

■ Video game reviews

'The Suffering': The only agony comes in playing this game

'The Suffering: The Ties That Bind' is a lackluster video game sequel to an equally boring original

BY ANDREW MCCOLLUM
PULSE REPORTER

Midway's "The Suffering: Ties That Bind", a sequel to 2004's not-sequel-worthy "The Suffering," is a run of the mill third-person action game that adds nothing to an already overcrowded genre.

Players take control of Torque, a grizzly inmate who has just survived

an invasion of demons on the Alcatraz-like Carnate Island. As the game begins we find Torque fleeing in a raft toward Baltimore, Md. But when Torque gets to Baltimore, he finds that the city is also infested with demons. So what is our generic anti-hero to do? Kill demons.

Combat in "Ties That Bind" is dull and uninspired. Generally, Torque's

confrontations boil down to strafing around a room while shooting enemies until they stop moving. Torque's arsenal is made up of underpowered versions of action game staples: pistols, shotguns, machine guns, rocket launchers, etc.

Whenever the on-screen "Insanity" meter fills up,



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players are able to press a button that transforms Torque into a hulking creature. When in creature form players can quickly cut through hordes of enemies, which would be great if it weren't so boring.

Level design is linear and "Ties That Bind's" graphics aren't anything special. The character

animations are decent and the enemy design is interesting, although many of the enemies are straight out of "The Suffering." The game's plot is confusing and uninteresting.

"Ties That Bind" isn't a horrible game; it's just average in almost every way. It does little to set itself apart from other action games and isn't worth its \$50 price tag. Don't waste your time with "The Suffering: Ties That Bind."

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'Ultimate Spider-Man' is an ultimately mediocre experience

The newest Spider-Man video game capitalizes on the comic book's freshness, but lacks lasting appeal

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There is one constant when it comes to categorizing super hero video games: Each game in the genre is either great or terrible. For instance, this year saw the release of the gleefully destructive "The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction," and the mind-numbingly vapid "Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects." But rules are meant to be broken, as demonstrated by Activision's latest super hero game, the haplessly mediocre "Ultimate Spider-Man."

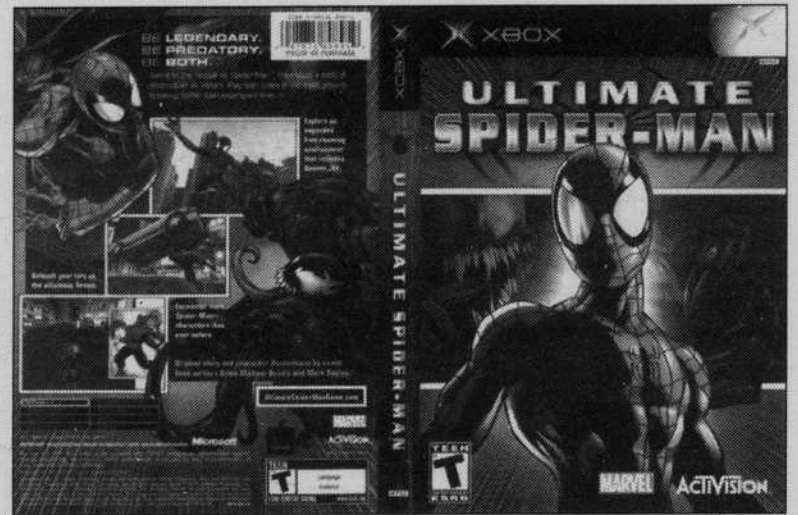
"Ultimate Spider-Man" takes place in Marvel Comics' Ultimate Universe, which was essentially a continuity reset of the story lines of previous comic books. In the Ultimate Universe, writers were allowed to re-imagine classic Marvel characters without all the baggage of the standard Marvel Universe.

In the Ultimate Universe, Peter Parker, Spider-Man's alter-ego, is a 15-year-old high school student who struggles to deal with school, girls, a job and a bevy of super villains looking to ruin his day. The game's story was written by Brian Michael Bendis, with pencils and

concept art provided by Mark Bagley. They're the duo behind the "Ultimate Spider-Man" comic book series. Players who aren't familiar with the series won't feel too out of place as the game does a decent job catching them up.

The game kicks off right after Parker and his childhood friend Eddie Brock find a mysterious bio-engineered suit their fathers created that was intended to be a cure for cancer. Parker tries on the suit and it amplifies his superpowers, but starts to drive him insane. Eddie tries on the suit and it turns him into the villainous Venom. In the game, players can play as both Spider-Man and Venom.

"Ultimate Spider-Man" uses a modified version of the engine that



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powered its previous incarnation, 2004's free-roaming "Spider-Man 2." The gameplay is essentially the same, which is both good and bad. "Ultimate Spider-Man" uses a simplified version of the previous game's excellent swinging system. Swinging around the city while playing as Spider-Man is quite a bit of fun. Venom doesn't swing at all; instead he leaps hundreds of feet in the air. The variety provided by the different systems of locomotion extends the playability of the game. Unfortunately, the model of New York in "Ultimate Spider-Man" is smaller than the one in "Spider-Man 2," which ultimately hurts the game.

The best aspect of "Ultimate Spider-Man" is its exceptional presentation. The biggest difference between "Ultimate Spider-Man" and "Spider-Man 2" is the former's excellent use of cel-shading. The game looks like it popped right out of a comic book, and when looking at screen shots, it's

hard to tell what was drawn and what was rendered by the game. The game's cut scenes are smooth and use panels and frames straight out of a comic book. "Ultimate Spider-Man" is the best video game rendition of a comic since Sega's "Comix Zone."

Unfortunately, the "Ultimate Spider-Man" story mode is short. Most players will be able to finish the game in about six hours. Of course, there are plenty of things to do outside the story, such as racing around the city and hunting for hidden icons, but that grows stale after about an hour. Combat in the game is drab. In the end, it is really just a button masher, although each character fights a little differently.

If you are a fan of Spider-Man, I would suggest renting "Ultimate Spider-Man" instead of buying it. Fifty bucks is a hefty investment for six hours of gameplay.

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