PLANETSIDE

Planetside is a Massively Multiplayer Online First Person Shooter game (MMOFPS), developed by Sony Online Entertainment (SOE). It was released in May 2003, and is still supported by SOE as of November 2006. It is the second MMOFPS game to be released, and currently the most popular one, having 20,000 subscribers in addition to free reserves accounts[1]. Not only does it successfully merge multiple genres, it also improves on many aspects of the genres it merges with unique features.

The game takes place in a futuristic setting, on a planet where rebirth technology has been discovered. Three factions fight for control of the planet in an endless struggle. Many MMORPG players find the persistent world and epic scale battles attractive, and the fact that they don't have to grind for endless hours to reach a state where they can enjoy the game is also appealing. However, the game still offers a progression system, in form of battle ranks as well as merit commendations, for players who enjoy the achievement aspect of RPG games (even though these do not give the players numerical advantages in battle). A player's health or damage never increases with his level. However, the player earns more certification points to spend on different areas, making them more versatile. So a Battle Rank 3 player can be a tank driver, advanced hacker or a demolition expert, whereas a Battle Rank 25 player can be all three, driving into an enemy base in a tank, hacking an equipment terminal, getting explosives, and blowing up the main generator. This system is highly effective in introducing new players to the battle as it allows players to play with their high level friends and complement each other regardless of the level differences, while in other MMO games a low level player is nothing but a hindrance or liability to his friends.

For First Person Shooter fans, *Planetside* offers various different ways to participate in the battle. Those who enjoy fast, deathmatch games like *Unreal* or *Quake* can specialize in light armor and heavy assault weapons, and focus on indoor fights. Players who enjoy team based shooters like *Team Fortress* and *Natural Selection* can become engineers, medics or infiltrators, and support their team. Players who enjoy shooters with vehicle combat, like the *Battlefield* series, can become tank or aircraft pilots or gunners, and focus on the outdoor aspect of the game. The game offers all these play styles unique roles in the battle. Teamwork is definitely rewarded, as heavier ground vehicles are operated by two or more people, and they are vastly superior to lighter tanks that can be operated with a single person. The infantry weapons are also designed to be used in groups. A single soldier has no chance of taking out a heavy vehicle by himself. However, even though these areas of the game encourage team play, there are other areas that are more rewarding to solo players. Light tanks play a vital role in skirmish battles, as they can easily hunt down infantry in forested areas. Most of the air vehicles are also one man, giving players more alternatives to contribute to the combat on their own. The game even has an incentive system to reward soldiers who play support roles. If a player wants to be a team player, he can do it on his own. Activities like healing or repairing friendly soldiers, deploying mobile spawn stations or hacking enemy terminals all reward experience points if those who are assisted score kills. Players even earn merit commendations for these support activities that can be displayed on the player-character's shoulder. These features allow players to choose the level of social interaction they want in the game, regardless of the way they support their empire.

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[1] WWII Online has a stable subscriber base of 10,000 people, Planetside has had 60,000 subscribers at its peak, and has greatly diminished after the Aftershock content patch, but it is still at 20,000 and is stabilizing. - www.mmogchart.com, 02 December 2006.

Last but not least, the strategic depth of the game offers an alternative to gamers who enjoy strategy games but get tired of repetitive outcomes and set build orders imposed by the genre. Certain vehicles in *Planetside* are designed to counter specific targets, like the anti-air buggy, or the anti-infantry battleframe. Some other vehicles like the main battle tanks are vital to holding ground, but they only become available after the capture of a tech plant on the continent. As players lead squads, they earn command ranks, and they eventually gain the ability to draw battle plans, discuss strategies with other high ranking commanders in private channels, and send global messages to their entire empire. These features appeal to commanders interested in macromanagement. Furthermore, small details are often the most important advantage a side can have – such as placement. A mobile respawn station concealed in a crater near an enemy facility's backdoor offers an immense advantage to assaulting infantry. A sniper on a hill that oversees the enemy courtyard is deadly. Players who enjoy making tactical decisions such as these will find the game very rewarding.

As can be seen, the game is an alternative to a surprising amount of genres. This leads to the question – what makes *Planetside* successful? Perhaps, the speed at which the player can join the battle is one factor. In *World War II Online*, the only other MMOFPS game released, players would often have to spend more than half an hour getting transported to the battle. This immediately made the game unappealing to casual gamers. Sony Online Entertainment seems to have noticed the importance of pointing new players in the direction of the battle as fast as possible, and *Planetside* is quite successful in achieving this. When a player enters the game, they go through a few brief tutorials, and they are then given the option to join the battle immediately. The game offers many options for deployment. There is an instant action option that transports the player to a random ongoing battle. Broadcast Warp Gates allow players to teleport to any Warp Gate linked by their empire's continents and facilities. Furthermore, a High Altitude Rapid Transport (HART) vehicle picks up people from the main headquarters (Sanctuary) every five minutes, and lets them use drop pods to go anywhere they want, as long as the continent is friendly or contested.

Another area in which *Planetside* is unique is in the number of gamestyles it offers. Certain players spend their entire time helping their empire. They get a mobile respawn station; deploy it at a strategic location. Then they go around and repair vehicles. When the fight moves indoors, they stay behind the lines, and revive fallen soldiers. At other times, they sneak into important enemy facilities and blow the main generators, creating distractions. When a friendly base is under siege, they run around repairing the wall turrets and deploying mines in the courtyard. When the enemy is already inside the base, and the facility is hacked, terminals become unusable. An advanced hacker can override this and make the terminal accessible to friendly soldiers. The entire empire depends on the support soldiers. But perhaps the most enjoyable part of being a support soldier is the fact that they aren't expected to be one. In RPG games classes are forced to play certain roles. A priest is forced to be a healer. Furthermore, a priest is expected to be a healer. Thus, if a priest heals, he is doing his job, and it isn't necessary to thank him. If he does not heal, he is not doing his job, and people complain. In *Planetside*, people are not labeled, categorized, and forced to perform specific tasks. A medic or engineer with the right certifications can be equally good at infantry combat as anyone else. However, they can still choose to stop fighting, fall back, and heal the injured. Just the fact that people are not forced to support each other makes support a much more enjoyable activity.

Other players spend their time in light vehicles doing hit and run tactics. They sometimes team up and use buggies to raid enemy flanks. Sometimes they use light tanks and hunt down snipers and infiltrators skirmishing in the woods. Sometimes they use fast scout aircraft to intercept and destroy enemy soldiers transporting modules or other important resources. The fact that light vehicles always play a vital role in the battle is nicely implemented: in most strategy games, light units represent a transition phase leading to heavier and more effective units replacing them in the future. However, in many situations in *Planetside* a buggy stays in the field much longer than a main battle tank due to its maneuverability. Although inferior in armor and firepower, the speed makes up for it and makes the buggy a deadly tool for raiding the flanks of an enemy strike force. For instance, in a bridge fight, a skilled buggy team can circle the enemy and take out the enemy anti-tank troops, allowing friendly heavy tanks to advance across the bridge. Of course, there are many situations in which a heavy tank would be a much better option. A single main battle tank can steamroll through an entire squad of enemy soldiers if it catches them without cover. Furthermore, a main battle tank is much less susceptible to minefields – the tank can generally get hit by a few mines, then the driver stops, the soldiers go out and clear the minefield, repair the tank, get back inside and continue forward. Unfortunately, a buggy stands little chance in a minefield, as it gets destroyed almost immediately and has little time to respond. Giving situational advantages to vehicles like this rather than numerical superiority definitely gives the game more strategic depth.

Some people enjoy using super heavy armor units called Mechanized Assault Exoskeletons (MAX's). These units specialize in one of three roles, namely anti-air, anti-infantry, and anti-vehicular. They are slow moving heavily armored targets that only carry one type of gun. They rely on other soldiers to heal and repair them. They cannot even carry around basic hacking tools normally available to all soldiers, meaning they need friendly soldiers to open doors for them in order for them to navigate through an enemy base. These definitely bring teamwork to indoor combat, as they are vulnerable to enemy soldiers with anti vehicular weapons, but with friendly soldiers around the MAX, the enemy has to constantly change between weapons to cope with the situation. Also, all three empires' MAX's have unique abilities. One empire's MAX has a shield that can absorb some damage if the MAX does not fire. This allows them to be more effective in rushing through a heavily defended corridor and making a run for the enemy generator. Another empire's MAX's can deploy, becoming stationary and dramatically improving their accuracy and rate of fire. This allows them to be very effective at defending choke points. The third empire's MAX's have jetpacks, meaning they can easily assault base walls, and can attack towers from the top and bottom doors at the same time. Empire specific abilities like these, while not offering numerical straightforward advantages in a specific area, give empires unique situational tactics, adding to the depth of the game.

Many other roles exist. Some players are dedicated pilots, switching between scout, anti-air and anti-vehicle aircraft depending on the situation, and sometimes teaming up and using bomber aircraft. Other players simply enjoy playing the infantry grunt role, and they load up on all the weapon certificates, giving them access to weapons for every situation, like grenade launchers, minichainguns, sniper rifles and camera guided missiles. Playing the role of grunt in *Planetside* has a unique sense of satisfaction associated with it, as the player is surrounded by other soldiers all with special abilities. He has to keep an eye out for all kinds of different players with unique strengths and weaknesses, like infiltrators, aircraft and snipers. The inventory system allows players to fit in whatever they can instead of restricting your choices with limits. The player-character can carry two weapons, a reasonable amount of ammunition and a lot of medkits. Alternatively it is possible to carry a third weapon, by sacrificing some of the ammo or medkits in the loadout. It is always possible to change to another loadout from an equipment terminal in a friendly facility, tower or mobile station.

Inventory Management – Leftmost inventory sacrifices second weapon for lighter armor and more maneuverability. Middle inventory has a well mix of weapons, medkits and ammunition. Rightmost inventory sacrifices ammunition to make space for more medkits, for extended indoor battles.

Part of what makes infantry combat enjoyable in *Planetside* is perhaps the feedback associated with it. Activities that provide players with a clear way of learning the outcome are generally more fun. In *Planetside*, this activity is shooting. At the center of the screen is the crosshair, representing the cone of fire which depends on the accuracy of the weapon and the avatar's position – e.g. crouching makes a weapon more accurate while running makes it less accurate. Successfully shooting an enemy generates feedback in form of a yellow circle in the crosshair. The direct positive feedback associated with the action gives the player confidence. Furthermore, when an enemy soldier is successfully killed, the player-character is awarded experience points. The experience awarded varies, depending on how long the enemy soldier stayed alive. The more experience gained from a kill, the more the player is likely to enjoy the game; for getting rewarded for his exceptional skill, as well as progressing towards the next battle rank.

Feedback – The crosshair is white when there is no target in sight, as shown in the left image. It changes color to indicate what the player is aiming at, aiding the player when acquiring targets. As the middle image shows, the crosshair turns red when over an enemy soldier, signaling the player to fire. The third image shows the yellow circle indicating the player's shot has hit the enemy. Also notice the increased cone of fire – weapons become more inaccurate from extended firing, and are better suited to being used in small bursts.

This leads to the next point – progressing in *Planetside* is fun, because players are not required to go through a boring time sink to come to a state in which they start doing an enjoyable activity. The entire game is the enjoyable activity. The player character's level only limits the amount of roles he can fulfill at the same time. There is always the option of unlearning a certificate and spending the points elsewhere. It is possible to unlearn a certificate every six hours, so a low level player can still play whichever role they want, changing between them periodically. Another important difference of progression in *Planetside* is that it is completely skill based. The more soldiers killed, the faster levels are gained. While it may take a new player two weeks to reach rank 12, a skilled, experienced player can create a new character and reach rank 12 in a few days. Of course, the new player can always opt to play a support role, and rely on the skill and experience of the soldiers he aids instead.

The learning curve in *Planetside* is variable. Support roles for example are quite simple, while learning to dogfight with aircraft can take months. Some of the provided tools aren't even utilized by beginners for a long time until the primary controls become second nature. For example, ability to switch to third person view is a vital part of infantry combat. It provides a better view of the surrounding area, and allows the player to take a peek around corners. However, it is only practical when the player already has full confidence in his control over his weapon and movement, or he will end up struggling to change camera modes while moving in the wrong direction or losing accuracy. Indirect advantages such as this give the experienced players an edge over the beginners. Although it is not a straight numerical advantage, it definitely makes a significant difference. There are other advantages, like learning the source of every sound effect, and keeping track of the killboard to see who got killed by what weapon. This gives an experienced player even more combat awareness. Reading "Player X got killed by a Beamer", knowing the Beamer is primarily used by infiltrators, then going outside and seeing the corpse of Player X, prompts the experienced player to turn on darklight vision, revealing the nearby infiltrator and making him an easy target. All in all, as the game is played, the player becomes more and more aware of their surroundings, and the game becomes, therefore, more immersive.

Overall, what makes *Planetside* stand out seems to be the flexibility it offers, and how every weapon and vehicle has a unique role in the battlefield. Players can choose to specialize in various different ways, making every one of them experience a unique kind of gameplay. Especially after merit commendations were implemented, players were given the chance of working towards rather interesting goals. For example, the Scavenger commendation involves obtaining enemy weaponry from dead soldiers, and using them against them. The Transportation Citation involves mowing down enemy soldiers in a vehicle. There is even a merit for killing enemies with a knife. All these merits added even more gameplay styles to the game, in addition to the ones offered by the player's specialization. The player might end up encountering friendly soldiers assaulting base doors with sniper rifles just to get that last kill for the medal. Checking a dead soldier's backpack and seeing all kinds of anti vehicle weapons in it might indicate he was working towards his tank buster merit. The amount of gameplay options available are only limited by the player's creativeness. The players are encouraged to explore different aspects of the game, getting involved in activities that do not necessarily serve the primary purpose of the game – winning the war. However, these activities also have their own purpose; using an enemy-empire weapon to kill 15 soldiers for the Scavenger, Bronze medal, for instance. These secondary goals often coincide with the primary purpose of the game, and players end up doing what's best for their empire anyway.

Analysing *Planetside* reveals how much potential MMORPG, FPS and Strategy games fail to use. A progression system that still allows characters of every level to play together, a support and merit system rewarding teamwork, and units with unique roles countering each other through tactical advantages rather than multipliers set in stone with a rock-paper-scissors system. These defining features of *Planetside* would be advantageous additions to many other games in other genres as well. Hopefully, in the future, more MMOFPS games will take *Planetside* as an example, and make use of these features. Further analysis can then be conducted to see if certain features would work standalone, and if certain features would fit well in other genres. Currently, the only example of this is the tactical advantages system – *Starcraft*, a strategy game, uses this system where units do not have damage multipliers, and rely on unique abilities to counter each other. Other genres in which these features can be implemented certainly exist, and the only limit is the imaginations of the game developers.