Prospectus

Lukas Nowlin

Intro:

The portrayal of the female body through video games has been a topic of discussion since video games first came to surface, dating all the way back *Super Mario Bros* and *Pac-Man.* Through video games, the stereotype of women being nurturing has begun to fade now centralizing on objectification and possession. As stated by Gill, " In a shift from earlier representational practices, it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one. Instead of regarding caring, nurturing or motherhood as central to femininity, in today's media, possession of a 'sexy body' is presented as women's key source of identity" (Gill, 149). This shift from motherhood to sexual object has been seen in a variety of different video games, reinforcing the idea that women's bodies are a sole way of identification. By examining *Overwatch*, I will be able to take a deeper dive into the sexualization of women through a variety of different characters and customizable cosmetics this game offers.

Released in 2023, *Overwatch* has 'avoided' being in scholarly conversations regarding the sexualization of female characters because it is deemed acceptable due to other video games being seen as worse or more vulgar. Using this game, I argue that it sexualizes the female body with characters like Widowmaker, Tracer, or DVA (etc), and reinforces gendered based stereotypes through the categorization of characters by tank, damage, and support. *Overwatch*

also has emotes, stances, and changes of POV, that I will later argue exploit the female body, using Laura Mulvey's research as a primary lens of analysis.

Addressing the "who cares?" question, although the argument rarely becomes public discourse, the amount of research about sexualization of women in video games is abundant, yet *Overwatch* specifically has slim research done on it alone. I reference Dickerman's work from 2008 where he claims, "Video games have become a powerful force in culture. Depictions of women in video games are scary and highly stereotypical. Women are usually minor characters, are seen as victims rather than heroines, and are depicted in highly sexualized ways" (Dickerman, 20). In comparison to 2008, much more work has been done on this topic in video games, but other forms of media continue to take the spotlight over the issues being called upon within the gaming industry, again Dickerman states: "Whereas the entertainment industry as a whole promotes various representations of gender, this is most notable in television and movies. In movies and television, research and activism have under-scored the effects that unrealistic and over-sexualized representations of women may have on adolescents and body image (Beasley & Standley, 2002), and awareness of the issues are growing. Awareness of similar issues in video games has yet to enter the public discourse" (Dickerman, 22). This reinforces the idea that more contemporary media steals the spotlight, allowing video to essentially ride 'under the radar'.

Literature Review:

Sexualization of the female body in video games

Dating back to some of the oldest video games, *Mortal Kombat; World of Warcraft; Tomb Raider,* scholarly conversations have surrounded how the gaming world sexualizes the female body. I want to bring light to, despite the true purpose of the game, how games that center around fighting are the games where women are sexualized the most. Research of games between 1980-ongoing and the depiction of the female body within these games have been done by several groups / researchers. Specifically, in 2024 Teresa Lynch followed the trends of this research and stated, games with fighting more commonly pursue exaggerated women features. Although fighting is a key aspect in *Overwatch,* the growing amount of female skins revealing their body, being exposed, or wearing latex outfits continues to happen. Generally, illustrated through research by Cao, I will be addressing how over 50% of women are shown in short skirts or shorts, alongside female characters, among the body's all parts, thighs are most frequently exposed, with more than half of female characters having exposed thighs, followed by shoulders, necks, arms and chests, highlight the amount of exposure given to women in video games. Another common theme among video games is female characters being presented in high heels even if they are going to 'fight'. Cao describes this as "her biggest function is beauty rather than fitness", (Cao, 3.1). In addition to Cao's research, Skowronski adds to the conversation by stating, "Although female characters are strongly underrepresented in video games, they often appear heavily sexualized. In their analysis of 20 US top-selling games of 2003, Downs and Smith (2010) found that only 14% of all characters were female. Of these, 41% appeared in sexually revealing clothing, and 43% were depicted partially or fully nude, compared to 11% and 4% of the male characters, respectively. Females were also more likely than males to be shown with unrealistic body proportions (25% vs. 2%). This pattern is consistent with several content analyses documenting the sexualization of female video game characters, particularly in

top-selling games" (Skowronski, 1.1). This research is the most crucial to my analysis, because although *Overwatch* has little to no research done on it, that doesn't mean the trend doesn't persist within this game. I will be closely examining how in *Overwatch*, half of the female characters' base skins are presented in heels or sandals. With the addition of 'customizable' or different 'skins', every female character has at least 1 skin with heels. Alongside this, over 75% of the base skins for female characters are either exposing/revealing or tight/latex suits. For customizable skins / 'skins' you can purchase, 100% of the female characters show skin or are in latex suits.

I will also be taking a deeper look into the strategic 'placement' of camera angles and switching from first to third person. Research done by Buckland on Laura Mulvey's *Male Gaze*, explains how the camera and switch of point of view is no mistake and theirs is the intention behind it by stating, "The body of the woman is therefore defined as an object positioned and located in filmic space, that is, an object seen and represented from the perspective of film, whose codes (close-ups, the frame, camera distance) are manipulated by an external force, patriarchal logic, to create an erotic image of the woman's body" (Buckland, 1). I will be using this research as a driving force in analyzing the spectators and *Overwatch*'s manipulation of angles shown within the game itself. Although it is a game and not a film, it is still imperative to incorporate with analyzing *Overwatch*.

Casting gameplay aside, Yao highlights how sexualization happens in the advertisement of games, and *Overwatch* is no different. I will be examining how advertisements of the game surround sexualized characters like Widowmaker; Mercy; Tracer; DVA. The manipulation of

these characters' gender is seen through the tight/latex suits and the amount of skin shown. Displayed through scholarly research, gendered based sales have shown beneficial in gaining male interest continuing to push the narrative of the dominant gender in video games (Yao, 90). With this research, I will be able to find who the intended audience is and how sexualization is allowed to continue to occur.

Real world implications

Although the virtual and real world are two very different things, the societal structure, or in this case display of female characters, in video games has real world implications. I want to emphasize how the depiction of women in video games can alter feelings of self worth and body image. Specific to *Overwatch*, I argue that male characters are depicted in a variety of weight classes, but every female character in the game is slim or/and fit, reinforcing what the "ideal" body type of a woman 'should look like'. Relevant to my claim, Behm-Morawitz research states that, "Moreover, exposure to idealized images of the female body in the media has been shown to negatively affect girls' and women's general feelings of self worth. Specifically, exposure to idealized images of the female body affects self-esteem and self-efficacy" (Behm-Morawitz, 1). Through research I want to show how the skins for female characters created by *Overwatch* give false or 'unrealistic' ideas of what the female body should look like.

I want to analyze how self consciousness is not the only effect of how women are portrayed in video games. By researching how men are dominant in gaming culture, roughly

making up 50-60% of ‘gamers’ and how this is displayed through skins and cosmetics created. Men being the dominant gender within the culture of gaming, starts to form the idea of who the intended audience could be. This research will help later argue why women are displayed as sexual objects or cast as support roles, resulting in these negative affects. Downs states, “Sexualized portrayals of women in the media have been linked to objectification, leading some males to view women and their bodies as possessions (Frederickson and Roberts 1997). Adolescent males’ learning to objectify women from media may lead to negative social, legal, and relational damage” (Downs, 1). Using this imperative research, I want to show how *Overwatch*’s characters reinforce media representations of women sexualized objects, and how this portrayal is a root for negative world implications.

The reinforcement of gender roles in *Overwatch* through their categorization can also have impacts on the perception of individual gender roles. I will analyze how the reinforcement specifically of women being placed into the ‘support’ role, crucial to this analysis Dietz and Mead claim: “Because roles are used to define the self, they become a point of reference for organizing and classifying the world and ultimately, as a basis for action (Mead, 1964). Thus, the roles internalized by the child, including gender, become for the child, and later for the adult, a basis for other roles and for action. Thus, the gender role that is internalized by the individual when she or he is young necessarily has a significant impact upon the perspective of that individual and the additional roles she or he assumes in later life” (Dietz, 426). This research is important in describing how the role selection in the game, does in fact influence and represent gender stereotypes. I intend to take a more direct dive into *Overwatch*, showing how its role separation influences real world views.

Reinforcement of gender role stereotypes

I will also be examining how the categorization of classes divided by tank damage support. This research highlights how the division of character by role also reinforces gendered based stereotypes. Using the first source I have found directly addressing *Overwatch*, this research will allow me to analyze the rhetoric surrounding the role selection along with the classification of characters by gender, specifically referring to the 'support / healer' role. Research done by Leon, supports my claim. He proposes "Both rely on role selection, for example, student, mentor, researcher in education, or tank, DPS, or support in video games. In both areas, choices are influenced by stereotypes and past feedback, which can discourage experimentation and reinforce inequities. For example, female players in role-based team games are often expected to choose a support role" (Leon, 154). I would like to take a deeper dive into this claim and explore how this division of characters does in fact reinforce gender roles.

Methodology:

The main method I will be using to analyze *Overwatch* will be visual rhetorical analysis. This lens will allow me to, through research, illustrate the function of the sexualization and display of the female body by contrasting the visual decision of male vs female skins within the game, specifically female characters like Mercy, Widowmaker, Tracer, and DVA, who are all in tight latex outfits as well as revealing skin, to characters like Soldier:76 and Reinhart, who wear armor and look fit for war. Alongside the skins, the proportions and body styles between male

and female characters differs, male characters look buff, intimidating, and ready for battle. While on the other hand, female characters are slim and 'curvey' normalizing exaggerated / sexually suggestive body types. Throughout my analysis, I will also be pulling from the theoretical framework of Laura Mulvey's *Male Gaze*. This theoretical framework will allow me to look deeper into the highlight intros, change of perspective within ultimate abilities, specifically DVA, and cosmetics like emotes frame female characters as sexually desirable or suggestive. The focus on all these aspects will lie in the positioning of the camera throughout all these experiences and answer the question of who's benefitting from these angles. (Mulvey, 1)

On the other hand, spectator analysis will allow me to analyze the audience of *Overwatch.* Understanding the audience will provide essential information behind what continues to fuel Blizzard to make cosmetics and skins because without an audience, Blizzard wouldn't continue to create these cosmetics. The promotion behind the sexualization of female characters is crucial to the main point of analysis. Evaluating the genders of the spectators, the actions of the fan-base, and the actions of employers of the company, will stand as further examples of real world implications behind the game. Implications in the real world are possible because in some instances spectators develop / inherit ideas shown within the game, whether this is the division of characters based on their 'role', Tank Damage Support (healer), or how women are shown within the game through the switching of the camera angle during 'ultimates', or the revealing nature behind female skins. Furthermore, this analysis will allow me to see the difference in gender between the players of the game by male and female percentage of players, helping later find the gender / audience it was made for. In addition, interpellation will allow me to constitute how the social structure presented within *Overwatch* is enforced on the audience

consuming the game. In other words, how Blizzard presents their ideals within the game, then how that is reproduced or used to ‘construct’ the players social perception.

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