Unit Operations - Game Critique

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Marvel's Spider-Man, developed by Insomniac Games, 2018

I chose to write this critique about Marvel's Spider-Man[4] simply because, at the time of writing this, it is my favourite video game. However, I have never really formally interrogated the game and its systems from a game designer's perspective or with a Unit-operations approach[1]. So in essence, I know it's my favourite game, but I don't have a formal, academic reason for making this claim... yet.

The best way to split the game is into the following parts: The **traversal**, the **combat**, the **stealth** the **upgrade/cosmetic systems**, the **main narrative**, the **side content**, and the **UI and menus**. Throughout this critique/analysis, I will be interrogating these aspects of the game. I will also be comparing these parts of the game, with other games and other Spider-Man games (from both before and after the release of this game).

The **traversal** of Marvel's Spider-Man is the main draw of the game for most players, including me. It is what makes, as every reviewer said, you "*feel like Spider-Man.*" In other words, it is a system that is unique to the character of Spider-Man and thus it was the main focus of the development team. This also makes it apparent that the only way to evaluate this system is to compare it to other Spider-Man games.

Insomniac's approach to developing this part of the game, was to create a system that is easy, accessible, and promotes player-expression over player-mastery. I.e., the system is relatively easy to pick-up and play and thus most players will be competent or even excellent with the swinging within a few hours. The depth of the system comes in with the variety of options the system gives you.

At its most basic form, it is just a traversal system, and the mechanics are only required to get the player from point A to point B. A player only needs to press and hold "R2" a few times and maybe press "X" to jump/web-zip every now and then, but that is it. The interesting mechanics are technically optional and only there to make the player "look cool" or "look like a Spider-Man".

Many of these optional interactions include: wall-running, zip-to-points, contextual animations, web-tricks, "Peter Parkour", and many more. All of these interactions either require a simple and easy-to-remember input or are done automatically.

Before Marvel's Spider-Man, was released, there was a general consensus among players that the best version of a Spider-Man-Swinging-System is *Treyarch's Spider-Man 2*[5], the movie game. That game's swinging was much more difficult to learn and master than Marvel's Spider-Man's swinging, since there were many more punishments for failing. The game made you work, learn, and train to "be Spider-Man" and thus had a much higher skill ceiling. The controller inputs were more complex and the player had to be much more precise when moving around the game space. This is a very different approach to the same system and makes the two games feel completely different.

I personally enjoy the newer system Insomniac made since it fits with the game on a thematic level. It pays off the superhero fantasy of being powerful and competent many players are looking for in... a superhero game. From a narrative perspective, it would not make sense if a Spider-Man with 8 years on the job just smacks against walls or flops on the ground when failing a swing. No, he'll start to wall-run or do a sick superhero landing.

When looking at games that came (and will come) after Marvel's Spider-Man, they only build upon Insomniac's system. Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales[3] added more air-tricks and Venom-dashes, and Marvel's Spider-Man 2 will add a wing-suit. All just more optional additions that encourage player expression (not mastery) and make the player look cool.

The **combat** of Marvel's Spider-Man is also an integral part of the superhero fantasy and like the web-swinging, Insomniac made this system with a similar focus on player expression rather than system mastery. The combat in this game is easy, even on higher difficulties. Each regular enemy type has easy-to-memorize weaknesses and most can be defeated with only dodging and regular attacks. In many playthroughs, I didn't use any gadgets except the regular webshooter in combat. Many sub-systems of the game's combat, like the gadget-wheel, air-combat, finishers, and web-throwing are not necessary to win an encounter, but are there as options for the player to play the way they want to. It serves to make the player look cool and feel like a competent superhero. Even the boss fights boil down to: waiting for the obvious "boss-is-vulnerable" state, attack, and then repeat.

The most common comparison for the combat in this game, is with the Batman Arkham games[2]. The Arkham games have much more difficult combat that requires some level of mastery if one is to beat the entire game. Batman is much more about efficiency, rather than style (the goal is to win, not to look cool).

Another difference between the two systems, is the mechanical focus. Marvel's Spider-Man focuses on dodging while the Arkham games focus on parrying and counter-attacking. The reason for this difference is a narrative one. Spider-Man uses his "Spidey-Sence" to predict incoming attacks and dodge them, while Batman uses his training in martial arts to use the enemies' momentum against them. Marvel's Spider-Man 2 will feature a parrying system, since the story is taking a darker, more-Batman-like tone, when Peter gets the symbiote-suit (the goal is no longer to look cool, but to win, brutally).

Stealth isn't a major focus of Marvel's Spider-Man. It is there as an alternative to some combat encounters and makes the game even easier. With the exception of certain story moments, stealth is just another optional system that gives the player another way to play the game and experience the superhero fantasy.

The **upgrades** and **cosmetics** in this game came from common tropes in superhero games, i.e. alternate costumes and skill-trees.

Spider-Man games especially are known for having alternate suits. What I appreciated about this game's cosmetics is that 38 out of 47 suits come at no extra cost (and the other 9 come with story content). With the exception of the game's sequel releasing later this month, this game has the most alternate looks for the protagonist in any Spider-Man game. Yet another system that promotes player choice and expression.

The upgrade systems in the game are very simple and only really serve to give a basic feeling of progression throughout the game. It consists of simple effectiveness/ammo-count increases for gadgets and extra combat, stealth, and traversal abilities.

Since a new-game-plus feature was added a few years ago, I've not interacted with the upgrade system, thus it is a part of the game I have very little to say about.

The **main narrative** and **side content** is what all the other parts I've mentioned thus far serve and revolve around. The game is classified as a story-driven action-adventure game, thus it is obvious that the story is a large focus of the game. The developers on multiple occasions have mentioned that the web-swinging and the story are the most important aspects of a Spider-Man game in the fanbase's eyes.

Mechanically, the main story can be described as mostly combat-arenas, separated by occasional cutscenes, stealth sections, traversal, and story-oriented "walking-simulator" sections (where you play as Peter, Miles, or MJ without using superpowers). The depth of this part of the game comes from the writing. It is a story that most Spider-Man fans loved, even if they just watched a playthrough of the game on YouTube. Only near the end of the game (and in the DLC chapters) is the player's competence with the game's mechanics really tested in any meaningful capacity. I reiterate that mastery of the systems is not required to beat the game, just basic competence.

The side content of the game is there to build out the "Friendly Neighborhood" superhero fantasy that the game strives to facilitate. The open world is filled with collectibles, side-quests, combat/traversal/stealth challenges, and randomly generated crimes. Future installments in the series only improved the variety and narrative aspects of these side-activities.

I will say, this game's **UI and menus**, is great. It gives the player all the information they will need both for moment-to-moment gameplay (like the health-bar, focus-bars, attack-indicators/spidey-sense, the minimap, etc.) and for 100% completion (every collectible and mission clearly labeled on map and a completion legend for every area on the map). I always enjoy it when I don't need to look up a guide online to find every collectible or mission needed for a platinum trophy. I consider it a failure of tutorialization or UI when you have to go to sources outside of the game, to complete an objective within that game.

All of the abovementioned aspects of Marvel's Spider-Man work together harmoniously to facilitate the accessible, pick-up-and-play power fantasy that the developers were aiming for. The superhero "Spider-Man" fantasy is beautifully realized in this game, and it is only being improved with each new game Insomniac releases. *That is why Marvel's Spider-Man is my favourite game* and why I am very excited for Marvel's Spider-Man 2 to take the title of **"my favourite game"** the day this essay is due.

References

[1]   Ian Bogost. *Unit Operations*. The MIT Press, 2006.

[2]   fandom.com. *Batman: Arkham Series*. URL: https://arkhamcity.fandom.com/wiki/Batman:_Arkham_Series. (last accessed 13/10/2023).

[3]   Insomniac Games. *MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN MILES MORALES. BE GREATER. BE YOURSELF*. URL: https://insomniac.games/game/marvels-spider-man-miles-morales/. (last accessed 13/10/2023).

[4]   Insomniac Games. *MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN. BE GREATER*. URL: https://insomniac.games/game/spider-man-ps4/. (last accessed 13/10/2023).

[5]   Metacritic. *Spider-Man 2*. URL: https://www.metacritic.com/game/spider-man-2/. (last accessed 13/10/2023).