Context Description

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Introduction:

Overwatch is a good site for analysis, particularly from the stand point I want to observe, which is the sexualization of women through skins and cosmetics, because at the release of the second game, which will be discussed and contextualized later, there was a decline in overall players and viewership that, to some extent, was credited to the addition of customizable skins / characters and the accessibility to a battle pass that was filled with unlockable cosmetics. On top of this, this game stands as an outcast within its game type, which is strategical gameplay, because of the overly-animated graphics and the amount of accessibility within customization of the characters. Majority other games like this one limit skins and keep the cosmetics limited to characters looking like soldiers and "ready for a fight", whereas *Overwatch* goes far past "ready for war" with their designs.

Description and Context:

Blizzard

Blizzard Entertainment was established in 1984, and released their first game in 1994 called *Warcraft*, more commonly known to be a part of the *World of Warcraft* series. *World of Warcraft*, was released in 2004, referred to as the revolutionizer of MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) and has set several records, most notably for its player engagement and subscriptions statistics. This game is known throughout the world and the gaming

community as one of the best. This game specifically however has raised discourse for years over the sexualization of the female body. This game allows characters to choose and customize their characters in both the upper and lower body, allowing customization to the hips, pelvis, and torso. The customization of clothing has also been a spot of criticism, allowing female characters to wear thongs, and shaping their armor around their bodies. Their second game, known as *Diablo*, which like *WoW* is a series, is credited as a cornerstone for RPG games. Like *WoW*, it was criticized for practically the same things. It offered similar features of customization that allow you to change your face, body, and accessories. Majority criticism came from the objectification and hypersexualization of women in armor. The armor in the game reveals a lot of skin, whereas men in armor are completely covered. Aside from the game criticism, Blizzard is one of the most influential and largest video game companies in the world. They are credited for revolutionizing the gaming world and have created some of the biggest hit games to date. However, California, specifically, whats now called, California Civil Rights Department, sued Blizzard in 2021 regarding sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, misconduct, gender inequality in the workplace, and pay inequality. Women in the office reported that the male employees would get drunk during the day and dump all of the work onto them. Alongside of this there were numerous reports of male employees acting inappropriately toward their female coworkers, for example, stated in the lawsuit, they would make sex and rape jokes. Female employees also reported being groped by their male colleagues at workplace events. In other instances, women were passed up for promotion by severely under-qualified men. Lastly, a female employee committed suicide on a work trip after a male employee shared nude photos of her to the other men. At the end of the lawsuit, Blizzard ended up paying roughly 55 million to California and the female employees. This lawsuit tarnished Blizzard's reputation and the gaming community's

trust declined, but the major games like *WoW* and *Overwatch* continue to have millions of players / fans.

Roles in *Overwatch*

Overwatch is a combat and objective based game, where teams of either five or six face off against each other. The game offers over 53 playable characters that are separated by three categories; tank, damage, and healer. Tank is the “big guns” character who is meant to take the damage and protect their team. Damage are the characters who deal the most damage and are the "soldier" characters. Lastly, the healers, these characters provide support to the team as well as heals the tank and damage characters when they take damage. In order to succeed in the game, each role must fulfill their ‘duties’, meaning when you choose a role, your playstyle has to revolve around that category / character. Each character has unique abilities, they all have at least 2 passive abilities, meaning they recharge quicker, and an ultimate ability which ‘charges’ throughout the match and generates according to how well you play.

History of *Overwatch*

Overwatch, however, did not always have these customizations and cosmetics. Blizzard released the first *Overwatch* on May 24, 2016, this game is the same as the *Overwatch* now as far as game play, and gamestyle, it was still objective / combat based, but two differences were the character selection, there were 21 playable characters at that time, there was far less selection of skins, and you were not able to customize the skins, meaning they couldn't be altered. *Overwatch* gained traction quickly, within 2016, it built a global platform and created the OWC (*Overwatch* World Cup), a national league where the best players per country play for the world champion title.

Throughout 2016-2017, Blizzard began to include lore and background information on characters, which is still ongoing now. They focused on short films and comics sharing stories of who the characters are / what they represent as ‘characters’. In September 2017, OWL (*Overwatch* League) secured billionaire sports team owners, establishing 12 franchises around the world, increasing viewership and player count around the world. After all the expansion from national leagues to professional leagues, in 2018, in a ‘Game Informer’ poll, *Overwatch* was ranked the 29th best game of all time. After continuous success, Blizzard announced *Overwatch 2*. *Overwatch* continued to succeed, with the announcement of a sequel and, in 2021, reaching a milestone of 60 million lifetime players worldwide, as well as, in 2022, reported by ‘Bloomberg’ *Overwatch* sold 50 million copies. However, in late 2022 *Overwatch* immediately shut down upon the release of Overwatch 2, leaving *Overwatch 2* and *Overwatch* being referred to as the same game. Upon the release of the *Overwatch 2*, Blizzard received harsh criticism on the addition of a battle pass, hero selection, and cosmetics. Continuing from the criticism, due to COVID-19 and lack of interest, the OWL collapsed. However, in 2025, the OWL was replaced by the OWCS (*Overwatch* Champion series), which had the same professionalism as OWL. The only difference between these leagues is that Blizzard was now in charge of this series along with Activision, made to reflect ‘traditional’ esports circuits. In 2026, *Overwatch 2* was rebranded into *Overwatch*, combining both games' lore and thematics to one storyline, bringing back old character lore, while continuing their stories.

Similarities and differences to other games

This game is similar to other games like *Valorant*, *CSGO*, and *Rainbow Six Siege* in its gameplay. All four of these games are combat and objective based games where you are fighting

another team for control of a point, eliminating all other opponents, or moving an objective. Ultimately, these games would be placed in the same ‘strategical’ game category. A big difference between these games though, is that *Overwatch*, above the rest, has the most unique and ‘exotic’ cosmetics and graphics. Although each game has a variety of cosmetics, *Valorant*, *CSGO*, and *Rainbow Six Siege* cosmetics all fit the field of combat, *CSGO* and *Rainbow* in specific create characters / customizable options that look fit for going to a combat zone, they look like stereotypical soldiers . *Overwatch* differs in this aspect because cosmetics, skins most of all, come in a large variety, scaling from combat looking - to leisure - to swimming attire, each character has at least 8 customizable skins. In this aspect of cosmetics, this game is similar to *Fortnite* and *Marvel Rivals*. *Marvel Rivals* is literally a copy of *Overwatch*, but with characters and maps from Marvel, like Spider-man; Iron Man; Invisible Woman. The biggest similarities between these 3 major games is seen in the character designs and the skins created within the game. Each game depicts the male characters as ready to go to battle and bulked up-fit, while in opposition, the female characters often wear revealing/tight clothing, provocative poses, and exaggerated feminine features. Another coaligning factor and reason of discourse I have found is the rating of each of these games which is ‘T’, Teen, meaning anyone 12-13+ can play it. *Marvel Rivals* in specific, has received huge criticism on the ‘T’ rating because of how exposing the skins and characters are. Many researchers have criticized the exposing nature of the game and have named it a sexually focused game. This stems mainly from the revealingness of characters' outfits, or lack of outfit, and hyper-sexualization of characters. Specifically to *Fortnite*, most of the discourse I found surrounding it was the portrayal of female characters vs male characters, also how these stereotypes attribute to the male gaze. They argued that *Fortnite* portrays female characters as “eye candy” and men as muscular, aggressive, dominant figures and that this is

more harmful because most of the players are young males. This stark contrast raised a variety of questions about the objectification and sexualization of characters and reinforcing gender norms. For the female characters, critics argued that female characters and gendered outfits are reduced to sexual objects for the male gaze and this perception influenced harmful stereotypes. On the other hand, the male depiction influences hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity by perpetuating what it is to "be a man". While controversy has risen for both *Fortnite* and *Marvel Rivals, Overwatch*, through the research I have done, remains untouched because these two other games are seen as "worse". From some sources I have read they claim *Overwatch* is okay, simply because these other two games exist.

Overwatch's viewership

Overwatch draws most of its audience from North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific regions; these 3 regions make up over half of overall players and have the most professional teams and tournament hosts, for example big cities like, Los Angeles (USA), Seoul (South Korea), and London (UK). Although a main point of viewership, media, and interest come from the professional league and world cup, there is also a large following for streamers who play *Overwatch* for content, as well as the media they repost their 'clips' of playing. In video games today there is a culture around 'clip farming', which means doing something cool in a short timespan then reposting this 'clip' on several social media platforms in order to reach as many people as possible. In *Overwatch*, Twitch. Kick, and Youtube streamers will host 2-8 hour live streams of them playing the game alone or with other *Overwatch* content creators. During those live streams, the streamers will do something cool within the game either a kill streak or a "funny" play, and either clip it themselves or have someone from their following do it for them.

In several instances, with popular streamers, followers of theirs create accounts dedicated to posting their clips for them. This all means that every social media platform has exposure to *Overwatch,* whether it's in the form of streams, long videos, or short clips. For me, I see clips on tiktok, instagram, and my youtube feed shows the world cup and professional league showcasing how large the game is and how much outreach it has as well.

Overwatch's fan-base

Overwatch has a variety of fans spanning from world cup viewers, the esports teams, streamers, and players all over the world. The community itself has developed a culture of its own, one aspect being cosplay. Cosplay is when you dress up as a character from a video game, movie, or book/comic, *Overwatch* has a very large group of fans who cosplay. Gaming conventions and social media are the places where cosplaying is the most common, there are several *Overwatch* cosplay tiktokers, instagram users, and even streamers. Gaming conventions happen all over the world and are known to be a hub for cosplaying, people gather at these events dressed up as their favorite characters. BlizzCon is a gaming convention sponsored by Blizzard, meaning large groups of *Overwatch* fans go. I have never been, but on social media I have seen groups of people who cosplay at these events. Through research, the competitive aspect within *Overwatch* has been said to be toxic. The pressure of competitive play is said to lead to many instances of verbal abuse and harassment. The last issue discussed is one of the earliest problems and controversy involving the sexualization of female characters in the game. While the game has a diverse cast, critics argued the designs of the characters were catered to the male gaze. A major spark in the debate was the creation and abundance of fan-made *Overwatch* porn which raised

concerns about the objectification of women in all video games. Blizzard however has reacted to this and altered poses and costumes, but the underlying issues still raised concerns.

Initial Conclusion:

As shown, *Overwatch* is an effective research object that could be analyzed through a variety of lenses. Prior to this research I was unaware of the Blizzard lawsuit, so I wonder how the actions of the company are displayed within *Overwatch*? Specifically if the display of women within the game is a reflection of Blizzard's company identity? Understanding the context about Blizzard, the role selection, Blizzard's past games, and the fanbases around the game, is important because it’s now shown the trend of sexualization in Blizzard games, the actions of the company itself, and the overall outreach of the game.

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