[Newsletter] Entry #4 - Narrative Analysis - Tomas Franzese

While multiplayer games tend to deemphasize story, Helldivers 2 creates memorable experiences that stick with its players. In particular, several subversive narrative design choices that Arrowhead Game Studios made for Helldivers 2 work together to create emergent meta-narratives that players feel like they are in control of. Players have specific objectives to complete within a mission but can do them in any order. That allows players to create distinct experiences and memorable stories as they make their way through a mission. I may recount the time I completed a difficult mission on my own without dying, while a friend of mine could recall summoning an aerial strike that wiped out their entire squad in the middle of a tense battle.

Each mission of Helldivers 2 tells a little story of its own, and it's something that players feel like they are in complete control of. In reality, the game is smartly setting up these encounters and establishing game systems that all work together to create a storytelling engine that players can mold each time they boot their game up. That same compliment can be given to many live service games, but where Helldivers 2 goes a step further than its competition is in its meta-narratives, as it gets an entire community of players attached to broader missions that they need to work together to complete. To understand what's so special about Helldivers 2's major orders, I must break down how narrative is typically delivered in live service video games.

Using Fortnite as an example, it has a seasonal model and tells its story that way. Each season typically has a cinematic that goes along with it and tells its own story. Every week, players obtain new narrative-related objectives to complete; by doing so, they are awarded with XP and NPC interactions that offer deeper insight into the game's lore. Then, there's typically a time-limited season-ending event for players to experience live, and those push the broader game narrative forward. A new season begins, and the process starts anew. Former Epic Games Chief Creative Officer Donald Mustard has explained that Fortnite's narrative is attempting to "tell you

a story that feels like it’s being told in a moment" and ultimately wants to offer a "blended entertainment experience that has interactive elements" (Webster).

Many of Fortnite's competitors lift that narrative storytelling model and don't innovate in many significant ways. Arrowhead Game Studios took that model and heavily reinterpreted it for Helldivers 2. Of course, the game does have a broader narrative that evolves. Players are the titular soldiers, fighting to defend the fascist Super Earth from opponents it has deemed threats. That started with bugs and robots and, over time, has evolved to include the zombie-like Illuminate. It has the same satirical edge and clear Starship Troopers inspiration as its visual style. However, through the Major Orders system, Helldivers 2 stands out. Major Orders, which come with flavor text in the mission selection hub, give the entire community of Helldivers 2 a community to work toward.

For example, players may have to work together to rid a planet of Illuminate. A progress bar fills every time a player completes a mission, even if it's only by significantly less than 1%. This creates a communal objective for players to rally behind and complete, and the ongoing story of Helldivers 2 dynamically reacts to whether or not players complete a Major Order. By making every player feel like they are doing their part to push the story forward, Helldivers 2 gives its ongoing narrative the feeling of being user-generated, even if Arrowhead Game Studios is truly the game master pulling the strings. Helldivers 2 writer Russ Nickel believes Helldivers 2 live service narrative succeeds "because it's one where the story can change constantly so it really does feel alive," (Dowd). That's similar to Mustard's goal, although Helldivers 2 approaches the concept from a different angle.

Many live service games fail because they don't intertwine narrative and gameplay well enough. Through the Major Order system, Helldivers 2 manages to achieve that complex goal.

[Newsletter] Entry #4 - Narrative Analysis - Tomas Franzese

No other live service game out there has a gameplay system quite like this, and that uniqueness is part of what allowed Helldivers 2 to chart its own path and become a breakout hit in the live service space. It's a game where players feel like they are working toward telling a story together, and that's a powerful tool for player engagement.

Works Cited

"Fortnite’S Experimental Story Is an Attempt to Create ‘the Entertainment Experience of the Future’." *The Verge*, 18 Mar. 2021, www.theverge.com/22338403/fortnite-story-narrative-interview-donald-mustard-epic-games.

"How The Blistering Satire Of Helldivers 2 Came To Be." *Inverse*, 9 May 2024, www.inverse.com/gaming/helldivers-2-lead-writer-interview-russ-nickel.