[Newsletter] Entry #3 - Stylistic Analysis - Tomas Franzese

Helldivers 2 wears its stylistic inspirations on its sleeve, pulling from the fascist-inspired imagery of films like *Starship Troopers*. Take the intro cinematic of the game at launch, which also kicked off its announcement trailer and can be viewed on YouTube. It's framed as a "Patriotic Service Announcement" from the Super Earth Ministry of Truth and begins with a man returning to his family and home and waving at nearby soldiers. His wife and child are killed in front of him, and he screams out, "Sweet Liberty…No!" That clip then freezes, with the man walking in front of the image, telling people to enlist in the Helldivers to prevent something like that from happening to them.

Cue a smooth cut to him wearing a Helldivers soldier uniform and a series of shaky-cam action shots glorifying the actions of the Helldivers as they kill aliens on other planets. The stylistic decisions made for this cinematic play into the idea that this is in-universe propaganda by a fascist government. It shows Americana, only for it to be disrupted by literal aliens before a call of action tells viewers to enlist and shows cool imagery of battles that are a far cry from the chaos Helldivers (and, in turn, players) actually encounter on the battlefield.

This opening cinematic effectively sets the satirical tone and aesthetic for the entire game, and *Helldivers 2* has stuck to these stylistic choices since its launch. The mix of Americana and industrial aesthetic choices plays into the fascist ideal on a satirical level, just like *Starship Troopers*. This opening cinematic in and of itself is similar to the recruitment ad that kicks off *Starship Troopers*, which Strezelcyk argues lifts its aesthetic from fascist propaganda like *Triumph of the Will* because of its commitment to "featuring the beauty of the armoured and disciplined body and the will to sacrifice," (p. 90). Although Strzelczyk was writing about how *Starship Troopers* successfully emulates that Nazi aesthetic to become a postmodern satire on fascism, the same can be said for *Helldivers 2* as it takes the *Starship Troopers* aesthetic and

applies it to a video game. Helldivers 2's soundtrack is similarly satirical in its style, as composer Wilbert Roget says it was composed to make players feel like they are "part of an epic, heroic effort" and took inspiration from video games that glorify the American military, like *Medal of Honor* and *Secret Weapons Over Normandy* (Stark). By embracing the stylistic choices of militaristic, fascist propaganda, and other satirical media visually inspired by those, *Helldivers 2* instantly lets players in on the fact that it is a playable satire of fascism.

While the clear inspiration from *Starship Troopers* could be considered derivative within the wider media landscape, Arrowhead Game Studios' stylistic choices give *Helldivers 2* a distinct aesthetic within the live service space. It's between the military-glorifying look and feel of *Call of Duty* and the cartoonish violence of *Fortnite* or *Apex Legends*. That middle ground looks a lot like *Starship Troopers* but is distinct enough within the border live service space that it adds to the subversive feel of *Helldivers 2* as a whole.

Games like *Fortnite* keep a cartoonish style so that their violence isn't too offputting to the younger audiences that play them. Meanwhile, games like *Call of Duty* are too deep in the military-industrial complex to grok any satirical commentary out of the propagandistic nature of its aesthetics. *Helldivers 2* is a subversive game in many ways, and by embracing the stylistic choices of *Starship Troopers*, its developers created a distinct visual identity that captivated players in the way the stylistic choices of games like *Concord* didn't.

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