

OPINION

“SOMETIMES APPRECIATING NEW YORK IS MORE SATISFYING THAN SAVING IT.”

Spider-Man 2's city is too richly detailed to swing straight through



WRITER BIO

Harry Shepherd is often perplexed at the size of his backlog, despite him repeatedly doing nothing in videogames for hours at a time.

Something I never thought I'd say: some of my favourite moments in a Spider-Man game didn't involve me doing... anything. Not swinging between skyscrapers. Not socking it to shoplifters or hanging out with MJ. Instead, I people-watch, perched on a bridge in Central Park. I watch leaves sway and rivers trickle. I simply exist.

If you're thinking this is a strange way to experience Spider-Man 2, it's because it kind of is. Insomniac has nailed the feeling of movement, especially doing so as quickly as possible. You're encouraged to dive to pick up momentum, zip to a point and time your jump for an extra boost, and launch yourself around obstacles to speedily change course. What's more, there are the new web wings that you can use in wind tunnels to zoom through the world in mere moments. Even fast travel, once unlocked in each section of the map, is eerily instantaneous.

MEANWHILE, IN NYC

So, why, if traversal is as fun and efficient as it is, would you ever stay still? I thought the same thing until I started polishing off my last combat-related trophies for the Platinum after I'd finished the campaign. While I was waiting for crimes to take place,

I started to notice how surprisingly detailed Insomniac's New York is. I started enjoying strolling through the High Line and poking around Coney Island so much I stopped wanting to actually do my Friendly Neighbourhood Spider-tasks.

What I realised was Spider-Man 2 at ground level is far more than just set dressing – a launchpad from which to resume your next session of swinging through the skies. If you take a moment to pause (as you do in a certain FNSM request side-mission with a returning character) you'll find a far richer environment than you might expect. Just walking along the bustling roads I could hear spontaneous street music and see vibrant street art I'd have thoughtlessly whizzed past hours earlier, laser-focused on my next mission. NPCs behave somewhat normally and even have real-life conversations: as I watched a man peering at a pretzel cart in Central Park, I was distracted by a man and a woman discussing her body's recovery after having a baby. Those infamously under-developed boat people from the first game? They look like proper human beings now.

What I'm trying to say is Insomniac's version of New York feels *alive*. Its surface is more than just surface-level. For a space that you only really use to fight criminals, pick up the injured to take them to a nearby ambulance, and accept the occasional high-five from passers-by, it has no right feeling as authentic as it does.

There's so much here that 99 percent of players will miss, but it's there for those who take a moment to slow down and properly soak up their environment. It's like optional Easter egg hunting, which feels liberating after being more or less told where to look when it comes to your Photo Op collectibles. In other words, in between science experiments, clearing Hunter hideouts, and the small matter of saving the world from an interstellar symbiote, take some time to slow down and actually be a part of the world you're saving, and you won't regret it.



Central Park is just as handsome at ground level as it is whooshed past a hundred feet in the air.

■ The city at ground level is more than just set dressing. ■



■ Aloy is extremely chatty, often eagerly pointing out clues. ■

OPINION

"GAMES NEED TO CALM THE HINTS DOWN AND LET ME FIGURE THINGS OUT."

In-game tips are there to help, but risk taking me out of the experience



WRITER BIO

Harry Shepherd loves a good beard-stroking puzzle, but needs the option to bask in the pondering for just a little while longer.

As a gamer, I've always admired puzzle creators. If I feel intelligent upon completing one puzzle, goodness knows the smarts needed to actually *make* them. Similarly, I commend those in charge of puzzle difficulty, especially in triple-A games. Naturally, it's a balancing act: if puzzles are too difficult, you risk frustrating the player. Too easy, and they're not memorable. Sadly, worrying too much about the former can lead to design decisions that can be irritating in a different way.

Take *God Of War Ragnarök*, a game that didn't need to be much better than its 2018 predecessor to cement its place as one of my favourite games this year. Its combat is approachable, but deep enough to sustain a 50-hour Norse epic. Its story is more nuanced than could be imagined after Kratos' initial god-bothering outings. Its puzzles are inventive, and a nice way to massage the side of my brain exhausted from all the divinely-wrought carnage.

Or, at least, they should be. Faced with a locked Nornir chest or an obstacle in the road, rather than being given time to pore over the problem in my mind and tinker with the variables at my disposal, I'm quickly told by one of my companions what

I have to do. Whenever Atreus interjects in this way, I just wish Kratos would growl "I was getting there," in response.

Worse is when one of my companions tells me I don't have the equipment to solve the puzzle that's in the way of some elusive treasure. Moments like this wrench me out of the experience: how does Mimir know this? If I'd been left to my own devices, I'd have discovered the item I needed and returned. Instead I'm reminded I'm playing a game, rather than discovering a new world. Some of the mystery is missing.

TAKE THE HINT

Ragnarök isn't the only offender, of course. Aloy in *Horizon Forbidden West* is also extremely chatty. Often she eagerly points out clues, inviting us to use our Focus to just as we were about to. Guerrilla Games even patched the sequel to trim the number of times she reminds us of how she's sending excess materials to her stash.

There are alternatives: *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* found allow us to tweak how much we're assisted. *Kassandra's* adventure features an Exploration mode that gives clues to the location of an objective, as opposed to marking it on the map. *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* lets us tweak exploration and puzzle difficulty, separate to combat.

God Of War Ragnarök is rightly applauded for its extensive accessibility options, but there's no option that enables you to choose how keen your companions will be to help you through the trickier conundrums. Just as I became better acquainted with the Greek archipelago in *Assassin's Creed* with a little less hand-holding, I want the chance to appreciate the work that went into each of *God Of War's* puzzles. And if that means getting stuck now and again, repeatedly boomeranging my axe into the wall, then that's the price I'm happy to pay to feel the joy of overcoming a good head-scratcher, and appreciating the talent of the puzzle's creator.



God Of War Ragnarök's puzzles are a welcome change of pace from all the ruthless axe-murder.

OPINION

"WE'VE REACHED PEAK REMAKE, AND I'M REALLY NOT HERE FOR IT."

Life's too short to keep going over old ground, even if it looks nicer



WRITER BIO

Harry Shepherd's backlog is so vast the thought of replaying a game even once gives him a serious case of the stress shivers.

2022 feels a bit like opening all your best presents as soon as you wake up on Christmas Day. With *Horizon Forbidden West*, *Elden Ring*, and *Gran Turismo Sport* already behind us, suddenly we find ourselves looking ahead to... well, not much. Besides the return of a certain bearded demigod dad, we're in need of something else to unwrap.

This made this year's 'E3' all the more important. Sony's June State Of Play and Summer Game Fest promised to reveal something to fill the gaps in our calendars. Yet, once the dust settled, I couldn't help feeling disappointed: I just can't get excited for more remakes.

Some of the biggest headlines from this summer are rebuilds of existing games. The *Last Of Us Part I* is set for 2 September this year, with *Resident Evil 4 Remake* joining the *Dead Space* remake next year. Each is correctly considered a classic, but even though I adore all three, the prospect of returning to them with new technical bells and whistles for PS5 doesn't thrill me.

DÉJÀ NEW

That said, it's clear why the trend of rereleasing existing games has only

accelerated. Yes, it's extremely expensive and time-consuming for developers to create new IPs, stories, and universes. It's also risky: after spending all that time and money, the game just might not be successful enough. Remakes, on the other hand, are a much safer bet, even more than sequels, since the publisher has a sense of its existing popularity and community. Remakes sell well enough to justify publishers releasing more. Remakes aren't without merit either; they give newer PlayStation players the chance to experience older games in a more appealing and accessible way, too, and there's nothing wrong with a healthy helping of nostalgia now and again.

Regardless, it's hard to not feel a little disheartened when the next big reveal is another remake. No matter the graphical enhancements or performance improvements, there's always the sense we're going over old ground. Prettier ground, perhaps, but nothing beats the feeling of discovering something new.

The *Last Of Us* remains one of the best PlayStation games ever made, but given it's been little more than a decade since the original's release – and with the game having been remastered for PS4 in that time – it's unlikely I'll be going back. Especially not for £70. It may have looked and played spectacularly before, and no doubt will again on PS5, but it will endure because of something that transcends any technical update: its story. The themes of love, family, and survival will stay as powerful ever, regardless of the machine it's on.

So is this the future of games? Publishers rereleasing and us replaying the same experiences on every new PlayStation, stuck in an endless time loop of remasters, remakes, and reimaginings at the expense of adventurous new games and IPs? I really hope not, because I want something better. I want to explore uncharted planets, meet different characters, and save strange worlds. I want something new.



It doesn't matter how many times it's tweaked or remade, *The Last Of Us* will always be a classic.

Nothing beats the feeling of discovering something new.