In 2015-2016 I heavily played PlanetSide 2, and while a fun game there where many problems with the game. Many of the issues where due to simple balance issues, while other where caused by major overlooks in the game design. Throughout this game analysis I will refer the game in the state it was in during the 2015-2016 window I played in. Daybreak Games has made many changes and updates to the game since, many of these updates have addressed the some of the issues I have/had with the game. However, to the best of my knowledge most of the major, underlying issues with the game have remained unchanged. So as the reader please understand that this 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 is caused due to anywhere from forty-eight to almost hundred players fighting over a very few objectives, each meant for engagements smaller than twelve on twelve. This is a side effect of the squad/platoon system, fast travel system, and most importantly, the scoring system.

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 those players that overwhelm points 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 not.

When the insensate 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 for the surround 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, there was a vehicle called an ANT, these where used to transport materials from the warp gates to the fronts, these materials allowed player 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 bases. 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, that lets players spawn an unlimited amount of times, anyplace you 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 player to spawn on it when it is deployed in a stationary mode, as well as resupply, heal, and change class; all for free. 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 player with a few hundred meters of the capture points.

The maps in PlanetSide 2 are massive, 8 KM by 8 KM; 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. But 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, Borderlands 2 and Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel, did this fantastically. In Borderlands you play in a massive world, that moves through several point of focus as the player progress 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 simple 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, possible 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 player 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 better. 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 hide and seek game with everyone running around as invisible snipers.

Further, more 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, leaving small squads and solo players to try and 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 player they 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, 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.

They way scoring works in PlanetSide 2 is that each continent has the three factions fighting on it. The first to 21 points wins the continent. Winning a continent will unlock a bonus for that faction. The continent then locks for some time usually about 8 hours, and another one unlocks. There are many ways to get points, you can generate them 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 hold 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 too, such as passive heath 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 was when I was playing if you controlled two Tec Plants your team got 3 points, if you owned 2 tech 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 bonus 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. 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 zurging 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.

A big part of the reason I stopped playing is because there was there was a very inconsistent player base for the game, many, many players left for the reason 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 langue they didn’t know. They had all the right ingredients, they just added the wrong amounts and the wrong time. I really do believe that PlanetSide 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 faction that uses game ruining strategies like this one; yet Daybreak does not seem to be interested in doing so.

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 community has extensively talked about on forums, discussed in game, or video essayed this topic. Re-vitalizing the community is the only way to save the game, but the game needs to be saved 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 design (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 at a time and spreading them across several servers’ results in a poor player experience over all.

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 where 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 game play experience, and bring back more players. And if we bring those players back, some will invest in the game’s digital content, which will fund further and future development.