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How does Tom Clancy's The Division engage their player's?

Tom Clancy's The Division (2016) is a third-person cover-based shooter, complemented with role-playing elements, in addition to a cooperative player versus player online multiplayer. *The Division* allows players to explore a dystopian New York City in the wake of a smallpox pandemic, where the once-familiar streets are devastated by factions that fight to survive. In this essay, I shall be using Schonau-Fog and Bjorner's (2012) 6 concepts of the Motivation of Play as a basis for how *The Division* keeps their players engaged. *The Division* contains multiple portions of gameplay that epitomize each motivation of play. Under each engagement technique, there shall be an accompanied method of analysis that include: Semiotics, Film Studies, Literary Studies, Aesthetics, and Rhetoric, as well as Social Sciences.

Certain motivations of play yield different analytical approaches. While all methods of analysis could be used to gain a deeper understanding, certain approaches are more appropriate. Intellectual and physical engagement cater towards the use of semiotics, film studies, and literary studies, as the game's meaning can be explained through the use of signs and symbols. Moreover, sensory and emotional engagement accommodates the use of aesthetics, as there is a focus on communication of the game as an overall evoked experience. Furthermore, narrative engagement uses aesthetics and literary theory to personify the different narratives that can be experienced throughout the game. Finally, social engagement uses social science analysis along with rhetoric to demonstrate the types of players that can be found within *The Division*.

Intellectual engagement grants the player the desire to complete their objectives, whether this is an extrinsic objective set by the designer, or an intrinsic objective defined by the player. *The Division* epitomises the pre-scripted events through their multiple mission types. The missions presented to the player are fundamentally linked to the RPG-esque skill tree system, as present in similar games. The different paths within the skill tree fall under 3 distinct categories: Medical, Tech and Security. The distinct colour scheme between the 3 categories symbolically not only represent, firstly different gameplay-gestalt the player can undergo through the game, but most importantly signify the selection of mission types the player can partake in.

By using the Medical skill tree as an example, it is apparent that on multiple ludic layers, the use of colours and mission types engage the player on both an intellectual and physical plain. Firstly, the medical iconography recognised through visual codes, such as the green colour pallet, indicate a defining motif throughout the game (See Figure 1). As highlighted by Bordwell & Thompson in a filmic sense, "when the filmmaker uses color to create parallels among elements of setting a color motif may become associated with several props" (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001, p.161). By using various visual

Figure 1 - Screenshot of The Division's map indicating the visual colour codes.

codes throughout the game, the player learns the different associations of that colour, whether it is a certain objective or mechanic. Within *The Division,* it is not only the visual codes, the mechanical mission types are symbolic of the colour pallets used. Certain secondary missions, called 'Encounters', entail different mission objectives depending on the reward. If the reward is designed to give the player medical points to further their skill tree, the mission shall consist of either: A hostage rescue, virus research or fixing a water supply. These missions are only exclusively playable through medical encounters, as indicated by the green icons on the player's map. The objectives of each of the missions are linked to improving the living conditions and/or discovering a cure for the pandemic. However, the player will not recognise this through their first playthrough, as connoted by Neiva and Romano "During their first appearance, gameplay hints (cues, signs, and symbols) bring about mental, emotional, or physical responses, not necessarily conscious, but always immediate." (Nevia and Romano, 2007, p.46). Through repetition, the player shall realize the immediate similarities in gameplay elements such as: enemy colour schemes, environmental design, enemy types and a variety of important indexical, iconic and symbolic codes thus engaging the player on a ludic level. For instance, with a third-person cover-based shooter like *The Division,* it establishes genre-defining iconographies such as "spaces littered with crates and boxes" (King and Krzywinska, 2006, p.112).

Through breaking down the game to its core elements, as previously mentioned, the player will learn the game is not about the mission objectives, but the speed at which they are able to complete those missions, resulting in tactical immersion. Physical engagement for the player is to master the specific physical inputs, however, there also needs to be fluidity within

the virtual environment for an improved player skill set. The repetitive mission archetypes found in the game allow the player to experiment with a variety of methods in completing said missions, leading to an eventual mastery. This is emphasised by Kücklich, as 'solving' a game "appears to be a process in which the player learns to decipher the signs on the interface as manifestations of the rules as determined by game's code." (Kücklich, 2001, p.126). It is only through this hermeneutic process that the player is fully aware of the possibilities the game presents the player, thus resulting in a mastery of the game. However, it is not only through the core elements the player achieves a mastery; it is through the aesthetics of the game as a whole. The aesthetic repetition found within the missions, the visual code of enemy types, the diegetic sound effects the enemies make; all of these allow for player mastery. Further highlighted by Grodal, there are three stages that the player experiences while playing a game; "first *unfamiliarity and challenge,* then *mastery,* and finally *automation*" (Grodal, 2003, p.148). Similarly, as Neiva and Romano point out, the player will not recognize the designed symbolic meaning to gameplay events. Through repetition of levels, however, the player will not only master the gameplay sequence, but will complete it in an automated state. The player disregards the conventional process of the mission and find new ways in completing the mission as fast as possible, so that they are able to gain the end reward.

The Division embodies sensory engagement through the audio-visual execution that stimulates the player's experience. As highlighted by Niethendal, *The Division* follows the core meaning of an aesthetically pleasing game. The "sensory phenomena that the player encounters in the game" (Simon, 2009, p.2), shown through the high fidelity graphics that *The

Division offers, gives the player a glimpse of what a hazardous and desolate New York could be like. Not only do the visual elements give a pleasurable sensation for the player, it can alter the player's gameplay experience. Occasionally within the game, a snow storm obscures the player vision, restricting their view to only a few meters in front of them (See Figure 2). The player must then alter their tactics to suit their new surroundings, as they will no longer be

Figure 2 - Screenshot of snowstorm obscuring player's vision.

able to engage enemies at long range. This also has an effect on the atmosphere within the city. By obscuring the player's vision, it further emphasises player's "sense of vulnerability (uncertainty) and is

thrilling because it is makes the object of terror indistinct" (Seif El-Nasr et al., 2007). The heightened sense of vulnerability creates an emotional engagement with the game, as the player is unable to see their enemy in a distance, something they have grown accustomed to doing. The emotional engagement that came about through obscuring the player vision is linked with the sensorial engagement of the player, as *The Division* creates eerie gameplay experiences.

Not only does *The Division* use genre-defining elements, but it also shares elements with other art forms. The game is played in a third person perspective; this is deliberate design choice, as the player is meant to have an emotional attachment to their character. Through the third person perspective, the players "activity is represented in the form of an avatar visible to the player, issues relating to the form in which the avatar is represented become of

more obvious relevance" (King and Krzywinska, 2006, p.117). As one of the core game mechanics is to collect and improve your gear, for this to be visually demonstrated to the player, connotes a sensorial accomplishment for the player. Moreover, the photorealistic art direction of the game is a testament to filmic elements found in familiar themed settings. Scenes within *The Division* are reminiscent of post-apocalyptic films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), in which the realistic setting is mixed with science fiction elements (See Figure 3). This can be categorized as illusionism, which is defined by Aki as where "imaginary things are represented with

Figure 3 - Screenshot of dystopian Manhattan depicting the illusionist aesthetics in The Division.

photorealistic life-likeness, and the result is an illusion of unreal worlds, things and beings actually existing." (Aki, 2002, p.121). The familiar scenes of the New York's major landmarks such as Times Square, mixed with the uncanny contamination zones, futuristic technologies, and a ravaged landscape evocative of a once great city, emphasise the illusionist aesthetics found in other media forms.

The familiar but unsettling perspective of a plague ridden New York City is integral to the narrative that is told through *The Division* missions. As defined by Jenkins, spatial storytelling is "stories that respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development. Spatial stories are held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts and pushed forward by the character's movement across the map" (Jenkins, 2004, p.124). *The*

*Division'*s interpretation of New York is split into different sections, each examining a unique part of the city. As the player progresses through Manhattan, they discover different areas which are marked by the recommended level the player should be. Aside from the gameplay separation, there is also an aesthetic separation, due to the introduction of different enemy factions. The enemy factions consist of: The Rioters, a group of low-life thugs that took advantage of the fall of society. The Cleaners are made up of former citizens of the island who have teamed up to cleanse the virus from New York. Finally, Rikers who are a group of convicts that escaped from Riker's Island on the East River of New York. Each faction creates a different story for the player, through exploration of the surrounding locales and the micronarratives they experience. Micronarratives are "short scripted events that are integrated within the interaction of the player. These micronarratives create the emotional landscape of the game, by encapsulating the conflict of the game in short events." (Clara, 2011, p.2). These scripted events can even be applied to combat. There are a variety of enemy types, however each faction poses their own unique technique. The Rioters are a low-threat enemy which can be easily killed. In contrast, the Rikers demonstrate a more destructive and powerful threat. The Cleaners are equipped with flamethrowers, therefore if the player shoots the container on their back they shall explode, resulting in a kill and subsequent area damage. These combat scenarios are an actual narrative development that the player is in control of, as they learn more about the factions. However, as Catania highlights, "this micronarrative segment is not related to the game's general narrative structure" (Catania, 2009, p.38).

In addition, *The Division* micronarratives are found through collectible items. Intel within the game are small snippets of information that detail additional elements of the world, mostly

during the spread of the epidemic. The most unique intel within the game are the 'Agent Diaries', which are extracts of phone recordings scattered throughout Manhattan. Each agent's diary has at least 3 or so phone recordings to collect for there to be a coherent narrative. This type of storytelling is defined by Fernandez-Vara as "Indexical storytelling is constituted by the traces left behind by other agents who have been in the space before. The remains are objects that those agents have modified previously." (Clara, 2011, p.6). Indexical storytelling is similar to spatial storytelling, as it tells a narrative by exploring the landscape. However, it specifics how the story and the game are integrated, as the designer has left deliberate traces in the game world. Agent diaries are significant, as the player is able to interpret and reconstruct events which have taken place in the past but in the same geographical location they are currently in. These indexical micronarratives are intentionally used to create an emotional connection between the world and the game through a series of short events. The empathy created through the connecting micronarratives engages the player, as they become fully absorbed within the stories of the world, and are able to identify with the character throughout the game.

The Division also consists of a multiplayer game mode called the 'Dark Zone'. The Dark Zone consists of both player-versus-environment and player-versus-player combat, where the goal is to extract weapons and gear that are of a high caliber compared to the single player portion of the game. The most interesting portion of this gameplay mode is that other player-controlled agents are able to turn against each other, leading to a 'rogue' status. By turning rogue on a player, you are able to steal the gear they have collected and extract it out of the Zone for yourself. If the player turns rogue, they follow Bartle's Taxonomy of a Killer. The

Killer categorization is defined by Bartle as, "people attack other players with a view to killing off their personae" (Bartle, 1996, p.6). Whether being a killer is morally just or not is unknown, as even Kücklich denotes the reinforcement of "'good' behavior, and punishes 'bad' behavior, is to be located within the game's code itself, using the representation engine merely as an executive organ of its measures. But due to the dialogic structure of the communication process, it is up to the player if he subscribes to these values or not." (Kücklich, 2001, p.125).

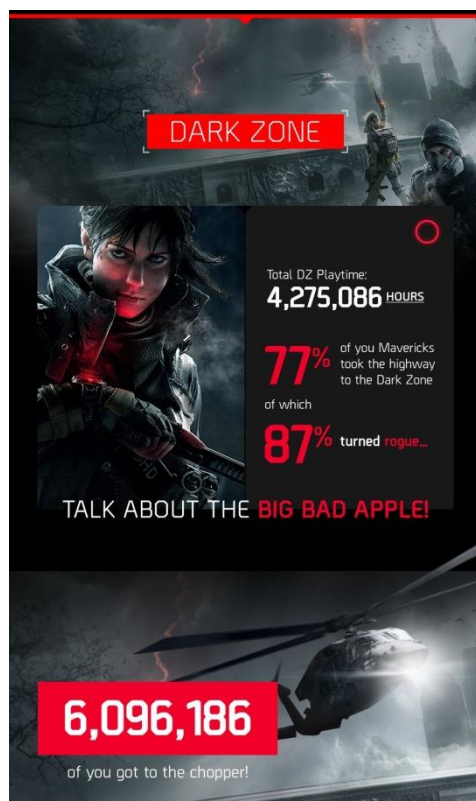Through analyzing the beta statistics that have been released by Ubisoft (See Figure 4), it connotes that 87% of the player basis had turned rogue, indicating they had killed a fellow player. The distinct nature of betraying fellow players to acquire their gear has parallels to economy systems within games. Crawford and Rutter suggest that "numerous games are based upon the principle of capital accumulation where the central aim and theme is to make more money to improve your character's or avatar's skills or possessions." (Crawford and Rutter, 2006, p.152). The implication connoted here is that players are willing to do anything it takes to further their capital gain, with regards to improving their in-game avatar. If the rules allow their player to kill for an advantage, for a majority of players their moral compass will lean towards killing other players. What remains unclear is whether the player is persuaded by the rules of the game to kill their fellow companions, or whether

Figure 4 - The Division's Dark Zone beta statistics.

it remains entirely up to the player to make that decision. Whether it is intentional or unintentional, the processes through the game communicate a specific message in allowing the player to kill fellow players. As argued by Sicrat "Games, procedurally understood, convey messages and create aesthetic and cultural experiences by making players think and reflect about the very nature of the rules, in the way the rules allow them to" (Sicart, 2011). The focus throughout the game, as previously mentioned, is gaining better weaponry and gear for your avatar. Depending on the player's nature, they shall perceive that as the sole target of the game. Overall, *The Division* portrays a survival of the fittest mentality, as only the best agents will be able to survive in the harsh conditions of a broken Manhattan.

To conclude, *The Division* engages its players and leaves them with the desire to continue playing, regardless of whether their preference of genre is a third person, cover-based shooter. The several categories of engagement that were discussed derive from a wide variety of different gameplay elements. Intellectual engagement gave the player a desire to experience the game on its ludic layers, ignoring the mission's surface meaning. Physical engagement allowed the player to not only gain mastery of missions, but lead on to an automotive immersion. Sensory engagement leads to a change in gameplay tactics, due to the varying aural and visual codes. Emotional engagement for the players originate from the unnerving gameplay caused by the sensorial changes. Narrative engagement allowed for player to immerse themselves within the indexical and spatial storytelling New York city had to offer, through the use of micronarrative. Finally, social engagement draws parallels to the economic advantages of Bartle's archetype of a Killer player.

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