

# Intersectional Pleasures of Anomie: Helldivers 2 and Democracy at Play

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## ABSTRACT

*Helldivers 2* has drawn a massive global audience, yet little research explains why players find its unstable, unpredictable world so appealing. This paper addresses that problem by arguing that the game creates a social environment in which instability becomes a source of pleasure rather than frustration. Using a framework drawn from Durkheim, Benjamin, Veblen, Stouffer, and Weber, I analyze how shifting rules, repeated spectacles, communal craft labor, player comparison, and episodic charismatic leadership interact to produce what I call the intersectional pleasures of anomie. This approach shows how live-service games transform uncertainty into cooperation, creativity, and emotional investment. The conclusion demonstrates that *Helldivers 2* offers a model for understanding how instability functions as both a design strategy and a meaningful player experience across contemporary digital games.

## Keywords

Anomie, *Helldivers 2*, Charisma, Collective Play, Meta Shifts, Player Identity

## INTRODUCTION

The opening to *Helldivers 2* begins with a voice that resembles an exaggerated wartime broadcast from a fictional past. One where a booming narrator announces that the galaxy stands in danger and the only brave citizens of “Super Earth” can preserve democracy (Arrowhead Game Studios, 2024). Players enter this world as members of an enthusiastic military society that glorifies sacrifice as patriotic duty. Although the tone is satirical, the stakes inside a mission rarely feel small. Moreover, a misthrown stratagem<sup>1</sup> can hurt teammates. A swarm of insects called Terminids<sup>2</sup> can turn a calm battlefield into a frantic last stand. Carefully planned defenses collapse without warning. Yet players continue to return to this universe, eager to drop from orbit into another desperate campaign.

This global enthusiasm is visible in the game’s numbers. Since its 2024 release, *Helldivers 2* has sold more than nineteen million copies and has reached peak concurrent counts of nearly 460,000 on steam alone (PlayStation Financial Report 2025; SteamDB 2025). The community has defeated hundreds of billions of enemies

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and recorded billions of player deaths. These figures show that *Helldivers 2* is not a niche experiment (Boellstorff, 2009; Taylor, 2006). But also, it's a large-scale cultural system that engages players worldwide. Missions unfold across volatile planets, strategies shift with each update, and the fictional propaganda of Super Earth ties gameplay to a heroic and humorous narrative. In this unstable environment, players don't simply endure chaos; instead, they learn to find meaning and pleasure within.

This paper argues that *Helldivers 2* transforms instability into a source of player pleasure rather than frustration. While live-service games are often criticized for continual balance changes and shifting metas, *Helldivers 2* demonstrates how unstable rule systems can generate cooperation, experimentation, and emotional investment. To explain this dynamic, the analysis brings together a layered theoretical framework: Durkheim clarifies the role of anomie and norm instability; Benjamin illuminates how repetition stabilizes perception within flux, helping players experience instability as enjoyable rather than overwhelming; Veblen explains the pleasures of mastery and collaborative craft; Stouffer reveals the comparative pressures shaping player identity; and Weber accounts for the emergence of charismatic meaning in moments of crisis. Together, these perspectives articulate what this paper terms the intersectional pleasures of anomie. The intersectional pleasures of anomie refer to the convergence of instability, repetition, craft, comparison, and charisma, which collectively transform potential frustration into meaningful, engaging, and pleasurable player experience. The following sections examine each theoretical lens in turn: Durkheim, Benjamin, Veblen, Stouffer, and Weber; before synthesizing their contributions to explain the pleasures of instability in *Helldivers 2*.

Although game studies has produced extensive research on live-service design, online communities, and metagaming practices, this paper turns to classical sociological theory to explain a different question: why instability can feel pleasurable rather than disruptive. Rather than replacing existing game-studies approaches, this framework complements them by foregrounding meaning, normativity, perception, craft, comparison, and charisma as interlocking dimensions of play. Situating *Helldivers 2* alongside research on metagaming cultures and live-service sociality (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017; Consalvo, 2007; Taylor, 2006) clarifies that the game is not unique in structure, but distinctive in how these dynamics converge to produce sustained engagement. The concept of intersectional pleasures of anomie is offered as a bridge between sociological theory and contemporary game-studies debates.

Methodologically, this study combines close textual analysis of game systems and aesthetics with long-term participatory observation of player communities and discourse. Attention is given to balance updates, meta shifts, cooperative mechanics, and emergent play narratives, alongside community discussions across forums, streaming platforms, and social media. This interpretive sociological approach does not claim universal player experience; rather, it analyzes how meaning, pleasure, and instability are culturally articulated within the game's evolving social environment. This methodological approach ensures that the analysis of instability, repetition, and player engagement is directly grounded in both in-game systems and community interpretation, linking observed behavior to the theoretical concepts outline above.

## DURKHEIM: ANOMIE AND THE JOY OF INSTABILITY

Émile Durkheim defines anomie or *dérèglement*,<sup>3</sup> as a collapse of shared meaning that leaves individuals and institutions alike disoriented (Durkheim, 1897/1951). For Durkheim, anomie arises when norms shift faster than individuals can adjust, an idea that follows contemporary work on unstable modern systems (Bauman, 2000). *Helldivers 2* reflects this condition through constant balancing updates, unstable weapon metas, shifting armor passives, and unpredictable planetary hazards. A favored loadout might lose effectiveness after a patch; a reliable strategy might fail under new enemy behaviors. Instead of resisting these changes, players embrace them. Anomie encourages experimentation, improvisation, and flexible identity work. It invites players to test new combinations and explore unfamiliar tactics. Instability becomes a central source of engagement rather than a barrier to enjoyment. This structural instability constitutes the first component of the intersectional pleasures of anomie, providing the conditions under which experimentation and adaptive play can emerge.

Because of this condition, the game's live-service structure creates an environment where norms never sit still. Weapons that dominate one week may feel obsolete the next. Armor passives fluctuate in usefulness as developers patch damage values or adjust resistances. Enemy factions evolve through balance updates and global events, that alter the way they swarm, flank, or respond to player actions. Planetary hazards vary unpredictably, turning what should be a routine operation into a desperate form of improv. Even mission objectives can shift as the developers respond to community performance or narrative developments; the game world never fully stabilizes. From a Durkheimian perspective, this constant movement may produce frustration or dysfunction. A person might expect players to feel adrift in a world without reliable standards. Yet, in *Helldivers 2*, anomie does not erode engagement, but rather enhances it. Because norms shift very frequently within the game, players treat instability not as a flaw but as a generative condition. An update that disrupts accepted "meta" knowledge becomes an opportunity to explore new identities within the game.

Durkheim believed that individuals require stable norms in order to flourish, but *Helldivers 2* shows that within digital environments, instability can become a form of stimulation. Anomie fosters creativity rather than despair as it pushes players toward flexibility, improvisation, and quick adaptation. They try unconventional weapon combinations, experiment with grenades or stratagems they once ignored, and shift between roles depending on the needs of the mission. The game rewards this flexibility with moments of unexpected success and emergent teamwork. What begins as a breakdown of norms becomes a source of vitality. This inversion is where anomie becomes pleasurable rather than destructive as it offers a central insight into the nature of play in contemporary live-service games. Instead of seeking order, players dive into the instability. They celebrate unpredictability because it grants them agency in reinterpreting the world. In a space where rules constantly change, every player becomes a small-scale sociologist, testing the boundaries of what works and what no longer does. As a result, *Helldivers 2* transforms Durkheim's *dérèglement* into a motivating force, turning disorder into a form of engagement rather than a threat. While Durkheim explains why instability emerges in the game's systems, the next section examines how repeated gameplay events, as Benjamin theorizes, make this instability perceptually manageable and pleasurable.

## **BENJAMIN: REPETITION, SPECTACLE, AND THE LOSS OF AURA**

If Durkheim explains the structural instability of norms within *Helldivers 2*, Walter Benjamin helps explain how such instability becomes perceptually and emotionally sustainable. Benjamin's account of mechanical reproduction provides a mechanism for why repeated experiences in *Helldivers 2* can generate "pleasure" rather than frustration, making instability perceptually both manageable and socially shared. Within *Helldivers 2*, the repeated consequences of missions, enemy waves, and orbital strikes produce a predictable sensory rhythm that supports shared player experience. Together, Durkheimian instability and Benjaminian repetition form the experiential foundation upon which the intersectional pleasures of anomie emerge, providing the conditions for experimentation, adaptive play, and sustained engagement.

Walter Benjamin's analysis of mechanical reproduction provides a framework for understanding the sensory and aesthetic world of *Helldivers 2*. Benjamin argues that modern techniques of reproduction such as photography, film, mass printing, all dissolve the "aura" of unique works of art (Benjamin, 1936/1968, 217-252). Aura refers to the singular presence of a work in time and space, its unrepeatable authenticity, and the reverence that surrounds it. Mechanical reproduction, by contrast, breaks art away from ritual and embeds it in mass circulation. What once appeared sacred becomes accessible, repeatable, and unbound from tradition; nothing remains unique, and everything becomes reproducible.

Yet, as Stahl (2010) and Der Derian (2009) show, mass-mediated images of war take on new meaning through their repetition. Every mission repeats sequences of war, destruction, and heroism with minimal variation. A player may drop onto a snow-covered planet for the twentieth time and witness once again the bright streak of an orbital strike or the synchronized collapse of enemy formations. Bug swarms converge in waves indistinguishable from those encountered in previous missions. Robotic automatons march through identical ruins, their movements predictable because they have been seen countless times before. Nevertheless, when the illuminate appear, their luminous weaponry and special silhouettes reproduce the same unnatural encounters players have experienced across countless times.

Benjamin also notes that mechanical reproduction creates new modes of attention (Benjamin, 1936/1968, 219-221). The film viewer develops habits suited to rapid cuts, shocks, and repeated images that train perception differently from traditional art. *Helldivers 2* produces a similar perceptual environment. The game bombards players with rapid visual stimuli such as bright flashes of orbital lasers, sudden eruptions of enemy nests, synchronized firing lines, and the rhythmic pulse of stratagems landing from orbit. Over time, players develop an intuitive sense for these repetitive shocks. The spectacle does not overwhelm; it becomes familiar. The player's body and reflexes adapt to a world where destruction arrives predictably and rhythmically, even when the tactical outcomes remain uncertain.

Thus, repetition becomes a form of community-building. When millions experience the same bombardments and extractions, they share a sense of belonging rooted in common sights, sounds, and failures. The humor players express when crushed by a teammate's misplaced stratagem or overrun by a familiar enemy type depends on recognition where the knowledge of others worldwide have endured the same reproduced events. Benjamin helps people understand that *Helldivers 2* does not rely

on unique narrative moments to create engagement. It relies on reproducible spectacle that binds players to a global audience-participant collective. In addition to this, *Helldivers 2* transforms the loss of aura into a generator of connection. What Benjamin once described as the political democratization of art appears here as the democratization of digital warfare. Every player becomes a co-owner of the spectacle, not because their experience is unique, but because it is shared across countless reproductions. The repetitive nature of the missions is not a limitation. It is the medium through which the game constructs solidarity. Where Benjamin explains how repeated events make instability manageable, Veblen illuminates how the player's instinct for mastery and collaborative craft transforms these conditions into opportunities for skill, experimentation, and engagement.

## **VEBLLEN: WORKMANSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE CRAFT**

Thorstein Veblen's concept of the *instinct of workmanship* offers a way to understand how players interact with the systems of *Helldivers 2*. Veblen argues that the instinct of workmanship is "effective in such so consistent, ubiquitous and resilient fashion that students of human culture will have to count with it as one of the integral hereditary traits of mankind" (Veblen, 1914, 28). This instinct does not arise from external pressure or economic incentives but from an internal satisfaction gained through careful craft, skillful manipulation of tools, and incremental refinement. Even within modern systems where labor becomes abstract or alienated, this instinct continues to steer individuals toward competence and mastery. *Helldivers 2* activates this instinct through its intricate interplay of weapons, stratagems, armor passives, and environmental modifiers. This engagement with craft constitutes a second dimension of the intersectional pleasures of anomie, where mastery and iterative refinement transform chaotic systems into meaningful, intrinsically motivating experiences. Although the game presents itself as chaotic, its deeper appeal lies in how it rewards sustained experimentation. After each balance patch, players voluntarily reexamine damage, recoil, armor resistances, and stratagem synergies, motivated by the intrinsic pleasure of refinement. These activities are voluntary as they arise from the intrinsic pleasure of refinement, where players want to understand how things work thoroughly.

This instinct becomes visible in the community's analytical practices. As Consalvo (2007), Postigo (2003), Kucklich (2005), and Nakamura (2015) note in other game cultures, players frequently treat digital environments as spaces for quasi-scientific inquiry. Online forums fill with spreadsheets, graphs of damage falloff, and empirical tests performed under controlled conditions. Knowledge circulates through YouTube tutorials (YouTube, 2024-2025), Reddit posts (Reddit, 2024-2025), Discord discussions (Discord, 2024-2025), and informal mentoring. The community becomes a workshop in which ideas, tools, and practices circulate freely and become a collective expression of Veblen's craftsmanship. As developers continually adjust the game's internal logic, even small patches create ripples through the community, prompting renewed testing and discussion. In this sense, the evolution of *Helldivers 2* depicts the evolution of craft industries: artisans refine methods in response to new tools or materials. The instinct of workmanship thrives in these conditions because it depends on challenges that require imaginative solutions.

As a result, Veblen's critique of modern industry illuminates the tension between intrinsic motivation and commercial design. The unpaid labor players invest, testing builds, producing guides, refining expertise, and supports the longevity of the live-

service model. Yet this alignment does not diminish the authenticity of their experience. The joy of doing something well remains meaningful independent of economic structures. *Helldivers 2* becomes more than a cooperative shooter; it becomes a dynamic workshop where players shape tools, exchange expertise, and build identities. Craft becomes pleasure, and pleasure becomes a way of understanding oneself within an evolving digital world, completing Veblen's contribution to the intersectional pleasures of anomie. Where Veblen explains how mastery emerges through iterative refinement, Stouffer's framework illustrates how players navigate the social pressures and comparative evaluations that shape their engagement in this environment.

## **STOUFFER: CROSS-LEVELING AND CONFLICTING PRESSURES**

Samuel Stouffer's concept of cross-leveling, developed in *The American Soldier*, explains how individuals evaluate their circumstances not in absolute terms but through comparisons with multiple reference groups (Stouffer et al., 1949/2000). Soldiers judged their morale through the interplay of institutional expectations, peer performance, and personal aspirations; a dynamic that is reflected in *Helldivers 2*. Players navigate three competing sources of evaluation: the developers who set balance and difficulty, the community that establishes meta norms and expectations, and the self,<sup>4</sup> shaped by individual preference and identity. Cross-leveling illuminates how players reconcile these overlapping pressures.

Players reconcile overlapping pressures from developers, the community, and themselves. A patch that weakens a favored loadout may frustrate some, while others view it as a healthy adjustment. Similarly, comparing skill against peers, novices, or expert streamers, shifts self-perception dynamically. A player may feel personally frustrated if their identity was tied to a particular loadout, even as the broader community celebrates the adjustment as "healthy." The developers frame such changes as necessary for balance. The player's emotional response of fairness, irritation, and curiosity emerges from cross-leveling between institutional authority, community reaction, and self-perception. Cross-leveling shapes self-perception, which fluctuates depending on comparisons with teammates, expert streamers, and broader community actors such as Reddit theory-crafters. Satisfaction becomes a moving target defined by comparison.

Community norms add further tension. When a weapon becomes "meta," players who enjoy off-meta builds may feel torn between personal preference and social expectation (Arrowhead Game Studios, 2024; *Helldivers 2* Wiki). The result is a negotiation between conformity and individuality which pertains to the kind of psychological pressure Stouffer describes. During missions, this dynamic becomes visible as players compare themselves to charismatic teammates whose decisiveness or competence temporarily sets the standard for the group. Through these interactions, *Helldivers 2* becomes a laboratory of cross-leveling. This ongoing negotiation constitutes a fourth dimension of the intersectional pleasures of anomie, where navigating contradictory expectations produces tension that drives engagement and meaningful player experience.

Players continually adjust their identities, expectations, and sense of competence through overlapping comparisons across institutional, communal, and personal layers. The pleasure of the game emerges partly from this negotiation: navigating tensions between developers and community, peers and self, aspiration and

performance. Stouffer's framework reveals that *Helldivers 2* is not merely a game of weapons and missions but a social world in which individuals continuously compare, recalibrate, and renegotiate who they are. Where Stouffer illustrates how players navigate comparative pressures and social negotiation, Weber illuminates how charismatic leadership emerges in moments of instability, providing clarity and meaning in chaotic gameplay.

## **WEBER: CHARISMA AND MEANING IN CRISIS**

Max Weber's concept of charisma provides a lens for understanding how *Helldivers 2* produces meaning within its unstable and often chaotic world. Weber defines charisma as a form of authority grounded not in law or tradition but in the perceived extraordinary qualities of an individual (Weber, 1922/1978). Charisma appears when established norms fail to offer clear guidance, and individuals turn to those exhibiting boldness, confidence, or decisive action. *Helldivers 2* generates many of these conditions. Missions unfold in environments where certainty is rare: enemies surge unpredictably, objectives collapse without warning, and a single mistake can jeopardize the whole operation. Balance patches further destabilize established tactics, forcing players to shed old habits. In these moments of uncertainty, charismatic leadership emerges spontaneously. A teammate who issues clear instructions or performs a daring maneuver gains temporary authority, granted by the situation rather than the game itself. Weber notes that charisma becomes visible through "the decisive act" (Weber, 1922/1978, 241-242), and *Helldivers 2* repeatedly creates contexts where such acts matter.

Charisma in *Helldivers 2* is episodic rather than permanent. A quiet player may suddenly command attention by coordinating a rescue or guiding the team through a collapsing frontline. Once the crisis passes, authority dissipates until a new moment calls it forth. Charisma also shapes emotional experience: when missions fail, a player who reframes the collapse as part of the story or encourages another attempt can transform frustration into renewed motivation. Weber argues that charisma has a "missionary" force (Weber, 1922/1978, 245-246), capable of reorganizing emotions and creating devotion through meaning-making. These dynamics are amplified by the game's satirical narrative. Super Earth's propaganda broadcasts exaggerate heroism, sacrifice, and patriotic duty, projecting a charismatic mythos onto players themselves. The rhetoric amplifies a sense of significance even as the game humorously undercuts it. Charisma also interacts with teamwork. During chaotic extractions or collapsing defenses, squads often rely on trust rather than calculation. Research on online games (Chen, 2009; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005) shows that such emergency patterns of leadership appear when uncertainty is highest and precisely where Weber situates charisma.

Finally, charisma intersects with Durkheim, Veblen, and Stouffer. In a world marked by anomie, charismatic players offer temporary clarity. Their competence, often rooted in Veblen's workmanship, becomes a visible basis for authority. Stouffer's cross-leveling shapes how players compare themselves to such leaders, influencing who gains trust in moments of pressure. These interactions help explain why *Helldivers 2* produces memorable stories: last-second revives, clutch defenses, and improvised strategies become narrative centerpieces. Charisma transforms chaotic missions into shared legends. Weber's concept represents a fifth dimension of the intersectional pleasures of anomie, where episodic, charismatic leadership provides moments of clarity, meaning, and shared narrative significance.

## HELLDIVERS 2 AS A SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

*Helldivers 2* is not merely a cooperative shooter; it is a social environment shaped by ritual, hierarchy, interdependence, and improvisation. Scholars such as Boellstorff (2008), Taylor (2006), and Fine (1983) document how online worlds develop complex social systems, and *Helldivers 2* follows this pattern. Its exaggerated patriotism is comical, yet it provides a symbolic order that frames players' actions as meaningful contributions to a mythic war effort. This narrative scaffolding encourages players to treat their labor, sacrifice, and repeated deaths as part of a larger collective drama.

Inside various missions, *Helldivers 2* generates intense interdependence. Friendly fire cannot be disabled, stratagems can crush teammates, and enemies attack with overwhelming force; every movement has social consequences (Arrowhead Game Studios, 2024; *Helldivers 2* Wiki, 2024). Players negotiate where to run, when to fire, and how to coordinate equipment drops. A single misstep can wipe out a squad, while a well-timed reinforce stratagem may save it. Failure becomes a shared narrative rather than a purely negative outcome. Comedic disasters and narrow escapes circulate as group stories that strengthen solidarity through humor, frustration, and relief. The live-service structure extends the social environment beyond individual missions. Regular updates force the community to reconstruct shared knowledge, interpret patch notes, and renegotiate norms of acceptable play. Influential streamers, theory-crafters, and veteran players shape understandings of competence and strategy, forming informal hierarchies grounded in Weberian charisma and visible mastery. These structures mirror broader social stratification: expertise confers authority even without formal rank.

At the same time, the game fosters inclusive forms of cooperation. Unlike competitive games that highlight individual prowess, *Helldivers 2* requires mutual dependence. Even highly skilled players rely on teammates for survival, and novices can contribute meaningfully through timely revives or defensive stratagems. This interdependence creates a distinctive form of social cohesion rooted in distributed competence rather than individual brilliance. The game often produces liminal experiences of moments in which everyday identities loosen and players adopt new roles under pressure. This complex web of interdependence and adaptive cooperation contributes to the pleasures of anomie, in which instability, shared effort, and emergent problem-solving produce meaningful engagement.

Finally, the social world of *Helldivers 2* stabilizes itself through adaptation. Because missions unfold unpredictably, players cannot rely on fixed scripts; they must co-create solutions in real time using shared rituals, norms, and improvised strategies. The mechanical world is unstable, but the social world becomes resilient precisely because it evolves with each encounter. As players navigate risk, uncertainty, and institutional influence, they engage in ongoing acts of interpretation, identity work, and collective problem-solving. *Helldivers 2* is not only played, it is inhabited as a social world.

## INTERSECTIONAL PLEASURES OF ANOMIE

The forces described by Durkheim, Benjamin, Veblen, Stouffer, and Weber don't merely coexist in *Helldivers 2*; their convergence produces a multi-dimensional structure of player engagement, which I term the *intersectional pleasures of anomie*. Instability, repetition, craftsmanship, contradiction, and charismatic meaning overlap

in ways that transform disorder into engagement. Players don't experience instability as a flaw but as the central texture of the game world. Pleasure arises not in spite of anomie but because of it. Durkheim provides the first layer. Constant updates, shifting metas, and unpredictable conditions create a world where norms cannot settle (Durkheim, 1897/1951). Instead of disorientation, players experience a field of possibility. Norms cannot settle, and instability invites improvisation, experimentation, and the joy of discovery. What Durkheim saw as socially destabilizing becomes, in *Helldivers 2*, a creative resource among players.

Benjamin adds a second layer by showing how repetition stabilizes perception amid flux. Orbital strikes, swarming enemies, frantic extractions, and collapsing defenses repeat across missions, creating a sensory world that is familiar even as tactics remain unstable (Benjamin, 1936/1968). This interplay of unpredictable events within a predictable visual rhythm produces a paradoxical pleasure. Players oscillate between surprise and recognition, finding emotional grounding in a universe that never fully settles. Veblen introduces a third dimension: workmanship. Instability presents problems; repetition provides raw material for observation; workmanship motivates players to refine tools and techniques (Veblen, 1914). Balance patches disrupt established strategies, but they also offer new opportunities for investigation. Workmanship transforms frustration into mastery, turning uncertainty into a tool for engagement.

Stouffer reveals the tensions that animate this pleasure structure. Players navigate contradictory expectations from developers, peers, and personal preference. These contradictions generate productive frictions between conformity and experimentation, community norms and individual identity, institutional authority and player autonomy (Stouffer et al., 1949/2000). The work of reconciling these pressures becomes a source of emotional and intellectual engagement. Weber completes the synthesis through charisma. In chaotic missions, charismatic players create temporary clarity and meaning (Weber, 1922/1978). Their decisive actions transform crisis into narrative significance, turning failures into stories and successes into memorable triumphs. These moments give emotional weight to instability and help explain why players recall their most chaotic missions with the greatest enthusiasm.

Together, these layers produce the intersectional pleasures of anomie: experimentation rooted in instability, recognition grounded in repetition, mastery emerging from craftsmanship, negotiation shaped by cross-leveling and meaning forged through charisma. Contradiction becomes a resource, and crisis becomes a narrative spark. The game's social demands amplify these effects by requiring cooperation, normalizing failure, and rewarding adaptive behavior. In this sense, *Helldivers 2* reflects a broader cultural truth: people don't simply endure unstable systems as they learn to thrive within them. The game mirrors the adaptive strategies individuals use to navigate contemporary life, transforming volatility, fragmentation, and rapid change into opportunities for creativity and solidarity. The intersectional pleasures of anomie reveal how digital worlds can convert the pressures of modernity, demonstrating how instability, collaboration, and adaptive play converge to produce meaningful, pleasurable engagement.

## CONCLUSION

*Helldivers 2* offers far more than cooperative gunplay or satirical storytelling. It represents a complex cultural system in which instability becomes a source of engagement, spectacle becomes shared ritual, craft becomes communal labor, contradiction becomes a site of negotiation, and crisis becomes an opportunity for charismatic meaning. Through the combined lenses of Durkheim, Benjamin, Veblen, Stouffer, and Weber, I argued that the pleasure structure of *Helldivers 2* emerges from the intersection of these forces. Players learn not only to survive instability but to embrace it as an essential feature of meaningful play. The game provides a space where uncertainty generates creativity, where repetition fosters belonging, and where the collective labor of refinement and adaptation becomes a form of shared identity.

The paper's unique contribution lies in articulating the "intersectional pleasures of anomie" as a multi-dimensional framework for analyzing live-service game cultures. While prior research has examined cooperation, instability, or online communities separately, this work shows how these forces operate simultaneously and interdependently within the same system. This approach provides scholars with a model for explaining why unpredictable digital environments can feel not only manageable but deeply pleasurable. Readers gain a vocabulary for understanding how players adapt to volatility, negotiate contradictory social pressures, and find meaning in moments of crisis. This contribution also opens pathways for comparative and empirical extensions. The framework developed here can be applied to other games built around instability and communal refinement such as *Destiny 2*, *Warframe*, or *Final Fantasy XIV* to examine how design decisions shape distinct configurations of anomie, spectacle, and workmanship. Empirical studies, including player surveys, behavioral telemetry, or social-network analyses of knowledge exchange, would allow researchers to test how players internalize instability, how charismatic authority circulates in online communities, and how cross-leveling influences identity and satisfaction.

Situating these findings within broader game-studies scholarship highlights both continuities and distinctions. Research on metagaming, live-service design, and online community formation demonstrates that shifting metas, collaborative optimization, and ongoing balance negotiation are common features of contemporary digital play. *Helldivers 2* participates in these dynamics while amplifying them through satirical militarism, collective failure, and highly visible cooperative dependence that are elements reminiscent of the science-fiction lineage popularized by *Starship Troopers* and its cultural afterlives (Heinlein, 1959; Verhoeven, 1997). The concept of intersectional pleasures of anomie therefore does not claim uniqueness for *Helldivers 2*, but instead offers a framework for explaining how familiar live-service conditions can become unusually meaningful and emotionally resonant.

At a broader level, the findings suggest that games like *Helldivers 2* illuminate how individuals learn to thrive in unstable systems; not only in virtual environments but in contemporary social life. When players embrace uncertainty, negotiate shifting norms, and create meaning in moments of crisis, they rehearse cultural strategies for navigating the volatility of modern institutions. Understanding these dynamics contributes to ongoing conversations about resilience, coordination, and meaning-making in digital culture. Moreover, the pleasures of *Helldivers 2* cannot be explained by mechanics alone. They arise from the intersection of social theory and design

practice, where instability becomes a resource for creativity and solidarity. By identifying and theorizing the intersectional pleasures of anomie, this work provides scholars with a new lens for understanding cooperative play and a foundation for future research across digital worlds.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A “stratagem” is a tactical item that players can call down from orbit by entering a directional input sequence. Stratagems can range from items, weapons, and airstrikes (Helldivers Wiki, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> The “Terminids” are a hostile insect species fought across multiple planets in the game (Helldivers Wiki, 2024). The game also features two other enemy factions such as the robotic “Automatons” and the squid-like “Illuminate.”

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Mestrovic and Brown’s (1985) analysis of *Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Dérèglement*.

<sup>4</sup> William James defines the self as comprising four interrelated components: the material self, formed through one’s possessions and bodily existence; the social self, shaped by recognition and judgments from others; the spiritual self, consisting of one’s inner subjective life and values; and the pure ego, the sense of personal continuity across time. These dimensions structure how individuals evaluate their own preferences, identities, and performances within social environments such as games (James, 1890/1950, pp. 291–306).