

Spider-Man: Representation Matters

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Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales (MSM-MM) is the second installment of Marvel's Spider-Man video game franchise. Developed by Insomniac Games in conjunction with publisher Sony Interactive Entertainment, MSM-MM is an open-world, action-adventure video game available on consoles like the PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 5. Following the events of the first game, *Marvel's Spider-Man*, including the death of his father, and the discovery of his spider powers, 16-year old Miles Morales and his mom Rio move from Brooklyn to Harlem. MSM-MM essentially begins once Miles' mentor Peter Parker entrusts him with the responsibility of protecting New York as the sole Spider-Man while Peter is out of the country. The narrative of the gameplay centers around Miles' struggle to balance the upheaval in his civilian life with the monumental responsibility that comes with being Spider-Man. The single-player game consists of nearly 5 hours of cinematic "Main Story" gameplay, several Side Quests and a list of suits and a wealth of collectibles to complete and acquire.

In Chapter 5 of "Diversity in US Mass Media", authors Catherine Luther, Carolyn Lepre, and Naeemah Clark highlight some of the earliest stereotypical images of Hispanics/Hispanic Americans in mass media. Portrayals of the "domestic worker", "lazy gardeners" and "ominous gang members" (Luther, Lepre and Clark, 2018, pg. 83) have been rampant ever since the 1970s and are still included in some mediums today. In the same text, the authors also discuss how Hispanic women are regularly portrayed as exotic, are hypersexualized and often objectified as symbols of lust for white men. And in an era of motion capture technology (a process of recording movement and translating it into digital animation), where video game castings are technically similar to that of film or television, the same misrepresentation of these groups is evident. There's generally a lack of Hispanic/Hispanic American characters and still fewer in

prominent roles. Where MSM-MM differs from other media is that it has a vibrant and culturally comprehensive portrayal of Hispanics/Hispanic Americans and their community. Miles is Afro-Latino and frequently uses English and Spanish interchangeably in conversation with his mom Rio and others in his community. Puerto Rican flags can be seen hanging from buildings in multiple cinematic shots between gameplay in the Main Story. In the mission “La Nochebuena,” Miles rushes home to set the table with his friends Ganke and Phin and his mom. On that table you’ll find traditional Puerto Rican dishes like arroz con gandules, turon or lechón. Video game enthusiast Michael Higham (2020) reminisces playing this mission for the first time: “I could almost smell and taste everything being cooked...I’m glad this game exists and did it for the culture”. Miles’ mother Rio Morales continues to shatter tropes of unintelligence and of holding lower status jobs that are usually associated with Hispanics and more specifically Hispanic women. Following her husband’s death, Rio has since started a campaign to run for city council and hopes to bring about real change in her community:

Rio: Sometimes it feels like Simon Krieger’s my real opponent. Roxxon has so much influence here. But they don’t answer to anyone except their shareholders. Harlem needs someone to fight for the community.

Miles: That’s mom’s campaign-speech voice, in case you couldn’t tell (*Marvel’s Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, 2020).

Rio’s role as a leader in her community already challenges the stereotypes that were described previously. She is presented as an important figure to our protagonist and the other characters in the Main Story from the outset. Although not a playable character, our protagonist frequently seeks out her advice and wisdom on his personal journey. There are several cutscenes where Rio

plays a major role in furthering the story and she has an even larger presence in the Side Quests or in tasks that can be completed after finishing the Main Story.

In chapter four of “Diversity in US Mass Media,” the authors discuss the representation of African Americans in mass media. Here, they highlight media studies professor Catherine Squires (2009) who draws one of the following conclusions in her analysis of [television] programs featuring African Americans: “Mainstream media only shows extremes in the black community, not a continuum of actions and identities” (Luther, Lepre and Clark, 2018, pg. 57). MSM-MM does a fantastic job at broadening the portrayals of the Black and African American community through a variety of socially conscious Side Quests and challenges that are available between missions or after finishing the Main Story. Throughout this gameplay, players complete tasks as both the Miles Morales and the Spider-Man personas. For example, in “Harlem F.E.A.S.T. Shutdown,” players must uncover the criminal organization that’s been sabotaging the Harlem F.E.A.S.T. Center, the homeless/community shelter that Miles volunteers at. Switching between Miles and Spider-Man, players talk to F.E.A.S.T. volunteers/members at the soup kitchen, investigate pipelines and fix pressure valves that culminate in the arrests of the criminals and the safety of the F.E.A.S.T. center. This mission portrays Miles as a hero in his capacities as both a citizen of Harlem and as the neighborhood’s webbed-superhero. It captures his duality as a protagonist. Along with the F.E.A.S.T. mission, there are eight Side Quests available to players in the game and after the completion of all of them, Miles/Spider-Man is gifted a unique “Uptown Pride” Spider-Man suit as well as a note that reads: “Proud to have a Spidey like you. Thanks for having our backs - Your Friendly Neighborhood Allies” (Marvel’s *Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, 2020). This black and gold suit represents the love that Miles/Spider-Man has for his city and the love that the city has for him. MSM-MM’s ability to cater its Main Story as well as

its Side Quests and challenges to the nuanced experiences of Blacks and African Americans rather than only offering the extremes makes it stand out amongst other games of similar genres.

Spider-Man is one of Marvel Comics most well-liked and influential characters. Part of the character's novelty is his anonymity. Anyone could be under the mask and anyone could be the hero. But until recently, Spider-Man has always been Peter Parker, a brunette white teenager with a red-haired girlfriend. *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales* recognizes that representation matters. Young minority gamers now have a Spider-Man who looks like them and whose experience may resonate with them. For instance, 27-year-old Prince Yiadom, a videographer working with visual effects, rarely saw "his" people represented in the media he liked. But now, "[he] can proudly look at [his] favourite comic book superhero and say 'He looks like me.' Kids today don't have to feel strange in society growing up" (Klepek, 2017). According to the Entertainment Software Association, gaming is one of the fastest growing entertainment industries in the world. "There are more than 214 million players worldwide, with at least one player in 75% of the nation's households" (Chavez, 2020). Black teens play video games in the highest percentile among racial/ethnic groups, 83%, and Hispanic teens encompass nearly 70%. Now these groups, who have been historically underrepresented in media across several mediums have a gaming experience that showcases and values their diversity.

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