<u>**Titanfall 2 Review - Kanishka Siriwardana 1605074**</u>
Note: I have used the game design version of mechanic here as opposed to the Marc Leblanc MDA version.

To start with the basics for the unfamiliar, Titanfall 2 is a first-person shooter developed by Respawn Entertainment. The team is famously comprised of former Infinity Ward employees who left the company in the wake of the 2010 royalties fiasco, shortly after the release of Modern Warfare 2.

This information is important as Call Of Duty games continue to be made despite the original people behind the franchise not being the current creators. From the outset, it was clear that comparisons to the franchise were going to be made, even before anything about the original Titanfall was shown. From a surface level look at the two games, one might assume that Titanfall is simply Call Of Duty repackaged with different bells and whistles from Infinite Warfare (2016's Call Of Duty title). Comparisons between the two are relevant only to differentiate the two and to give a frame of reference to the unfamiliar.

Titanfall 2 is split into two parts; Campaign and Multiplayer. The latter is the clear main attraction while the former serves to introduce and familiarize players with the mechanics of the game. However, the campaign is compelling in its own right.

Firstly, the campaign. No part of Titanfall 2's narrative is worthwhile. The backstory has enough elements in it to make for an interesting story but it serves simply to inform the aesthetic of the game. The game takes place in the distant future, in the frontier of space where the Interstellar Mining Corporation (IMC) is fighting against the Militia. The IMC wishes to exploit resources from planets and the humans living on those planets formed the aforementioned Militia. This is information that was found through a google search as the game itself does not mention this during its runtime. Even the first game only makes allusions to these things.

The player character is called Jack Cooper, a grunt for the Militia. He is quickly thrust into the role of a Pilot after his commanding officer dies during the first mission of the game. Pilots, in the Titanfall fiction, are the best of the soldiers, able to perform amazing acrobatic feats and fight with pinpoint accuracy. They are also the only soldiers who can call down Titans into the battlefield. Titans are large bipedal mechs that form the backbone of both the Militia and IMC army. They also have advanced artificial intelligence systems, which is especially relevant to the narrative.

Jack becomes the Pilot of BT-7274, the Titan of his former commander. From here, the story follows the two of them and the way their relationship develops. Sadly, this falls apart for a number of reasons. Firstly, Jack has no personality to speak of. The two main characters have conversations throughout the game, some of which have dialogue choices for the player to make. None of these give anything away about what type of person Jack is, what his feeling are about the larger conflict and what his current emotional state is. BT is the more interesting of the two but that isn't saying much. His schtick of not understanding basic human interactions and nomenclature is mildly charming at first but gets old fast.

The other elements of the story don't fair much better. Because the majority of the narrative is focused on the relationship between Jack and BT, the side characters don't get much screen time. They are just as shallow as the main characters and relegated to a few lines, most of which are forgotten as soon as they are uttered. The larger conflict is also not explored. At no point do you get a sense of how it is going and why your actions are truly significant.

There doesn't seem to be anything significant it is trying to say through its story elements. If there is, then it is doing a good job of hiding it from the player. Most likely, the resources of creating a compelling narrative were used elsewhere.

Thankfully, the campaign is saved by the gameplay and level design.

Titanfall, when playing a Pilot, controls a lot like Call of Duty. Your default position is with the gun at the hip and you can increase accuracy by aiming down the sights at the cost of mobility and peripheral vision. The similarities pretty much end there. Titanfall's focus is movement. When sprinting, the player can jump against a wall to start a wall run. This speeds the player up and makes them harder to hit. By jumping off the wall, the player gains even more speed. Chaining wall runs together allows the player to travel large distances quickly and safely. Other elements of the control the player has over his or her avatar also fit into the speed and mobility concept that is at the heart of the gameplay. The player has a slide that puts the player into the crouched position and gives them a burst of speed. This slide can be preloaded while in the air, which can then be used in conjunction with the wall runs to maintain speed if there is no wall.

By preloading the slide in the air and jumping as soon as the player touches the ground, the speed loss is reduced to almost zero and the player can continue to travel forward.

This increase in speed is key to making sure players engage with the mobility mechanics. This was true of the first Titanfall and a year later, this requirement of a benefit for engaging with a mechanic became clear thanks to the release of Call Of Duty Black Ops 3.

Black Ops 3 contained the wall running elements of Titanfall but it did not have the increase in the speed that came along with using the mechanic, it seemed to actually make the player a little slower. Furthermore, they were not safe from enemies as it did not make tracking them more difficult. This resulted in most players not engaging with the mechanic.

The movement system in Titanfall also makes for very different enemy encounters. A lot of the weapons are incredibly effective when fired from the hip (default position) so they can be used in conjunction with wall runs and jumps in one smooth motion. This gives the combat a pace that is a mix of the modern shooters and the area shooters of the 90s.

The campaign uses this movement system thanks to smart level design. There is such a variety of unique levels that it would take a little too long to explain all of them, so I'm going to focus on the 'Effect and Cause' level. Most of the levels in the game have some sort of

element that modifies the player's interaction with the game and in turn, affect the mobility. In this level specifically, the player can shift between two time periods at the press of a button. The setting for a level is an abandoned experimental lab. When the player shifts in time, they shift to when the Lab was still functioning. As a result, there are elements of the level that exist in one time period that don't exist in the other. The player is required to engage enemies in both time periods as well as navigate between the two in order to progress through the level. This manifests in needing to switch time period between wall runs to make walls appear that are not present in the current time period.

It's a simple mechanical wrinkle to the existing gameplay and the concept has been done in other games but modern first person shooter campaigns don't have levels like this.

They also don't overstay their welcome. The campaign is only around 4 hours, short even compared to the already small campaigns of modern shooters. Most importantly, they help to hide problems that the genre has that even Titanfall has not been able to overcome. The infantry enemies in this game are little more than cannon fodder so taking the focus away from standard gunfights has helped enormously to make the game more compelling.

The other significant part of the gameplay in Titanfall are the Titans themselves. Smooth, intuitive gameplay has clearly been a focus for Respawn even when they were making Call Of Duty games and this is especially apparent when controlling Titans. They are a lot more agile than one might expect and control similarly to the Pilots while still making a significant change to the moment to moment gameplay. Titans cannot jump but they can dash. They also have a variety of weapons and abilities that form classes. Titans have significantly more health than Pilots but it does not regenerate. They are also much bigger.

In the campaign, you have access to a Titan depending on the level. In some levels you can switch between Titan and Pilot but it is recommended that you stay in your Titan because you are engaging with other Titans. As mentioned previously, the combat in the game against the AI is not very engaging and this holds true for Titan vs generic Titan fights. Luckily, these sections also don't last long and quickly move you towards more interesting sections.

For the Titan gameplay, the interesting sections in the campaign are the boss fights. These are against the named enemies in the narrative and are a stiff challenge that require you to use all the tools at your disposal.

The campaign is a good journey overall, using the elements that make Titanfall interesting in a single player setting with some unique ideas that could and should be replicated in other titles.

However, it is quite clear that the multiplayer is the main attraction.

For the most part, Pilots and Titans function the same way they did in the campaign with a few difference. Firstly, Pilots have an expanded toolset. For example, the campaign had the cloak tactical ability that turned players invisible. That is present in the multiplayer but there

are others such as stim that provide a burst of speed and increased healing. Also, more weapons and ordnance are as well as a selection of perks (basically modifiers such as quieter footsteps). All these items and abilities can be combined into classes much like Call Of Duty.

The Titans have less customizability compared to the original Titanfall but this is due to a beneficial change to the game. For reference, in the first game, Titans could be customized to have a range of weapons, chassis or perks. In Titanfall 2, there are six unique Titans with fixed weapons, chassis, and abilities. There is a still a selection of perks but the changes made to the Titans through them are not drastic.

While this seems like a step back, it ends up actually being more varied. These six new Titans are far more unique than anything that could have been created in the first game through the options. This is because each has a different set of abilities that work in conjunction with each other to make them feel incredibly varied. For example, Ronin is a hit and run style Titan with a sword on his back. He has little health but a ton of maneuverability and close range damage. Tone is a titan that requires 3 hits from her primary weapon in order to release a salvo of rockets at an enemy Titan. She also has a sonar pulse to detect enemies behind walls and a particle wall to block bullets. All those things are unique to her and make her playstyle very different to the other Titans.

Obviously, the big mechanical change in the multiplayer is the inclusion of other live players. Something which immediately takes the big negative of the AI from the single player away. It becomes immediately apparent that mastery of the movement mechanics means more success. A skilled player will use their environment to keep momentum up during engagements and make tracking them more difficult. They can do this all the while engaging the enemies in a gunfight and the game encourages you to do this.

This is visible in what happens when you shoot someone. If you are sprinting along the ground and you fire your weapon, you immediately go into a walk. This makes you slower and more vulnerable. If you were to fire while running on a wall or in the air, your speed does not decrease.

This makes multiplayer engagements incredibly dynamic and battles tend to last longer than comparable first person shooters. The skill ceiling for this is also high. A mechanic discovered by the players called air strafing allows Pilots to travel across the map in second and mastery of this technique is difficult.

The Titan Pilot interaction in the multiplayer is slightly different. Pilots have to earn their Titans by killing enemy players, damaging/destroying enemy Titans, killing roaming AI or completing objectives (in some game modes, killing the AI is the objective). These actions add to your build meter. Once it is full, you can call in a Titan. Dropped Titans last as long as you can keep them alive and you can earn more Titans if you lose the initial one.

Pilots are at a disadvantage against Titans but they are not powerless. A good pilot can outsmart a Titan and destroy it all by themselves. All Pilots can carry anti-Titan weapons that

do more damage to Titans and some ordnance have different effects on Titans. For example, the arc grenade can be thrown at Titans to temporarily blind them.

New to Titanfall 2 is the battery mechanic that presents an interesting risk-reward system. Pilots can jump on the back of enemy Titans to pull out a battery. This immediately reduces the enemy Titan's health. Additionally, it adds a significant percentage of progress to the Pilot's build meter. The stolen battery can be placed in their own Titan or a friendly one. The trade-off comes from vulnerability. Once the battery is pulled, the enemy Titan knows where the Pilot is for a few seconds, their location marked on HUD. Also, the battery glows bright green and can be seen easily, even from across the map (provided there is a line of sight).

A skilled Pilot, noticing they are close to a full Titan may attempt to pull a battery, call down their Titan and goad the enemy Titan into walking under where their Titan will fall onto the map. If successful, the enemy Titan will be crushed by the Pilot's Titan and the stolen battery can be placed in the Titan to give them a bit more health.

If the Pilot is not successful, he/she would die, granting points to the enemy. The stolen battery can be recovered to null the damage done by pulling it out in the first place. Also, the Pilot could potentially lose Titan build percentage depending on how they built that percentage up.

The Titan Pilot interaction also shows the importance of Titan control and pushes people to do better at the game. The team that has Titan control (more Titans on the map) is at a huge advantage. They can kill and complete objectives quickly while being inside the safety of a Titan. Titan control tends to shift constantly during the game, the winner generally being the team with more control.

It forces a shifting set of goals for the player. A team without Titan control usually has to focus on reducing the number of enemy Titans on the map in order to gain control and complete the objective. If they do not attempt to gain control, they will lose faster. The team with control has to make as much progress towards the objective goal as they can because Titan control does not tend to last a long time. It can become incredibly tense when two relatively even teams are simply battling each other to gain Titan control because only a few engagements are enough to shift the balance.

All these interactions and meta-systems are what make Titanfall's multiplayer different from other games in the genre. Call of Duty only operates on the infantry level, the Battlefield games operate mostly on the infantry level with vehicles that change the game but not nearly as significantly as the mobility and Titan mechanics of Titanfall.

At a fundamental level, the fun comes from engaging, understanding and mastering these systems. It does not rely on the carrot on a stick mentality of other multiplayer games, the base gameplay is its own reward. The better you get, the more intense the game feels and more fun it becomes.

It should be noted that one of the reasons this all works so well is due to feel. Feel is difficult to quantify but what is meant by feel here is how player interaction affects the gameplay. In Titanfall, every action feels intuitive and smooth, both as Pilot and as Titan. It is this commitment to feel above realism and visual fidelity that makes the game work.

The few issues with the multiplier stem mostly from balancing problems that the developer is working on. The primary problem is that of the two types of weapons in the game. Pilots have access to multiple classes of weapons but they fall into two types, hitscan and projectile. Hitscan weapons fire and hit exactly where a player is pointing. It is instant. Projectile weapons have travel time so a player has to account for where they bullets will land when they fire and adjust so their bullets go where the enemy is going to be. The philosophy behind this seems to be to reduce the impact of single hit kill weapons like sniper rifles (most of which are projectile weapons) and to further increase weapon variety. Unfortunately, the effort required to perform well with the projectile weapons does not correlate to a high reward. Luckily, the vast majority of weapons in the game are hitscan so players do not lose out much. Perhaps the problem will be addressed in patches.

There are few things left to discuss regarding the actual content of the game. Visually, the game looks good with a future military look that strikes a balance between the modern military Call Of Duty games and Mass Effect. It's not a graphical powerhouse but the unique look of the game further adds to the disappointment of it's underutilized world and story. Moreover, the game's focus seems to be more on performance than on fidelity, as was the case with the studio's past games. It is a necessary trade off due to the fast and chaotic nature of the game.

In terms of the value for money, it depends entirely on how much a player engages with the multiplayer. If they are looking for a single player campaign and have no interest in the multiplayer, then it is hard to recommend for the full £50 price. The campaign is only four hours long and while it is certainly worth experiencing, it is not worth that price. Technically, a player interested in the multiplayer could play it indefinitely but that's unrealistic. What is important is that the game has enough variety in terms of game modes, weapons, Titans and abilities that it should keep them interested for a long time.

To conclude, Titanfall 2 is one of the most innovative games to come out in the genre in a number of years, even compared to the first game in some ways. It feels like the culmination of what the studio was building towards for a number of years. The problems with the campaign are significant but do not account for even a fraction of the time you spend playing the game. The game's focus on building interlocking systems that produce a sensory overload type of gameplay is mostly successful in the campaign and close to perfect in the multiplayer, the latter of which is where players are likely to spend most of their time.