

Video Game Reviews: Stalk mutated enemies in Chernobyl's shadow

by *Jeb_Haught*

Game: "S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl"

Publisher: THQ

System: Windows XP/Vista

Cost: \$40

ESRB rating: M

Review rating: 3 1/2 stars

'S.T.A.L.K.E.R.,' you can play the role of an amnesiac bounty hunter in the ruins of the Chernobyl nuclear plant. CNS Photo courtesy of THQ.

HIGH DEF - Those who are lucky enough to have a powerful computer capable of running this graphics-intensive game at high resolution will be hard-pressed to find a better-looking computer game on the market. CNS Photo courtesy of THQ. 'SPIDER-MAN 3' - You can clean up the city streets and upgrade Spidey's powers in 'Spider-Man 3.' CNS Photo courtesy of Activision. SPIDEY SENSE - A highlight of this game is the random, crime-stopping tasks players can undertake. CNS Photo courtesy of Activision. Perhaps you've never heard of THQ's gorgeous first-person shooter, "S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl," which has been in development for more than five years. The game has been dropping on and off the radar for so long that many gamers forgot about it or doubted they would ever get to play it.

It's finally here, and it turns out it was well worth the wait.

Those who are lucky enough to have a powerful computer capable of running this graphics-intensive beast at high resolution will be hard-pressed to find a better-looking computer game on the market. Not only do the characters and mutated enemies look almost photo-realistic, but the physics behind effects such as fire and particles are also top-notch.

Players delving into this dark and gritty shooter will find themselves in the role of an amnesiac bounty hunter who stalks the open vistas and post-meltdown ruins of the Chernobyl nuclear plant. Using the popular "open sandbox" style of play, potential stalkers have the freedom to choose missions in any order. But be forewarned: Enemies are extremely dangerous, so every task should be approached with caution.

"S.T.A.L.K.E.R." doesn't introduce much that's new to the genre. Sure, I can enhance my character's abilities, but that's been done before. I'd like to know why carrying several items makes my Stalker so sluggish. Maybe this feature is new and realistic, but it's also very irritating. Still, the game looks fantastic, and features plenty of cool weapons and enemies.

Game: "Spider-Man 3"

Publisher: Activision

System: Microsoft Xbox 360

Cost: \$60

ESRB rating: T

Review rating: 2 1/2 stars

It used to be that the "Spider-Man" franchise was the one welcome exception to the second-rate games released simultaneous to the movies they are based on.

Now, it seems the "Spider-Man" developers have been infected with the same cosmic goo that made Peter Parker so unstable. "Spider-Man 3" seems more like a cruel joke than an enjoyable sequel.

For starters, the visuals are hardly worthy of being called "next-gen." Video sometimes becomes choppy during hectic battles. On top of that, the camera seems to have a mischievous mind of its own. Frequently, the view will swing around Spidey while he swings through the air, which impairs the player's web-slinging accuracy. Other times, the camera gets stuck behind objects, thus blocking the view.

It doesn't help that the combat system is almost identical to its 3-year-old predecessor, as is the weak artificial intelligence given to enemies. Apparently, several sets of combos and a bullet-time knockoff that lets the player slow down time pass for engaging game play nowadays.

Combat boils down to button-mashing rather than trying to beat enemies with strategy and finesse. What saves this game from complete mediocrity are the random crime-stopping tasks players can undertake. They're fun and unexpected, and when enough tasks are completed in a given area, the wall-crawler makes that dangerous part of town peaceful. And that means Spidey gets upgrades to his abilities. Too bad the main story missions aren't nearly as fun as the random tasks.

When it comes to "Spider-Man 3," I suggest you rent the game.

Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)

E: Everyone

T: Teen (13 and older)

E10-plus: (Everyone 10 and older)

M: Mature (17 and older) RATING KEY

4 stars - Must have

3 stars - Pretty good

2 stars - So-so

1 star - Don't waste your time

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