[Newsletter] Entry #5 - Ideological Analysis

Helldivers 2's satirical themes may have given the game its distinct edge in the live service space, but it also muddies the waters in terms of an ideological analysis. Helldivers 2 simultaneously serves as a critique of the live service games that glorify violence and military power while also upholding some of those tenets enough that parts of its community are raucous enough to disturb other players and even attack the developers themselves. As I explained in my narrative analysis of Helldivers 2, it's satire much in the same way that Starship Troopers was. By placing players within the point-of-view of nameless soldiers in a fascist xenophobic superpower, it explores the ridiculousness of that ideology's militaristic dogma.

At the same time, that lets Helldivers 2 serve as a critique of other military video games. The United States military and video game industry have a complicated history together. Witheford and Peuter's Games of Empire use the term "militainment" to describe games like America's Army that actively promote the United States military and discuss how the concept of a digital video game was born during research by the United States military in the 1960s. Nowadays, Call of Duty is the premier video game series and retains close ties to the American military. The most popular multiplayer games are shooters, which in turn can serve as an ample battleground for pro-military ideologies. Franchises like Call of Duty and Battlefield have no problem embracing them.

Helldivers 2 eschews what those games are doing. It certainly reaps all of the benefits of being a military shooter. It's a game all about the action; the rewards players earn are cool weapons and armor, and it uses military-sounding terms like stratagem, Major Order, or Warbonds for its in-game feature terminology. But for those willing to more deeply analyze the game, it's clear that the world of Helldivers 2 isn't aspirational but horrific. It gamifies the

military-industrial complex's wonton use of soldiers and death as players engage in wonton violence, sending soldier after soldier to their deaths after each deadly mistake.

In that way, I do think Helldivers 2 takes more of an anti-military stance than many of its multiplayer shooter peers. Unfortunately, nuance can be lost on a live service game with mass appeal. For many people, Helldivers 2 has become yet another live service multiplayer game they put in their gaming rotation alongside Call of Duty. Look to forums like Reddit, and you'll see people discussing how they've encountered people who don't understand that Helldivers 2 is satire or are actively being aggressive and transphobic. Helldivers 2 can encourage role-play, but is role-playing a fascist in 2025 such a good thing?

Penn State University professor Sophia McClennen told NBC News, "when you combine satire and parody, you're going to get a lot more people missing it and you're going to get a lot of the people that you're actually satirizing liking it," (Rosenblatt). McClennen ultimately sees that as proof that the satire is doing its job right, but unfortunately, there is some real-world consequence for the players you draw to the game. Right-wing players have attacked community managers on the game with political ideologies they disagree with (Kaur). They think the meta-narrative of the game is on their side when it isn't.

Ultimately, Helldivers 2 is bold enough to challenge the military-industrial complex that so many multiplayer games embrace, which is further proof of its subversive nature. Unfortunately, this shows how nuance can be lost when any video game reaches as massive an audience as live service games need to survive.

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[Newsletter] Entry #5 - Ideological Analysis

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