Marvel’s Midnight Suns is an unexpected triumph of tactics and friendship

I did not want to play *Marvel’s Midnight Suns*. Having been so thoroughly heartbroken by *Sonic Frontiers*, I didn’t even want to look at another video game for at least a week, especially one I knew so little about. I told myself I’ll give it one shot, and if it’s boring or otherwise not fun to play, I’ll consign it to the dustbin of 2022’s underwhelming write-offs (right up there with *Triangle Strategy*). Then I sat down with the game… and had to physically drag myself away from it 10 whole-ass uninterrupted hours later.

It’s hard to put *Midnight Suns* into any one genre box. During the game’s prelaunch marketing campaign, *XCOM* developer Firaxis made it clear that *Midnight Suns* wasn’t going to be the alien strategy RPG with a Marvel palette swap. And it’s not because it’s *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* with a Marvel palette swap. To be clear, I *loved Three Houses,* so to have that with Marvel — especially after I’ve already given a fair chunk of my soul to *Marvel Snap* — was right on time. Doubly so since I’ve been aching for a strategy game since *Triangle Strategy* didn’t deliver and Nintendo’s been emotionally (and physically) withholding the *Advance Wars* remakes. *Marvel’s Midnight Suns* came at the right time, satisfying my exact craving while also giving me a ton of sweet story-building extras like developing meaningful friendships with Marvel characters, classic and new.

Midnight Suns wasn’t going to be XCOM with a Marvel palette swap… because it’s *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* with a Marvel palette swap

Midnight Suns starts with an optional tutorial that gets you

acquainted with the game's fairly easy-to-pick-up battle system before launching you into a story where demon monster mother Lilith has been resurrected by Hydra to rain hell upon the world. To combat Lilith, the Midnight Suns, a group of both well-known and relatively unknown heroes, resurrect her child, the Hunter, who perished in a fight against their mother some 300 years ago.

Knowing as little as I did about *Midnight Suns*, I was pleased to see there was an element of personalization to the game by way of a custom character. I was, however, a little disheartened to see that despite whatever you make your character look like — in my case, a dark-skinned Black woman — the game doesn't tailor Lilith to resemble you. Even though you can apparently change your dead dad's appearance to match yours, I laughed really, *really* hard when the game told me this woman birthed my Black ass.

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Biracial people of many hues exist, so it is not unreasonable at all to believe Lilith could be my character's mother. But if *Pokémon* and *Fallout* can tailor parents to match their customized child, *Midnight Suns* can, too, whatever Lilith's "original" design be damned.

Small gripe aside, your Hunter really becomes a character all your own. You make Hunter to your physical preferences, then make dialogue choices reflecting either a light or a dark personality that, over time, build the Hunter's character into something wholly unique. The choices are a little basic and fall into the narrative trap of being either too goody-two-

shoes-y or too unrepentant asshole-y. Choose dialogue options correctly when talking to your companions and you're rewarded with friendship points that lead to big bonuses in combat.

However, simply being nice to everyone isn't a surefire way to rack up friendship points. Magick, one of Hunter's companions, is a dour, taciturn young woman with a lot of emotional baggage (which happens when you make a pact with a demon at like seven-years-old) who simply rejects your every attempt to choose the typical "this is what a good person would do" dialogue options with her. When she storms out of your base of operations after a party gone wrong, you have the option to stay with her to comfort her – the "light" choice – or the "dark" choice is to simply leave. As most gamers would tell you, they almost never choose the "mean" or "dark" option, as dark is usually synonymous with bad. But Magick rewards you with friendship points when you leave her be or choose any of the "dark" dialogue options. And for that, I respect her.

However, simply being nice to everyone isn't a surefire way to rack up friendship points

You can get to know your companions in a number of delightful little ways, from having conversations with them, giving special gifts, going on hangouts where you chat at some scenic location within your base, or by joining a number of special interests groups the Suns have set up. I laughed out loud when I was invited to join Magick, Dr. Strange, and Nico Minoru for their magical investigation and experimentation group with the acronym E.M.O. K.I.D.S. There are a lot of charming little bits of humor like that peppered throughout the game, including a very *Borderlands*-esque splash screen that accompanies every new character's introduction.

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Unlike *Three Houses* — and no doubt due to the invisible hand of The Mouse — you cannot romance any of the Marvel characters. I am, however, duty-bound to report that a lot of the game’s dialogue seems to *imply* that Dr. Strange and Iron Man have more than a friendship going on. IronStrange shippers, do with this information what you will.

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The power of friendship isn’t the only way you get stronger in *Midnight Suns*. Over time, you will explore and level up your base, The Abbey, with training ground upgrades, healing pools, item fabrication machines, and more. It’s important to get the hang of your surroundings because a lot of the game’s power progression is locked behind activities you can only do outside of typical missions. One of Hunter’s abilities that I’ve found to be greatly useful in combat is only earned once you’ve completed a second explore the Abbey grounds questline that’s completely optional.

I both like and dislike how optional sidequesting is baked into your overall progression. It is nice that the more powerful you get isn’t 100 percent tied to completing mission after mission but also in how well you treat your friends and your environment in your downtime. In talking with your friends or giving them advice, you can earn powerful cards for use in combat or materials used to upgrade and improve cards. Even petting and praising your dog — a combat ally for when

the Hunter is on special solo missions – makes her stronger.

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On the other hand, I had a hard time with the way the game forces you into a specific cadence. You can only do one mission per day. Before a mission, you have infinite time to explore, train, chat with companions, or send them on solo missions off-screen. Once you complete a mission, the day switches to night, in which you’re only allowed to do social activities before going to bed and restarting the sequence. Sometimes, especially later in the game, I didn’t care for talking anymore; I just wanna beat on the bad guys. There are fascists overrunning New York– the games’ words, not mine, which is a mightily refreshing storytelling tidbit since video games tend to shy away from outright naming the bad guys for what they are – and you want me to join your book club? Get outta here, Blade.

It’s especially hard to accept this forced pacing because the combat is just so *good* you wanna keep doing it. The Hunter and each companion has a combat deck of cards that lets them perform attacks, buffs, or draw more cards. Each mission lays out combat like a puzzle to be solved. For each turn, you have three opportunities to play a card, one opportunity to move, and two opportunities to redraw a card in case you get a bad hand. Your job is to kill as many enemies in as few turns as possible using your environment, cards, and *advanced knowledge of trigonometry.* No, I’m not making that up.

The singular best thing about *Midnight Suns’* combat is the ability to hit enemies with other enemies. I was constantly

hoping to draw cards that let me knock back or sling enemies around the battlefield, knocking them into obstacles for maximum damage. There’s even a solo Hunter mission for which the entire win condition is centered on if you can kill the entire battlefield with no moves, no redraws, and only a handful of cards. So I’m whipping demons into other demons playing billiards with their bodies, and it was *awesome.*

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There are all sorts of moveable battlefield objects, like giant crates that you can kick into an unsuspecting, poorly thought-out straight line of enemies doing absurd amounts of damage. I frequently checked my heroes’ positions on the field, getting my angles *just* right so I could wing an enemy into an exploding gas tank catching their allies in the blast or into a hell portal Ghost Rider opened up, calling out shots like I was at a pool table, “Hydra asshole, corner hell-pocket.”

There are, of course, other ways to deliver a Hydra beatdown that are equally enjoyable and provide a little creative character-specific flair to combat. But for my money — and yours — the sooner you realize how to best to construct your decks around maximum trigonometry damage, the better.

I wasn’t able to complete *Midnight Suns* in time for this, but I am so looking forward to taking my time to finish the game. I am seriously digging every bit of exploration and combat, and after the sour taste *Sonic* left in my mouth, it’s really nice to feel *good* about video games again, especially when the game wasn’t something you wanted to play at all.

*Marvel’s Midnight Sun*s is out now on Xbox, PlayStation, and PC.

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