dire.

Critical Reception

Jonathon Dornbush gave *Marvel's Spider-Man* an 8.7 for IGN, writing that the game did an excellent job of creating a version of the character who had a sense of history in the world and well-developed relationships. Specifically, Dornbush credits Peter and Mary Jane's romance plot as being relatable and adding personal stakes to the story. He also notes that the central villains and their relationships to the protagonist were given time to "believably develop, making for some emotionally powerful scenes toward

the end." Overall, Dornbush says he was particularly fond of the way the game put emphasis on the non-Spider-Man-related of Peter's life, declaring that he, "played Spider-Man to be Spider-Man, but I'm so happy I got to be Peter, too."

Erik Kain, Senior Contributor for Forbes, gave *Marvel's Spider-Man* a 9.5/10, writing that the story of the game has a strong emotional resonance that is well balanced by a proportionate amount of "Spider-Man humor and levity." Kain notes that some of the game's twists aren't all that surprising if the player is already familiar with the Spider-Man mythos, but also writes that the story isn't carried by those twists alone and is compelling regardless. On a more critical note, however, Kain found that the MJ and Miles missions "could have, and should have, simply been cut-scenes." Although this last point may be more of a criticism about a type of gameplay that he found frustrating than a narrative moment, it does have narrative ramifications as it shows that the narrative value of these sections perhaps wasn't enough to win him over on them.

In his Kotaku review (which doesn't include a score), Ethan Gach praises the game's story overall, specifically citing the way it gives villains sympathetic qualities and the way it presents a refreshing take on its source material from comic books and other Spider-Man media. However, Gach also feels that the non-Spider-Man elements of Peter's life didn't get enough focus in the game. For example, he mentions a moment in the game when Peter awkwardly asks MJ out on a date and notes "I'd have liked to see that struggle play out as vividly as my aerial web-slinging fights."

Lessons

- **Lesson 1: Additional Playable Characters Broaden the Player's Perspective** – The player character becomes the perspective character, so providing new characters to play as can provide new perspectives on the events of a game's story. If one protagonist is empowered by the mechanics/story in some way, playable characters who have a more "ordinary" level of power and vulnerability can raise the stakes of the narrative, both for themselves and for a more empowered protagonist who cares about them.
- **Lesson 2: Rewarding the Player for Certain Kinds of Interactions Reminds Them Who They're Fighting For** – Action-adventure games can tell players that the protagonist is fighting to help a group of people, or they can push the player to engage with them on a regular basis. For Peter Parker, this means both giving the player ways to interact with and help civilian NPCs on a regular basis and rewarding them for doing so, because that's the kind of person Peter is. This helps add a sense of genuine care for others, and adds a feeling of responsibility to a protagonist who might otherwise be a responsibility-free vehicle for a power fantasy.
- **Lesson 3: Emphasizing a Protagonist's Relationships/History in Cutscenes or Discoverable Objects Makes Them More Human** – Balancing a character's adventures by showing the relationships they value and/or parts of their personal history, through both cutscenes and history-relevant objects, can show who that character is when they're not out fighting crime. Additionally, incentivizing the player to find instances of such characterization in the game world, as is the case

with Peter's old backpacks, is a good way to make sure the player will witness them.

Summation

When Peter defeats Otto Octavius at the game's climax, Otto explains his actions, by saying that he and Peter have a responsibility to "do what's best for those beneath us. Whether they understand it or not." Peter angrily denies this, and his denial represents the game's denial of it overall.

Because the game shows players what it's like to be non-superpowered characters in the world, encourages them to help and interact with civilians in general, incentivizes rewards them for seeking out evidence of the protagonist's humanity and gives them allies to work with, *Marvel's Spider-Man* portrays a hero *of* the people, not *above* the people. The game sometimes has issues in its attempts to connect the player character with others, such as when it stumbles into controversy by affiliating Peter with the NYPD or rushes Silver Sable's enemy-to-ally transition, but nonetheless it gets across strong messages of responsibility, humanity and working with others in what could have otherwise been a simple superhero power fantasy.

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