

Old Friends, New Friends: **How *Midnight Suns* Has It Both Ways**

Let's say you're at a party. You walk in just a bit late. Over on the left is a huddled circle of familiar friends, and on the right is a batch of strangers who already seem to have an established dynamic. Most people, when given that choice, will make a sharp beeline for their old pals.

It's not easy to step out of our comfort zones. Think about how people order the same drink at Starbucks, rewatch their favorite TV shows, or stay loyal to a small rotation of YouTubers. Human beings crave the familiar. We like our routines, our known quantities. So when it comes to media, stepping outside that comfort zone isn't just rare — our brains want to quantify it as a form of risk.

This remains true in the world of games, which are generally a kind of comfort activity meant to challenge us only in the ways we *want* to be challenged. And in a media market where existing IPs and fractional fandoms rule the day, you're even more hard-pressed to get someone to accept the unfamiliar.

Yet *Marvel's Midnight Suns* (Firaxis, 2022) manages to coax the player into accepting and integrating previously deep-cut characters like Magik right alongside international box-office titans like Spider-Man. It's a clever bit of narrative design that helps build affection for the game's entire roster, while also allowing for a distinct flavor and story that stands out among the many Marvel products vying for our attention today.

There are certainly ham-fisted ways to make someone pick a character named "Nico" for their team instead of Captain America. You could make the Marvel superstars completely unlikeable or even downright villainous. You could write their narratives as brief and unremarkable or nerf their combat abilities so they don't compare to the newcomers. But the team at Firaxis doesn't indulge in any of these cheap tactics.

Instead, most of their tactics are structured around the narrative as a whole. *Midnight Suns* indulges in the spooky, magical, and demonic side of the Marvel universe. Rather than robots, interstellar warlords, or political machinations, the story deals with vampires, witchcraft, and demon-powered forges. With this dip into fantastical and horror-themed elements, Firaxis takes the opportunity to spotlight characters who are naturally connected to those elements — more so than, say, Iron Man. This makes the introduction of, and focus on, the newbies more natural — they know magic and monsters, so why not rely on them?

Nico Minoru, Magik, Robbie Reyes, and the somewhat more familiar Blade all have deep ties to the supernatural, each seeing it through different eyes for different goals. Nico is the daughter of a pair of villainous sorcerers, working overtime to turn her evil inheritance into a force for good. Robbie takes on a costly pact with a Spirit of Vengeance to protect the people he cares about. Blade's entire life was shaped by his connection to Dracula and the world of vampires, leaving him to wonder who he'll be when — and if — he completes his mission.

It's Magik's story that I personally found the most gripping, despite being the least familiar with her. Although she initially comes across as frigid and pouty, time reveals the reasons behind her prickly nature. Spending decades isolated and manipulated by the demon Mephisto has given Magik the hardest shell and the softest heart of any Midnight Sun. She is guarded and acerbic, yes, but her years of loneliness have left her aching for love and deeply empathetic.

Of all the characters, she most understands what the protagonist Hunter and the possessed Scarlet Witch are experiencing. After years of learning and coping, she is no longer ashamed or afraid of her dark magical powers, though she remains remorseful over the poor decisions and lost years of her childhood. Walking the line between light and darkness can be a cheesy character arc, but Magik shows how it can be done well.

This also demonstrates one of *Midnight Suns*' best strategies for putting unfamiliar and familiar characters on an even keel: no hero is an island. Every character has thematic connections to at least one other, making their story part of a whole that only becomes clear through exploring those relationships.

Magik's extended hand of understanding to Hunter and Scarlet Witch provides them with support no one else can offer. Robbie's ties to New York City and his tight family bonds make him a natural counterpart to Peter Parker, while his money troubles and protective instincts put him at odds with Tony Stark's billionaire "innovations." Blade's search for a better future draws him to the optimistic and unstoppable Captain Marvel, while the pain of his past makes him reluctant to accept the vampiric Morbius as part of the team.

By looping these story circles together in intertwined chains, the writers and narrative designers of *Midnight Suns* encourage you to explore outside the familiar. Simply by spending time with Captain Marvel, you'll hear about Blade and get subtle nudges to interact more with him. When you hang out with Spider-Man, you're drawn into Robbie's stories. The old friends make natural and intriguing introductions to the new friends.

This carries over to the gameplay, where some of the strongest strategies involve mixing characters from both the Avengers and Midnight Suns camps. This does, admittedly, involve a bit of artificial manipulation: while your opening roster includes Iron Man and Doctor Strange, most of the other popular Marvel characters don't show up until after a few missions. As a result, you *have* to try out some of the newbies.

But even after Captain Marvel, Spider-Man, and Captain America arrive, you're enticed to keep using folks like Nico and Magik. Each character fills a unique niche and synergizes well with specific others. If you want a damage dealer who can soak up hits, you'll need Blade. If you want to make the most of the combat maps' environmental hazards, Magik tops the list. Nico can debuff enemies so normally soft hitters like Spider-Man or Deadpool can rack up kills faster.

It's a clearly thoughtful strategy that demonstrates the ability of narrative design to do more than fill text logs — it blends gameplay and story to support each other. Every avenue leads into another. Taking superhero friends on outings and hearing their stories buffs their combat performance. A fun and

synergistic combat mission entices you to like the hero and want to learn more about them. It's a self-sustaining feedback loop that pulls you deeper into *Midnight Suns*.

What's most impressive is how seamlessly all of this plays out in the moment-to-moment experience. Conversations feel earned rather than forced. Team compositions feel meaningful instead of prescribed. And because the narrative and mechanics are in constant conversation, there's a natural sense of progression. The many systems that enhance your combat abilities are mirrored by the emotional growth of the characters. You're not just building a team; you're building trust, understanding, and — when *Midnight Suns* is at its best — real affection.

In an industry where IP loyalty is expected to sell games on its own, it's rare for such well-reasoned and well-told writing to make it to the final product. *Midnight Suns* offers a refreshing counterpoint. It respects the big names without leaning on them, and in doing so, gives lesser-known characters the space to shine. Though it may seem like a small gesture, I appreciate that the safe choice was sidelined in favor of one that trusted the audience to embrace the unfamiliar alongside the familiar.