

**GAME REVIEW**

# YOUR DEFINITIVE NEIGHBOURHOOD SPIDEY

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When Spider-Man 2: The Game came out in 2004, it was a revelation. More often than not, video game developers hadn't been able to translate superhero stories to an interactive medium, but Spider-Man 2 was the exception. Not only did developer Treyarch create a realistic and dynamic representation of Manhattan for its time, but more importantly, they nailed the swinging.

So when Sony revealed at E3 2016 that Insomniac Games would be working on the first open-world Spider-Man title of the generation, there was some consternation, but even more excitement. If anyone could recapture the magic of Spider-Man 2, it would have to be the team behind the Xbox One hit Sunset Overdrive...right?

Insomniac's Spider-Man doesn't take many risks, but it's still the most spectacular game of its kind. Comparisons to Rocksteady's Arkham trilogy are inevitable, and in some respects, this is the same blockbuster action game we've been playing for the last 10 years. Anybody who's beaten Batman: Arkham City knows the territory. It's a game built to support a linear narrative, with big set pieces, flashy cutscenes, and interactive quick-time events, plus optional side quests and hidden collectibles scattered throughout its sunny Manhattan. It is the apotheosis of that formula.

Marvel's Spider-Man for the PS4 executes traversal better than any Spider-Man game ever made, including the legendary Spider-Man 2. Swinging is smooth and simple, the transition from swinging to sprinting along the side of a building is seamless, and the sheer variety of mechanics at Spider-Man's disposal as he flies through the city is astounding.

Whether you want to get from point A to point B as economically as possible or zip around with as much flair, it's totally up to you. The game's greatest triumph is its use of Spider-Man's web-shooter abilities. Insomniac's Spidey gives players a vast open-world New York to inhabit, and great care has been taken to make sure this core aspect of the experience is as polished and refined as anyone could hope for. The ingenious control scheme harkens back to a simpler era, putting an unbelievable amount of maneuverability and precision into just a few buttons and a thumbstick. It is, quite possibly, the most fluid and flawless traversal system seen in a game.

What makes Peter Parker a compelling hero, in this and the game's other stories, is the tension between doing what's right for the greater good and doing what's selfish. The impossibility of helping everyone in need at all times is at the

heart of the character. He's defined by the difficult choices, by his failures, and by his relationships with Aunt May, his boss, and his ex. Peter struggles with the question of how well two people can ever really know one another. What's our responsibility, he wonders, when those we idolise turn out to be monstrous? Thematically, the game's got a lot in common with Raimi's Spider-Man 2 movie, though it manages to forge an identity all its own.

The combat is fluid, taking a page from the Batman: Arkham series while adding plenty of Spidey-specific acrobatics. Beyond just punching your enemies, you can also web them up, dodge their attacks, slide underneath them, uppercut them into the air, or use one of the many gadgets that you'll unlock during the course of the game to dispatch them with added panache. I will say, as thrilling as the combat looks on the screen, there seems to be a limit to how many opponents the game can throw at Spider-Man before the systems become overwhelmed and I found myself unable to effectively dodge every incoming attack. This compelled me to *git gud* and make actual use of gadgets and crowd controlling skills that can be purchased as you level up. The game should be played in Spectacular (hard) difficulty for maximum amusement.

The one saving grace in these exasperating moments is that you can use the combo meter you build as you land attacks to heal yourself in the middle of a fight, even as you're throwing a punch or zipping between street lights. I can't understand why there isn't a system in place that allows Spider-Man to gradually heal if he hasn't taken damage for a few moments, but once I got a hang of the healing mechanic, the combat became more manageable. Do note that combat forces you to play smarter than just randomly mashing buttons and dodging out of harm's way, which is a good thing. Overall, combat is vastly enormous and options are at your disposal.

The game manages to pack a majority of the most infamous Spidey villains into the story without ever feeling bloated, including Mr. Negative, Kingpin, Vulture, Rhino, and Scorpion. And those are just the main baddies, as you'll meet half a dozen or more while completing challenges and side missions. By the end of the campaign, you'll feel like you've played through about a hundred Spider-Man comics.

While Parker might not be able to keep his own life in check, the game itself does an admirable job of balancing the extended, impactful story missions with discrete, repeatable events, such as stopping crimes that happen dynamically

throughout the city, completing tasks at Harry Osborn's portable research stations, taking on Taskmaster's timed challenges, finding backpacks, capturing landmarks & secret photos, Black Cat's collectibles scattered throughout the city, as well as clearing out bad guy strongholds. It makes sure to give you a breather between story missions as well, giving you a chance to explore the city and choose what you want to do. In addition to being fun and varied, these side missions and dynamic events serve a valuable purpose that is rewarding you with experience. Every mission you complete, every landmark you photograph, every enemy base you clear out will reward you with experience as well as a specific kind of token that you can use to obtain new gadgets, upgrade those gadgets, or acquire new suits, each of which unlock a special move that can only be activated once every few minutes.

Plus, every time you level up, you'll gain a skill point which you can apply to the game's branching skill tree. By the end of the story, I had snagged all, though you will have to decide which best suit your play style as you pick which ones to invest in early on. As a sucker for progression systems like these, I found myself more inclined than I might have been otherwise

to complete every activity I came across. I'd do disservice if I didn't rejoice in Insomniac's digital reconstruction of Manhattan, which is the most astounding, eye-popping representation of the city I've ever seen in a game. The level of detail here is unimaginable, with every city block and every neighbourhood having its own unique flavour and style. While the city is slightly truncated compared to the real island, virtually every major landmark is exactly where it should be, as are many of the famous locations from your favourite Marvel comics and TV shows. I've already spent more than 25 hours swinging back and forth from Harlem to Battery Park, but there's still so much more to see.

Ultimately, Marvel's Spider-Man feels like the first entry in an ambitious and promising new series. Its masterful web-swinging and its undeniable sense of joy make for an experience that's more gratifying than anything seen from a superhero game in years.

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