

PlanetSide 2 Game Critique

In 2015-2016 I constantly played PlanetSide 2, and while it was fun, there were many problems with the game. Many of the problems were due to simple balance issues, while others were caused by major oversights in the game design. Throughout my analysis of PlanetSide 2, I will refer to the game in the state it was in during the 2015-2016 window when I played. Daybreak Games, the current developers, have made many changes and updates to the game since I played. Many of these updates have addressed some of the issues I have/had with the game. However, to the best of my knowledge some of the major, underlying issues with the game have remained unchanged. So as the reader, please understand that this critique does not address the game in its current state, rather that of an analysis of PlanetSide 2 from early 2016.

Capture points in PlanetSide 2 turn into mad houses of lag and friendly fire. This mad house effect is caused by two major issues, the scoring system and the fast travel system. Each of these issues also compounds on other flaws in the game, such as the squad/platoon system, redeployment system, and the availability and capabilities of the Sunderer. All of these issues and others combine to form a perfect storm of game ruining strategies and exploits.

First off, capture point overcrowding is caused by the squad/platoon system and the scoring system. It is common to see one or two platoons each with forty-eight players steam role over a point, or cluster of points, defended by a fraction as many players. The goal for these players is not to move the front, or reinforce sectors they take, but rather to bee line for a point of interest like a Power Plant or Bio Sphere. The issue is not that these players are employing bad strategy, the German Blitzkrieg proved that this kind of shock and awe fighting was wildly effective; the issue is the game does not punish these players for failing to reinforce their supply lines, or for failing to defend the sectors they have captured. In fact, the game almost encourages players to act this way; there are massive rewards if they can capture the point of interest, and few penalties if they fail to capture their target.

Squad/Platoon System

When the incessant forward march, that I jokingly call a wall of lag, is stopped by another faction, there are virtually no penalties for having wasted so many resources or having lost supply lines to the current front. On more than one occasion I have seen this kind of Blitzkrieg end up with the fighting front surrounded, only to have the surrounded platoon abuse the fast travel system and accessibility of Sunderers to crush their opponents in what should have been an unwinnable fight.

In PlanetSide 1, a game I didn't play very much, there was a vehicle called an ANT. The ANT was used to transport materials from the warp gates to the fronts. These materials allowed players to respawn and powered the force fields that defended the bases. If you lost your supply lines, you would find it nearly impossible to defend a siege. However, in PlanetSide 2 that is not how it works. The ANT's are still used to move materials around, but not for the preconstructed bases, where all the fighting takes place. Where you can respawn is now determined by a latus network, supposedly like that of a power grid. But this does not solve anything, because there is a vehicle universally available, called a Sunderer. These vehicles let players spawn an unlimited amount of times, anyplace they want.

The Sunderer in PlanetSide 2 is honestly one of the biggest flaws in the game; yet many parts of the game are balanced around it. It allows players to spawn on it when it is deployed in a stationary mode, as well as resupply, heal, and change class, all for free. The Sunderers are also well defended and have the ability to cloak when deployed. It takes every feature of a stationary base, removes the ability to spawn other vehicles, and puts it on wheels. This means that even if you are cut off from the 'power grid' and can't spawn in the base you are trying to defend, you can just spawn in one of the Sunderers that your team has 'pulled' for that engagement. This nearly negates the need for any form of supply line, and always keeps players within a few hundred meters of the capture points.

The maps in PlanetSide 2 are massive, eight kilometers by eight kilometers. It takes several minutes to fly from one side to the other, quite some time to drive from a warp gate to the front, and I've never tried walking more than a few hundred meters because the maps are simply that big. Never the less, the size of these maps is made completely null and void by its fast travel system, and the Sunderers.

Now I should say, that having a fast travel system in a video game is not an inherently bad thing. For example Borderlands 2 and Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel, did this fantastically. In Borderlands you play in a massive world that moves through several points of focus as the player progresses through the story. But you still must experience the world, there is no way around it. You spend time walking from place to place, but it never feels unnecessary or pointless. Borderlands is an amazing game for its story and characters, yes, but it's made and balanced around combat. Yet traveling around its world is a normal and fun part of the game. Gearbox managed this in two ways I believe, the first is that you have rocket boosted cars, or Star Wars style hover bikes at every fast travel station, so if you know it's a long walk you can take one of those, for free. The second way is that you can only fast travel from fast travel stations, so you still must walk or drive to a fast travel station if you need to get someplace. When you die, you are also fined a large percentage of your money, this means it always hurts the same to die, and killing yourself simply to fast travel is never worth it.

Day Break Games addressed the issue of fast travel in two ways, they gave you two hot keys, one that 'redeploys you' and one that 'joins combat' and both are ridiculous game ruining additions. Redeploying simple means, you get a 10 second count down, and if you don't take damage for those ten seconds you are taken back to the spawn menu without it counting as a death. Join combat does the same thing, but then it auto reassigns you to a new sector, possibly on a new continent, that sometimes has a battle taking place nearby.

Even though you have access to futuristic jump-jet style fighters, massive aerial troop transports, and rocket boosted quad bikes, it is simply faster for players to use Sunderers to spawn on or jump around between the fast travel points. In a game with an open world, giving players buttons on their keyboard design so that they don't have to actually spend time traveling, and mobile spawn points so that they can fast travel anyplace, completely negates that open world.

I believe Daybreak tried to use the join combat feature to help distribute players more evenly. However, what it turns into is people who don't have a 'clan' or platoon to join, getting assigned to a sector in the middle of no place, that has two allies and three enemies. This turns a game about waging a planet wide war, into a three on three game of hide and seek with everyone running around as invisible snipers.

Furthermore, the re-deploy feature is abused by those who just zurg-rush in a straight line; once one front slows down, all of the players in those two or three platoons will just re-deploy to the other side of the map, or a separate continent completely and start all over again. This leaves small squads and solo players to try to stop the now oncoming wave of enemies. This often results in the sectors they just captured being retaken.

The simplest way to fix the fast travel, is to make it so players must spawn at bases connected to the 'power grid' and can only fast travel from those bases. Sunderer's should also have to carry Cordium (a harvestable mineral in the game world); this way if players want to keep spawning at those Sunderers they must deliver supplies to it using the ANTs. If players want to re-deploy it should count as a death and having a longer respawn time, this would discourage players from abusing this system (a change I believe Daybreak made just as I quit playing). Daybreak should also remove the join combat hotkey and make it a feature that you can access from the respawn menu, so players are not encouraged to use it. I also believe that there needs to be a stronger emphasis on sector control and defense.

Scoring System

The way scoring works in PlanetSide 2 is that each continent has all three factions fighting on it. Simplistically, the first to reach 21 points wins the continent which unlocks a bonus for that faction. The continent then locks for some time usually about eight hours, and another one unlocks. There are many ways to get points. You can generate points by building refineries and feeding them Cordium collected through the map. But they are also earned for holding a certain percentage of sectors, and for holding points of interest like Power Plants, Bio Spheres, or Tec Plants. There are three of each of these points. Each faction starts with one of each when a new continent unlocks, and each gives a different bonus, such as passive health recovery, or access to the faction main battle tank at vehicle spawning stations other than the warp gate. These points of interest supply powerful advantages as is, but when you add huge score swings to owning several at a time it almost negates every other way of generating points. An example when I was playing was that if you controlled two Tec Plants your team got 3 points, if you owned 2 Tec Plants and two Bio Spheres you got 7, a third of what it takes to win the game. If you owned all three Tec Plants, a nearly impossible task admittedly, you got 15 points, merely 6 points short of winning the continent. Compile these massive score swings with the fact that the other factions now don't have the passive bonuses from those points of interest, and it becomes a one-sided slaughter fest.

I think the passive bonuses granted by these points of interest makes them important enough as is. I do not think that they should have bonus scores assigned for holding multiple points of interest. Buffing the current passive bonus or increasing the 'Continent capture' bonus would be a better way of rewarding players for holding those points of interest. This would eliminate the strategy of zurgung through 5 sectors to capture a Tec Plant, which in turn would help eliminate point overcrowding and encourage players to spread out along the front and fight for and hold sectors.

Other Issues

A big part of the reason I stopped playing PlanetSide 2 is that there was a very inconsistent player base for the game; many, many players left for the reasons I stated above. Furthermore, almost every issue in PlanetSide 2 compounds on and with others. The game is a mess of poorly designed features. I used to compare it to a cake someone tried to make, except the recipe was written in a language they didn't know. They had all the right ingredients, they just added the wrong amounts and at the wrong time. I really do believe that PlanetSide 2 has the possibility of being an incredible game, even with the massive amount of room for player error; it simply needs to be designed better. With this type of game, where the players have the control to do anything, you cannot plan on players being smart enough, or coordinated enough to counter cheap strategies like zurg rushing a Tec Plant. The game itself must punish the players and factions that use game ruining strategies.

Admittedly this issue specifically is caused by the dwindling player base, if each continent had the max player count online, all the time, this type of strategy, unless coordinated perfectly would be exceptionally hard to pull off. However, the servers are not at max player count, ever. This means that work must be done on the game to rebalance it for the now reduced player count. The PlanetSide 2 community has extensively talked about the player count on forums, discussed in game, or video essayed the topic. Re-vitalizing the community is the only way to save the game, but the game needs to be significantly improved before that new community can begin to form.

PlanetSide 2 came out in November 2012, making it almost exactly six years old today. The game has been continually worked on, developed, and updated. Yet it continues to barely maintain 2,500 players daily. For a game designed (not actually capable of handling but designed) for 2,000 people to a continent, and 6,000 to a server, pulling in a mere 2,500 players a day and spreading them across several servers' results in a poor player experience over all.

Conclusion

I truly do believe that PlanetSide 2 from a conceptual level has everything a game needs to dominate the gaming market; however, designing a game that involves: infantry combat, ground and air transport, armored vehicle combat, air combat, base building, large scale strategy, small scale strategy, and takes place in a completely open world, is a monumental undertaking even at first thought. That said, I think it is capable of being done, and if it were I think a game like PlanetSide 2 could rule over the FPS gaming market for many years.

The changes I talked about above are a mere start to the changes that could be made to PlanetSide 2, to help improve the gameplay experience and bring back more players. If we bring those players back, some will invest in the games digital content, further funding the future development of the game.

Post Script, November 2018

During my time away from the game, Daybreak re-designed the scoring and alert systems. This fundamentally changed how continents are won. Now when a faction gains control of 41 or more territories on a continent, a “Holding Ground” alert will start. This is a ninety-minute timer, at the end of which, the faction with the most territories under their control will win the continent.

This is almost the exact change I would have proposed if asked, and as I returned to the game during my writing of this analysis, I could quickly tell things had changed. With the removal of incentive for mindless rushing, Blitzkriegs have become a very rare event. The overall faction balance (a topic I did not brush on but was a massive issue previously) has also changed. The Terrain Republic (TR) does very well in CQB, when rushing objectives, and has an MBT that can serve as a long-distance artillery piece. This makes defending against TR rushes almost impossible. However, with the changes to the scoring system these types of rushes are rare and can be simply countered by taking territory behind the advancing front. This is the type of

punishment that was needed; yes, factions can still trample a small force, rushing to an important territory, yet, there is no gain to be had for doing so.

It is amazing to have seen such a distinct picture of pre and post change to the scoring system. The game almost feels like a completely new one; sure the guns are the same, and it's the same map, but the strategy is completely different, and much more balanced. I must commend Daybreak on making such major changes to the game, it has made a massive impact to the enjoyment of the game. I hope they continue to make improvements like this one in the future so that more players return to PlanetSide 2.