[Newsletter] Entry #2 - The Lede

Tomas Franzese

Helldivers 2 hit a maximum concurrent Steam player count of 54,691 people on January 16. On that same day, Sony canceled two live-service video games in development at its game studios, one of which utilized the blockbuster *God of War* IP (Schreier). From the cancellation of *The Last of Us Online* to *Concord's* flop to these latest cancellations, PlayStation's efforts to break into the live service space recently have been disastrous. The lone bright spot for it on that front is *Helldivers 2*, a game that had few expectations before its release that blew up and is now one of the most popular multiplayer games on PS5 and PC.

Arrowhead Game Studios and Sony Interactive Entertainment released *Helldivers 2* on February 8, 2024 for PC and PlayStation 5. It's a sci-fi co-op third-person shooter sequel to an isometric shooter from 2015. Taking clear inspiration from the likes of *Starship Troopers*, Helldivers 2 sees players fight as nameless soldiers for "Super Earth,' unabashedly taking on otherworldly bug, robot, and zombie threats in the name of liberty. It stands out from its co-op and extraction shooter peers because of its wonton commitment to emergent moments and violence.

Each mission feels different depending on the stratagems players choose to call down and which enemies and objectives spawn. The explosive nature of many attacks and friendly fire always being turned on also leads to unexpected hilarity. Plus, a meta-narrative about fighting on certain war fronts has enthralled players. IGN awarded the game a score of 9 out of 10, calling it "the rare modern multiplayer game that does almost everything right" (Borger).

Helldivers 2 also squarely falls into the category of live service game, which Dubois and Weststar use to refer to games that "indeterminately support and periodically release content incrementally" (Dubois & Weststar 2333). Although it has seen some player drop off, *Helldivers 2* still entices tens of thousands of people to play it every day at the very least. It has been a clear

success for Sony, and support shows no signs of winding down. That starkly contrasts many of Sony's other live service efforts in recent years, which have resulted in flops, cancellations, and layoffs.

As the video game industry continues to embrace live service gaming because it's where the brunt of the industry's revenue comes from, successes and failures need to be analyzed so we can gain a greater understanding of what works and what doesn't. While *Concord's* disastrous launch showed everything that could go wrong with a live service release, *Helldivers 2* conversely shows what needs to go right.

Helldivers 2 makes a strong case for how innovation is required to succeed in the live service space. There was no other game prior to its release with the same kind of wonton combat or meta-narrative that players had to work together to compete. It consistently delivered new content post-launch and learned how to weather PR storms and disasters during that time. *Helldivers 2* is a testament to how there isn't just one formula to live service success that can be replicated; instead, each new live service hit will make a name for itself uniquely.

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