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Tried and True: Team Fortress 2

*Team Fortress 2* is class based first person shooter, released in 2007. It came packaged with *Half-Life 2: Episode 2* and *Portal* in the Orange Box. It is the sequel to the 1996 mod *Team Fortress* for *Quake* and its 1999 remake, *Team Fortress Classic*. TF2 is a class based, which means upon loading into a match, you choose a role, a character. There are nine of them, each with distinct play styles but fall into 3 categories: attack, defense, and support. Some might have a rocket launcher and move slower, while others can build turrets at the cost of personal self defense. You can also switch in between lives to fit what your team needs. The combat and the objectives for each game are structured to be balanced on partial class countering and overall skill of the individual, allowing for raw skill or team planning to overcome even the worst of situations (Doug). I could just keep listing facts like these, droning on and on, just like a Wikipedia article. But good news for you -- I’m not. Team Fortress is one of my favorite games of all time. I have an absurd amount of time in it and I’ve been playing since I had a personal computer. This is no way going to be unbiased, but I’d love to prove to you right now, reader, that this is the best class based shooter, maybe even shooter, maybe even game, of all time.

First, let's talk about the game at release. Welcome back to 2007. I was 6 years old, and I had no idea what Valve was. Valve, for those who are uninformed such as myself at age 6, was the head honcho PC gaming company at the time. With the release of Half Life 2 and the emerging popularity of their game distribution platform Steam, Valve had the stage they needed to put out huge, popular games. The company was ready to use this newfound freedom to land a *multiplayer only* game onto the market, which means they focus solely on the competitive game modes and multiplayer maps. Truly, the only single player component of TF2 was its tutorial. For a multiplayer only game, they needed players, and lots of them. To get players, you need interest. To get interest, you need marketing. TF2 marketed in the obligatory ways, such as posters at game stores and advertisements on the Steam Store, but the engineers and artists worked in tandem to create a visual style that was hard to overlook.

The art style was described loosely from the developers as “idealized 1950’s-60’s Americana.” To be more specific, they adopted many traits from the artist J. C. Leyendecker. I’m unable to show you pictures in this document, but please, go google him. He was a commercial illustrator, so his artwork captured the advertisements of the time perfectly. By basing the artstyle on advertising, the artworks’ staying power in the mind was unmatchable. Interior details such as clothing folds are aplenty and silhouettes are often emphasized with rim highlights rather than dark outlines (Mitchell). In addition to making advertising easier for the game, this style also helped the game heavily. All classes were identifiable from their silhouette alone, and their weapons are always held at chest height to clearly show off what gun you’re at the muzzle end of. There’s one other thing that TF2 had up its sleeve when it came to artistic style -- and that’s the cinematic Meet The Team shorts. Each video short delved deeper into the lore or a story behind each of the classes, showing off the personality of each class and building their relationship to the other members of the cast. They were a fan favorite, and by releasing them they could build the world of Team Fortress outside the .exe file.

One thing I forgot to mention is that the Meet the Team videos weren’t actually part of the marketing process for Team Fortress 2. Meet the Heavy, the first in the series, was released in 2009, two years after the release of the game. So what gives? Why keep investing resources to advertise a game that's already been out for long? Well, Team Fortress 2 put its foot down and said, “Nope. I’m not going anywhere. You will keep playing me.” They employed something that would soon become the industry standard, and they’d do it with flying colors. Team Fortress would be the pioneer of the Event. Events are planned public or social occasions where people gather for whatever reason. In real life, my best example for a public social event would be a Fourth of July parade. In video games, however, my best example would be the WAR! update in TF2.

In addition to a standard update of new maps, weapons, and systems, (not paid dlc of course, all free to the player) Valve added a time sensitive event to Team Fortress. Content not restricted by cost, but by the time frame. For a week, two classes had a global kill counter for each other. Anytime you killed the opposite class, you’d add to the counter, and the winner would receive new weapons the next update. By restricting the event to only a week, it put pressure on players to play during the time frame, pushing the concurrent players to an all time high. This event was crazy on its own, but it also was introduced by a very stylized web page documenting all the changes to the game and a webcomic that describes the reason for the two class’s sudden hatred of each other.

Team Fortress 2 made its mark by not letting up. TF2 is unique compared to other shooters at the time because it was the first popular game to “commercialize” after release (Bycer). This meant more maps, weapons, and other full-blown events such as WAR! for free to keep the game fresh and new for years. The core gameplay is so satisfactory that all Valve needed to do was keep adding and expanding to the base game. The events started advertising themselves, and the annual holiday events consistently kept players coming back. Scream Fortress, for example, was the annual Halloween event. The event had many themed maps and even some completely exclusive ones, and allowed you to earn and wear Halloween themed cosmetics. This practice is now seen in many multiplayer video games, further solidifying TF2’s place in being a trailblazer in marketing and lasting appeal for a multiplayer shooter.

2 years later, in 2011, TF2 adopted the free to play model. This means anyone could pick up the game and play it, earning extra weapons and cosmetics through in-game drops, achievements, and microtransactions. This effectively immortalized their shooter, as it’s upfront cost to newcomers is zero. Many rejoiced at the fact that there will always be people online to play against. In addition to becoming free to play, the TF2 team started loosening the reins on TF2, and allowed the community to start making their own weapons, maps, and hats for the game. They could upload the content onto Valve’s game modification database, Steam Workshop, where any fan created content could be greenlit into the official game by the community. There are also community servers, where any modifications could be made to the base game by the server host (Lim & Harrel). You could make TF2 maps that looked like Minecraft, or introduce new weapons for the community to try out before voting for it on the Workshop (Magrino). Team Fortress octupled its revenue from 2010 by going free to play. But wait, how did Valve make money if the Team Fortress was now free?

Well, the F2P business model thrives off of microtransactions, that word I just threw out a paragraph ago without drawing too much attention to it. People have definitely come to hate microtransactions. Especially to a younger audience, purchasing in-game items with real world money can go very wrong (Game Studies). TF2 took the inevitable criticism of the F2P model head on… by placing the corporate masterminds within the game. You’re not buying in-game items from Valve, no, you’re buying from MannCo, the corporation that has been profiting endlessly from the never ending battles that occur within the game. The CEO of the company is a strong Austrialian man with his home country shaved into his chest. Even when introducing a very publicly criticized revenue style into Team Fortress, they did it with style and grace that no other game had achieved before. And let me tell you, Team Fortress 2 was only the beginning of success that would soon become the business model for free to play apps for smartphones we see today.

Team Fortress has been out for 12 years and counting, but immortality is never pretty. The last major update to the game happened in 2016 with the Jungle Inferno Update. With only the Halloween and Christmas events to tie the community over, the game slowly lost its player base. Every update since then has been bug fixes and cosmetics. These bug fixes ironically brought new bugs to the game, and slowly the game became unoptimized to the point were even good computers couldn’t run the game stabley (McCormick). Without the constant support of the developer, Team Fortress is unable to hold a candle to its class based competitors, most notability Blizzard’s Overwatch. Even with Overwatch’s shadow constantly drowning it out, Team Fortress was and still is a glorious game. The characters are still held as the most memorable characters in gaming history (Lahti). The gameplay is still one of the best multiplayer experiences on the market, and it's free! The glory days of trend setting may be over now, but that won’t replace what the game achieved for games, media, and advertising as a whole.

References

Bycer, J. (2018). Team fortress 2 (2007; PC and multiple platforms): The birth of games as a service. In J. Bycer (Author), *20 essential games to study* (pp. 53-56). Retrieved from ProQuest Ebook Central database.

This chapter of a book isn't about analyzing the game where it was on initial release, but how they continued to expand upon the base game to make it fresh and appealing years after its release, consistently keeping relevance in the public eye.

Chong-U Lim and D. Fox Harrell, "Modeling player preferences in avatar customization using social network data: A case-study using virtual items in Team Fortress 2," *2013 IEEE Conference on Computational Intelligence in-games (CIG)*, Niagara Falls, ON, 2013, pp. 1-8.doi: 10.1109/CIG.2013.6633636

This case study is about how people express themselves in-game using player customization, and how people would personalize their profiles based on the monetary value of those cosmetics.

DougDoug. (2019, January 4). *OVERWATCH vs TF2, but explained with food* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp4cH7mb4X4

Very current Youtube video, comparing TF2 to Overwatch, Blizzard's recent first person class based shooter. They use very friendly analogies in food to portray subjects that would be hard to explain to someone who isn't experienced with video games or shooters.

Hats of affect: A study of affect, achievements and hats in team fortress 2. (2011). *Game Studies*, *11*(1). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/moore

This journal dives deep into how TF2 created a commodity that it's designers never intended: expression of persona and how that can become a commercial community service within the game and the Steam digital distribution platform.

Lahti, E. (2018, May 24). How team fortress 2 changed FPSes forever. *PC Gamer*. Retrieved from https://www.pcgamer.com/how-team-fortress-2-changed-fpses-forever/

A recent article on TF2, an over decade old game at the time. It describes how out of everything, multiplayer storytelling is Team Fortress 2's biggest achievement.

Magrino, T. (n.d.). Why team fortress 2 is one of the greatest games ever made. *Gamesradar*, 1-2.

This article's main claim to why TF2 is the best game ever is generosity. Throughout its years it has catered more and more to the community, and allowed them to create new cosmetics and game modes and community servers.

McCormick, R. (2017, September 20). Has team fortress 2 been improved by its updates? *Rock Paper Shotgun*. Retrieved from https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2017/09/20/has-team-fortress-2-been-improved-by-its-updates/

This source does give a lot of credit to TF2, but does explain how a game that is supported for too long does lose scope and become a hollow, overdeveloped version of itself.

Mitchell, J., Franke, M., & Eng, D. (n.d.). Illustrative rendering in team fortress 2. *Illustrative Rendering in Team Fortress 2*, 1-7. https://doi.org/10.1145/1274871.1274883

This journal is from inside Valve during the games release. In it, they show how the engineers and artists worked together using shading and silhouettes to create a distinct looking game that uses its looks to enhance gameplay.