

OVERWATCH: AN ANALYSIS OF DECEPTION, VISIBILITY, AND CULTURE

by

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Dedicated to my twelve-year-old self playing *RollerCoaster Tycoon* and dreaming for the day I could go into video game development.

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A critical analysis of *Overwatch*'s, a first-person shooter game developed by Blizzard, multiplayer experience reveals the ways women hide their virtual persona to avoid harassment. The way the company approaches harassment against their employees constructs the conditions for harassment to emerge in-game for players. The paper will analyze the company's approach to harassment in-person, in their physical offices, and online, in their game environments, and how that affects a player's in-game experience.

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2016, one month after Blizzard Entertainment's release of the video game *Overwatch*, a female competitive gamer named Kim "Geguri" Se-yeon was accused of cheating and using an aim assist software while competing in the Nexus Cup Korean qualifiers. To elaborate, an aim assist program would cause "Geguri" to be able to target enemies through walls or automatically without needing to move the mouse manually; aim assist works by moving the player's crosshair to any enemy target. At the time of this tournament, "Geguri" was 17 years old. She was on a team called UW Artisan playing against the opposing team called Dizziness. After team Dizziness lost against UW Artisan, two members of team Dizziness, "ETLA" and "Strobe," publicly accused "Geguri" of using an aim assist program because of her precision and speed. "Strobe" went as far as threatening to show up at "Geguri's" house with a knife if she was found to be cheating. The players publicly accused her of cheating and claimed that if their accusations were proven false, they would quit professional gaming (Choi). To clarify, "Geguri" was a professional 17-year-old video game player who was not only being accused of cheating in a professional tournament but also was threatened with physical harm over the accused cheating.

Following the accusations, "Geguri" demonstrated, on a live stream with a camera pointed towards her screen and hands, that she was not cheating, and was cleared of all the accusations. If "Geguri" had been using an aim assist, her hand movements would not match the movements made on-screen as aim assist usually makes your crosshair move unnaturally. "Geguri" was technically cleared of all the accusations by Blizzard Entertainment before the live stream, but the professional gaming scene was not convinced until she played live. The hour-long live stream of "Geguri" proving her innocence led to discussions of discrimination, sexism,

and hegemonic masculinity within video game culture. She was originally being accused of cheating, and once it was clear she wasn't cheating, the conversation behind her live stream turned to one that attacked and criticized the type of femininity she was presenting. People on social media commented on her looks and even tried to give advice on how she could present herself in a more feminine way (Choi). For example, people commented on her short hair, lack of makeup, and her physical attributes, all to dismiss her legitimacy as a skilled gamer and as a woman. If she was a skilled gamer, she could not also be a woman in their eyes, because she needed to fit into the masculine mold that gamers typically embodied.

As noted above, not only was "Geguri" falsely accused of cheating, and harassed by other gamers, she was criticized for not looking feminine enough to be considered a "real" girl gamer. When she was given the chance to show off her physical skills, instead of being focused on her playstyle and techniques, she was evaluated through a "male-dominated gaze, which furthered an objectification of [her] centered on surveillance of her body" (Choi). When a female gamer excels at playing a game, they are Othered from the "girl gamer" category and into a category that fits video game culture's view of masculine gamers. According to Omar Ruvalcaba's "Women's Experiences in ESports: Gendered Differences in Peer and Spectator Feedback During Competitive Video Game Play," female gamers will typically "avoid the identity of "girl gamer" in online and streaming contexts due to attached stereotypes regarding lower skill level and not wanting to be seen as a token" (Ruvalcaba). When a female gamer does embrace the gamer girl phrase it results in being highly sexualized and isolated within the gaming community. In brief, the term gamer is implied to be masculine, and when someone falls outside of the masculine range, they are no longer just a gamer. When the phrase gamer girl is used, it is

typically used in a negative context and in a way to isolate the player from the community they are in. Lastly, when a girl gamer breaks the traditional stereotype that they fall in, all their feminine attributes are questioned as their gaming skills are up to par, but their relationship to femininity is not according to the male gamer gaze.

If a girl gamer avoids the title “girl gamer,” they can try to blend into the masculine community that competitive gaming creates, thus allowing them at least a platform to show their skills and be taken seriously. Even if a female gamer shows off their skills, they still face multiple obstacles that male gamers do not typically face, such as sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and negative stereotypes that hinder their ability to consistently succeed. When women are in competitive video games and face sexual discrimination, they “tend to identify strongly with male stereotyped qualities, distance themselves from a feminine identity, and compete more aggressively with other females” (Ruvalcaba). In summary, the eSports scene is built only with masculinity in mind; the overwhelming number of obstacles that exist for women discourage talented female gamers from coming near competitive gaming. To put it in perspective, *Overwatch* has been out since 2016, and “Geguri” was signed to the *Overwatch* League in 2018 and left in 2020. She remains the only female player to ever be signed to an *Overwatch* League team.

For more context about the game, *Overwatch* is a team-based multiplayer first-person shooter game that was released in 2016 by Blizzard Entertainment. Blizzard Entertainment is responsible for many different types of games such as *Hearthstone*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Diablo*. *Overwatch* was their first attempt at making a diverse first-person shooter game, and it brought in a fresh style of gameplay in the action genre. Players can choose between 32 playable

characters with diverse backgrounds, stories, and abilities. Each playable character in the game incorporates different toolkits to counter other playable characters. For example, one playable character may have a machine gun, while the other one uses a rocket launcher, and the other may use a sniper rifle. Moreover, their kits don't just incorporate weapons, but they have tools as well to elevate and change the gameplay. The various types of characters and abilities make for a game that relies a lot on communication and teamwork to advance in the ranks.

Players play in teams to satisfy objectives within a time limit and climb the game's competitive ranks. The game is a one-time purchase, and there are in-game "loot boxes" that players can buy to gain custom skins, emotes, voice lines, and sprays for characters. Players can also earn loot boxes just by playing the game, so purchases are not required. The game, as noted above, came out in 2016 and has received updates for free game content such as new maps, heroes, skins, and event modes until 2022. The game received universal praise and even had a group of professional teams titled "The *Overwatch* League," which "Geguri" was a part of for several seasons. These teams compete in streamed tournaments and fight for the championship title and the chance to win over a million dollars ("*Overwatch*, a Team-Based Shooter").

The way in-game interactions work in *Overwatch* is like other first-person shooter games. Players can choose to interact vocally, text-based, or even decide not to communicate at all, but a lack of communication usually hinders a team's ability to win a match. Team-based interaction is encouraged through the gameplay, as there are six players on each team. Teams typically consist of two healers, two tanks, and two damage-based characters. They encourage players to talk to their teammates to pick characters that counter other characters, as players can swap characters only after they die and then will be respawned as that new character. If one team runs a more

aggressive team, the opposing team may choose to have a more defensive team midway through a game. This team setup requires communication between players to run smoothly, and if there is a lack of communication it can stop the team from being successful. As explained in more detail later, the players choose between three categories of playstyle: tank, healer, or damage character. A tank character will typically have a shield, high health, and lower-damage output to balance out their health. But a healing character will have lower health, typically lower-damage output, but high healing output to help the tanks and damage character. Almost opposite to the healing character, a damage character will have high damage, lower health, and normally, no healing capabilities. Therefore, the different play styles create the ability to form a team that aims to be cohesive, and this requires participation in text or voice chat to win matches.

Blizzard Entertainment was founded under the name in 1994 and began with the release of their first hit, a real-time strategy game titled *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*. They went on to release the popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* in 2004 and reached over 9 million subscribers by the end of 2007. They held their own BlizzCon, a convention for Blizzard Entertainment fans, in 2005. After delving into card games based on the *Warcraft* narrative universe, and publishing *Hearthstone*, they began to develop a new MMORPG. *Titan* was discussed in 2010, but the development was falling apart, so it was canceled in 2013, and that left the remaining *Titan* developers to produce a brand-new idea to bring in new players. Jeff Kaplan led the new development team, and the team produced a new kind of game for Blizzard: a team-based multiplayer shooter game. This game was eventually named *Overwatch* and released in May of 2016 (O'Dwyer, Danny, and Justin Haywald). In Chapter 1, I will analyze the way Blizzard Entertainment approaches harassment against their

employees through a lawsuit filed by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing. This chapter will set up how the company deals with harassment in their physical offices and reveal just how hard it is to be a female in the gaming industry.

In Amanda Phillips' book *Gamer Trouble*, they discuss #GamerGate and how the history behind antifeminist public discourse has existed in gaming and technology for so much longer than discussed. In short, #GamerGate was an online movement by gamers to "preserve ethics in video game journalism." At least, that was what the movement was about on the outside. On the inside, it was a movement dedicated to gamers who didn't want the state of gaming culture to evolve to be a more inclusive one. As Phillips' writes, "feminist gamers clearly exist, but they are pushed to the margins of the community when they do not fall in line with dominant gamer interpretations of video games" (Phillips, 30). In Chapter 2, I use Foucault's notion of the Panopticon to explore just how *Overwatch* rewards those who follow in line with masculine gamers and their culture. I will give more recent examples of abuse that exists in video game culture, but I will also reveal some older examples and how the problem has only become more apparent and accepted as time goes on. The examples I give will bring to light just what people who are pushed to the margins of the community experience whenever they boot up their favorite multiplayer game, and how that contributes to the fall of girls in e-sports.

As Phillips writes for us to "complicate how we understand the power, and powerlessness, of... women in the media, the role of technology and game mechanics in producing politics," (Phillips, 136). Blizzard entertainment could give fans of *Overwatch* as many female characters as they want, but their female users are still powerless during play. The male gaze that exists within digital games and e-sports creates a space where women are not only

more heavily criticized for their gameplay but criticized for their femininity or lack thereof. In Chapter 3, I will connect all the pieces together and discuss how women that participate in video game culture and development need to have spaces to share their stories and have their voices heard.

CHAPTER 1

CASE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In mid-2020, a lawsuit filed by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing revealed hidden stories of women who suffered harassment and abuse while working at Activision Blizzard (Los Angeles County Superior Court). The lawsuit argued that management at Activision Blizzard was aware of and encouraged sexual misconduct towards female employees. Activision Blizzard was also accused of having discriminatory hiring and employment practices against women and of maintaining a “frat boy”-esque culture. Former World of Warcraft and *Overwatch* employees and managers were found to have harassed, sexually assaulted, and abused women that worked at the company. According to various sources, female employees were not only subjected to sexual harassment and retaliation, but they were paid lower and had less room for opportunity than their male coworkers (Zwiezen).

Similarly, women that work in any sector of the technology industry face similar problems. As noted in Debbie Ging’s article from Feminist Media Studies, because women are excluded from the “internet’s digital infrastructures” they are less likely to have “participate[d] in both the production and consumption of its tools, platforms and services” (Ging). As Ging notes later down, it is vital to realize how “workplace discrimination ends up not only discriminating against women but also effectively hardwiring misogyny into the systems it produces” (Ging). When intertwining women in technology-related fields with the masculine video game culture that exists, it’s no surprise that Blizzard was a hostile work environment for the women they hired. In turn, the hostile physical office environment that they created and hid is revealed through the coding and development of the video games they create. The misogyny that

exists in the technology realm is transformed and amplified when intersected with video game culture. Women can't hide if they are in a physical office setting, as opposed to hiding personas online, and avoid misogyny in the workplace. In online settings, women can work together to protest and have their voices heard collectively. When a workplace has fewer women in a department it is much harder to collectively speak out against injustice. That is not to say that misogyny online is any less than misogyny in person, but there are critical differences between the two depending on the setting.

At a BlizzCon Panel in 2010, a woman, known by her *World of Warcraft* handle for anonymity, named Xantia asked the *World of Warcraft* developers a question and was responded to with a condescending tone and dismissal. Around the time that the lawsuit became news, the video of Xantia resurfaced to show just how public the company was with its sexism. The video is not only “emblematic of a rotten culture at the heart of Blizzard,” but also is “proof of gaming’s ambient hostility to women” (Gach). Xantia noted that when she asked her question, she could hear a small group of women cheering, but they were drowned out by men booing at her, and the developers did nothing to stop the booing. She attended BlizzCon as a potential networking opportunity to try to work in the video game field and really was curious about the question she asked. Xantia asked the developers, one of whom being Alex Afrasiabi, if they were going to develop more varied female character designs by noting that the female characters looked like they had “just walked out of a Victoria’s Secret catalog” (Gach). Instead of providing an actual response, one of the game directors said, “which catalog would you like them to step out of?” and that they would, “pick different catalogs” (Gach). The developers not only dismissed her, but made a joke out of her question, and cheered on the people booing in the

crowd. Looking back at the way that the developers treated the way that a random fan asked a question, the examples of harassment that are in the lawsuit are not incredibly shocking.

In a study conducted by Eric Bailey, Kazunori Miyata, and Tetsuhiko Yoshida, they find that there is a data-based gender gap that exists in game development, and it's worse than expected. The game *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* was published by Activision Blizzard in 2015 and developed by Treyarch, a company owned by Activision Blizzard. In the audio department, there were three women out of twenty-five employees. The programming department had only two women out of ninety-five employees. Project management had zero women out of thirty-seven employees. Art and animation led with twenty-one women out of two hundred and twenty-eight employees. Lastly, the game design department had seven women out of ninety-one employees. Overall, this gives a total of forty-six women out of five hundred and sixty-eight employees (Bailey, Eric N, Kazunori Miyata, and Tetsuhiko Yoshida, 52). Because of the large gender gap within departments, women had a smaller collective voice when making decisions for the game. Within the games analyzed in this study, *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* had one of the larger gender gaps within the industry. The women that were in roles within the industry were in “comparatively lower-paying roles and outside of leadership” positions (Bailey, Eric N, Kazunori Miyata, and Tetsuhiko Yoshida, 62). Not only do women have to deal with harassment and misogyny, but their pay is significantly lower than their male coworkers.



Fig. 1. Hollister, BlizzCon Cosby Crew, 2021.

Additionally, the Activision Blizzard male employees took part in group chats titled “Cosby Suite” and “BlizzCon Cosby Crew” (Hollister). A photograph, Fig. 1, as shown above, of former *World of Warcraft* developer Alex Afrasiabi, and several other Activision Blizzard developers holding up a photograph of Bill Cosby at the Activision Blizzard annual event BlizzCon in 2013. The photograph revealed was taken in a hotel room located at BlizzCon and was repeatedly referred to as the “Cosby Suite” in digital or physical conversations. This photograph reveals just how far the culture goes. It wasn’t just one developer causing a string of harassment, it was an entire culture that existed inside of Activision Blizzard. The lawsuit reveals that Afrasiabi, who is outright named in the lawsuit, would continuously hit on, grope, and attempt to kiss female employees around other male employees and supervisors (Gach). Another developer, who was outed by screenshot, Jesse McCree, who was up until 2021 a lead designer for *Overwatch*, cheered him on during the text conversations and implied that he could have sex

with all the female employees (Gach). Not only did the group chat imply that the hotel room was a “Cosby Suite,” but they constantly sent tons of pictures of alcohol to “prepare” for the “Cosby Suite.” The male developers pushed back, claiming that the “Cosby Suite” was a joke about ugly sweaters, and how the hotel room looked like one, but many of the texts and references to the room were sexual in nature making this point moot (Gach). Nevertheless, the “Cosby Suite” is only a portion of the damage that Blizzard imposed on its female employees.

The July 2021 Department of Fair Employment and Housing lawsuit revealed even more harassment that possibly led to a woman taking her own life. At the time of the lawsuit, her name was removed from the documents, and Activision Blizzard responded and called the claims “distorted” (Carpenter). In 2017, Kerri Moynihan went on a company retreat at Disney Land and stayed in Disney’s Grand Californian Hotel & Spa. Moynihan, a 32-year-old finance manager at Activision Blizzard, was being sexually harassed by her supervisor and other employees. At an employee holiday party before her death, a nude photograph of her was passed around to other male coworkers. In March of 2022, Paul and Janet Moynihan filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Activision Blizzard for the death of their daughter. The wrongful death lawsuit claims that Greg Restituto, their daughter’s boss at Activision Blizzard, “initially lied to investigators,” claiming that he wasn’t in a sexual relationship with Kerri and then attempted to hide evidence of their relationship after her death. His hotel keycard was found in her hotel room, and he even had her apartment key but denied their relationship. The month after Moynihan’s death, Restituto was no longer working at Activision Blizzard. Additionally, Activision Blizzard refused to turn over Moynihan’s and Restituto’s company laptops and claimed that Moynihan’s cellphone had been wiped already. A half-hour before Moynihan’s death, Restituto texted her, “Please don’t do

that. Not tonight. Think about it and make your decision when your mind is clear” (Garcia-Roberts, Gus, and Shannon Liao). It is hard to believe that Restituto had no relationship with his coworker Moynihan, but even if he didn’t, the company still failed to acknowledge and help female employees that experienced harassment. In summary, Kerri Moynihan was an employee at Activision Blizzard who was failed by her company, by her coworkers, and the culture that exists within the video game industry.

Activision Blizzard created an environment where behavior from Restituto, and Afrasiabi was ignored, normalized, and not taken seriously. If a female employee took their complaints to the human resource department, they were denied professional opportunities, forced to transfer to other areas, given negative performance reviews, or even terminated (Los Angeles County Superior Court). According to the “Reporting Harassment in *Overwatch*” page on Blizzard’s website, their ”in-game policies are designed to foster fun, fair, and safe game environments,” but if their corporate policies don’t work, it’s hard to imagine that their in-game policies are effective (“Ignoring Players in *Overwatch*.”).

An environment of abuse within the video game industry and culture is covered up with flashy game releases, game patches, and “fixes” that do nothing to help the quality of life for women working at these companies or the quality of life for the women playing their games. These fixes exist only to satisfy profit margins and players that are white men who fit the stereotypical “gamer” persona and they allow the abuse and harassment to hide under new releases. Not only do developers suffer from harassment and abuse, but players also do as well. Any player who falls outside of the “normal” masculine player persona suffers verbal harassment and abuse covered up by patches, faulty reporting systems, and new content that claims to

improve user experiences. Still, it is impossible to eliminate toxic culture in a video game when a company is built on toxic culture, which is why it is important to talk about and analyze it.

CHAPTER 2

OVERWATCH'S PANOPTIC VIEW

Team-based communication in video games is usually toxic; for example, many research projects reveal the toxicity that runs rampant in many team-based games. The harassment that women experience shows in multiple ways, from verbal abuse, text-based harassment to even in-person harassment if personal data leaks. *Overwatch* enforces an endorsement system to encourage friendly behavior between players (Chalk). In each game, players can vote for three other players who showed fair play or behavior. This system breaks down into three vote types: sportsmanship, good teammate, and shot caller. It encourages players to vote for other players that portray any of these traits. These ratings then form a ranking system for each player that gives them a number through five that determines their “endorsement” level. The game will then try to pair players with similar endorsements together to be on the same teams to encourage friendly gameplay. Gaining a new level of endorsement gives the player loot boxes, which contain various skins and emotes, which are forms of desirable in-game content. Thus, players have a reason to want to gain a higher endorsement rating. The endorsement system was a new tool enforced to create non-toxic gameplay and a healthy experience for players. To sum it up, when players can earn a reward for good behavior, they are, at least on paper, more likely to exhibit non-toxic behavior.

Michael Foucault’s commentary on the Panopticon in his book “Discipline and Punish the Birth of the Prison” links to how *Overwatch* and its endorsement system works. Foucault writes, “... but the Panopticon was also a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, alter behavior, to train or correct individuals,” and this relates to how the

endorsement system is used, as it is a system incorporated to alter the behavior of toxic players (Foucault, 2003). The players also serve as the watchers, as they can endorse other players. However, they are also the ones being watched by the algorithm-based system, and their teammates. Later in this chapter, I will go more in-depth on how this specific system works, along with the standard reporting system, and how players abuse it, meaning lots of toxic behavior slips through the cracks of code. Essentially, the endorsement system is a laboratory meant to carry out an experiment to provide players with enjoyable teammates and alter negative behavior. However, when the code itself is scripted by developers who embody negative behavior, it is just a flashy patch aimed at making the company look better when it does not even work correctly. The experiment aims to increase profits at Blizzard by utilizing players as non-willing participants in a lab project to help refine and better in-game engagements all for the company's gain.

To clarify, the endorsement system does not work the way they advertise it. After each game, a player will endorse other players. The more players endorsed; the more loot boxes a player can get. However, the game cannot stop someone from endorsing random people to gain experience to gain free loot boxes. That is to say, players can easily maintain a level 3 endorsement rating just by playing enough games and being voted randomly. And furthermore, the game, during less active hours, will still pair lower endorsements with higher endorsement players. Players with higher endorsements, 4 or 5, usually have a higher queue time for games as well (Chalk). They set the endorsement system in place to reduce toxic behavior by allowing players the chance to voice their behavior concerns. However, it also encourages a reward system that allows for false recognition. Players can endorse random people on their team

without paying attention, just for the experience they gain while using the system. This leads to a wave of toxic players with higher endorsements when they are not players that should be playing in those ranks.

Foucault's commentary on the Panopticon in his book links to not only the video game *Overwatch* by itself, but it can also connect to how Blizzard's company works. Developers are in an already toxic culture, gaming culture, and constantly construct and produce a "normal" persona that is most desirable in that culture. The developers are "disciplined" into "normal behavior" by the watchers who oversee the culture, the CEOs, and top executives (Foucault, 205). Thus, the gaming culture is so embedded in the workplace that they view straying from the toxic culture as abnormal. Therefore, a dominant voice exists in game studies and gaming culture, specifically a male voice, and is viewed as the normal voice. By bringing in analysis with "situated knowledge," people can finally understand the voices that exist in game studies and culture that are silenced (Haraway). The male dominant voice has silenced experiences that need to be discussed to enforce actual change. There is no single origin or starting point of this process, as noted in "A game of cat's cradle," there is only a string that gains knots collaboratively, and it does not end (Haraway). By analyzing player and developer experiences in *Overwatch*, more voices can be heard and justified. The collective work can bring marginalized players' experiences into the light.

Consequently, the toxic masculine culture that stems from Activision Blizzard does not stop at the corporate level, it falls all the way down to the virtual culture. Not only does this affect players who play the game virtually, but people who are in the video game community. In

short, the culture that Activision Blizzard normalizes in their offices has consequences in the virtual setting of *Overwatch* and the online spaces that fans of *Overwatch* reside in.

To illustrate the culture that is apparent in virtual and physical areas that video games occupy, it is important to look through the virtual areas and pull context. One area where a lot of the *Overwatch* community interacts back and forth with developers and interacts with each other is on Reddit. Reddit is similar to a lot of social media applications with a couple of caveats; users are typically anonymously posting their thoughts. This application or website is an ideal one to look at when exploring the culture the video game brings, as when a person plays *Overwatch*, they are also anonymous. As noted previously, when a player is in a game in *Overwatch*, the only attachment to their identity is their username and, if they choose to use it, their voice. On Reddit, the only thing attached to a user is their username and the information they decide to give to the platform through comments, threads, or posts they make. Using Reddit as a source for academic information can be a tough challenge, because of the anonymity that exists on the application; but, using the application to compare interactions between people who reside in the same virtual worlds can be explored for similarities. To clarify, the *Overwatch* Reddit community is a place where developers and *Overwatch* players discuss changes to the game, suggestions, and glitches they see in the game. Developers frequently interact with *Overwatch* players with in-depth game details, and game glitches, but they do noticeably ignore specific topics about sexism, such as the example discussed below.

Specifically, a post from user “bmrtrt” titled “I played as a female for a day, and here are my observations,” reveals a male user’s experience using a voice changer to present a more feminine voice (“bmrtrt”). They note several things before going into the results including how

they are platinum ranked in the game, they kept voice communication to the minimum, and they mostly played a healing character to fit the stereotype of gamer girls only healing in video games. The user claims they, “tried to replicate a female player minding her business to the best of [their] ability” (“bmrtrt”). In their games using the voice changer, they found a few key things: many of the players they played with did not care that they were a female, about a third of the players tried to initiate flirting with the user, and about ten percent of the players seemed to “actively hate women.” Before going into the results this user got, it is important to note that this was an experiment done by a user in the game; not to say they are wrong about the results, but it is important that this data matches up with more social media examples from women to be considered usable.

Additionally, there were also a couple of issues with their experiment. They noted that they stuck to playing only a healing character in the game, as the stereotype within the community is that women only play healing characters. There is an inherent problem with this choice: they are playing in a seemingly different environment, as they are playing the role those male players are comfortable with women playing. If the user had played tank or a damage-based role, the results would probably be much more shocking. The second issue is that the player was already a higher rank on the tier list; because of the harassment that women receive playing first-person shooter games, and the effect that harassment has on play ability, a lot fewer women are in higher ranks. When people are abused verbally in a virtual environment the first reaction is to stop speaking, and when a person does that in a competitive video game the game becomes a bit more challenging in a team-based environment. To clarify, this user’s experiment was a popular thread with over three thousand and one hundred upvotes, and zero developers commented on

the post; when there is a history of developer's commenting on game concepts, developments, and glitches, given the history of abuse within the company it is not surprising that this post was left untouched by developers.

With those issues in mind, the user "bmrtrt" noted that the ten percent of users they encountered that acted like they actively hated women were toxic to a point where the game felt unplayable. Specifically, the user noted that those users would, "harass [a person] all game... calling [a person] all sorts of names... demanding they get pocketed" (bmrtrt). Because "bmrtrt" was playing a healing character in this experiment, other players he was playing with demanded to be pocketed the entire game; specifically, when a player asks a healer to pocket them, they are requesting a healer to focus them to heal over other players in the game. The user "bmrtrt" played as a healing character under the guise of a woman's voice, meaning the ten percent of men that harassed him were expecting to be healed over other players on the team consistently even after verbal abuse. To further illustrate, one of the ten percent of players that was verbally harassing "bmrtrt" even went further and sent them a private message in the game that said, "I hope you get gang-raped and have your head cut off," because "bmrtrt" didn't heal this person continuously throughout the game. This isn't just normal toxicity, or complaints about someone's gameplay; this is personal harassment and attacks that reveal hatred towards a gender, rather than a player's skill. Furthermore, when Blizzard developers choose to ignore a thread that brings awareness to these issues, it further highlights the notion that Blizzard is choosing profit over people.

To expand, in a study done by Hampus Bergstrom and Niklas Ericsson titled, "How toxicity differs between male and female players in competitive *Overwatch*," they survey a group of 328 participants from the *Overwatch* and Competitive *Overwatch* Reddit boards. When the

survey group was asked if they felt like toxicity is an issue in online games, the answer was an overwhelming yes at 90.9%. They separated the survey group by gender and asked specific questions for each gender. When the male group was asked if they felt the need to hide their gender to not be harassed when they are playing online, the answer was almost 100 percent no. When they asked the same question to female players, the answer was 72.5% yes. This reveals that female players felt like they needed to hide their gender to avoid being harassed while playing *Overwatch*. Digging a little deeper, “89.9%” of all survey participants “experience toxicity towards their performance in the game, but those female players also experience a high number of toxicity towards their gender” (Bergstrom & Ericsson, 17). When comparing male and female players in experiencing toxicity towards gender, only 27.6% of male players said they received gender-based toxicity versus 81.4% of women said they received gender-based toxicity. Nevertheless, anyone playing *Overwatch* will experience toxicity at some point during their gaming, but there is a major difference in how each gender experiences toxicity. Men typically receive toxicity based on their skill level at the game, and women receive toxicity based not only on their performance but their gender; this leads to female players feeling like they need to hide their voice or gender, putting them at a disadvantage when it comes to team-based competitive video games. Without communication, women may not speak up or communicate with their team during team-based combat, leading to game losses, which will drop their competitive score.

To visualize this notion more, in “Exploring the Online Responses to All-Female Esports Teams in Reddit” by Miia Siutila and Ellinoora Havaste, they discuss the reaction to an all-female League of Legends team that was established in 2012-2013. Team Siren was announced

and was turned into a running joke and people claimed that they used their gender “as a way to get attention, money or special treatment from (male) leaders” (Siutila & Havaste, 61). Most of the jokes directed at Team Siren were “sexual in nature or related to the players’ gender,” and even nodded to the stereotype that women only play support or healing characters, as one comment even said, “how can you win with 5 supports” (Siutila & Havaste, 62). *League of Legends* may be a different kind of game than *Overwatch*, but the kinds of characters are very similar and in both games support heroes or characters are usually attributed to women players. When related back to the introduction, when “Geguri” was discussed, the reaction to the only female *Overwatch* League player seems very familiar to the response that the all-female *League of Legends* team received. Gaming communities often tote around a feeling of meritocracy, as it seems as if the only thing that matters to them is individual skill in a player, but when people read between the lines and experience first-hand the toxicity that comes with trying to go professional as a woman, they realize the façade when it is too late, and they are already burnt out. To summarize, even when another large competitive video game created all-female teams, the reactions from the community were very similar to the reactions that “Geguri” received, and were either sexual in nature or related to gender, and not skill.

Furthermore, all these examples are not isolated in just competitive video games, it can happen in any multiplayer game. In “A Rape in Cyberspace” by Julian Dibbell, Dibbell describes a “cyberrape” in a multi-player computer video game called *LambdaMOO* that occurred in March 1993. *LambdaMOO* is a multi-player video game that allows players to interact with avatars; to clarify, a more modern version of *LambdaMOO* could be similar to *VR Chat*, in which players interact with 3D animated models they choose. Users in *LambdaMOO* interacted with

each other through script and text, as there were no images in the game. A character named Mr. Bungle used a subprogram that allowed him to create or write actions that could be attributed to other characters in the community. Mr. Bungle used the subprogram to force other players in the virtual community to perform sexual acts on each other and themselves through text. This raised several questions about the boundaries between real-life and in-game life, and how games should be governed to moderate situations like the one above. Eventually, one of the lead programmers of the application decided to ban Mr. Bungle, but only after hours of deliberation. Additionally, it was discovered that Mr. Bungle was not only a single man, but a group of students attending New York University, who encouraged and suggested sexual acts for Mr. Bungle to use during the evening this happened (Dibbell, 30). In contrast with the harassment that *Overwatch* player “bmrtrt” faced while pretending to be a girl gamer, and the results from the survey, harassment and violence online has only become worse (“bmrtrt”). Technology allows players to not only communicate vocally in video games, but they can communicate physically as well in virtual-reality games. The notion that Mr. Bungle was not just a single man, but multiple people, with the same hateful thoughts about users in a virtual environment, reveals just how normalized this hate has become. The Mr. Bungle event and the ways that women are harassed on *Overwatch* reveal how the real world and the virtual world intertwine, and that reveals the emotional effect that players can have after these events. Additionally, the notion that it took hours of deliberation to ban Mr. Bungle on a free platform relates to the way that *Overwatch* developers ignore the cries for help on Reddit in a paid-game environment.

Consequently, because of the toxicity that exists in the virtual environment and how gender-based it can be, women have less access to the e-sports community, and online gaming

environments, and less ability to help bring change. In other words, the women that do make it to the big tournaments are sexualized and told they are just looking for attention. With fewer women in the community, there are fewer chances for women to collaborate and work on bringing change; this brings in feelings of isolation for women in video game culture. “bmrtrt” was not a woman facing these challenges, they were simply a user trying to experience what women experience when playing in online games; they realized how toxic it can be, and how the toxicity, against women, has nothing to do with their ability to play, yet it can hinder their ability to play due to a lack of communication (“bmrtrt”). Yet, because of their acceptance in the *Overwatch* environment due to their gender, their experience was validated, and taken seriously. “Geguri” was a woman player in *Overwatch* who had an incredible talent for the game; she was precise, played well on a team, and did everything she could have to be successful in the field. But because of her gender, she was falsely called out for cheating and forced to prove her worthiness in a live-streamed setting with male eyes on her for the wrong reasons (Choi). When a female does well in a video game, it is not only her skill that is criticized. She must prove her worthiness to be a part of the culture. She must prove that she just isn’t looking for attention. She must look feminine, or she won’t be considered an asset, but if she looks too feminine then she is just trying to gain money and cares nothing about video games. She must laugh along to the misogynistic joke, and not be a “pick me” or a “healer main” girl. Yet, when a man does well in a video game, they don’t have to prove anything.

When I was twelve years old, my dad installed *Half-Life 2* on his personal computer. I had always had an interest in video games, and up until that point I stayed put on my roller-coaster simulation games, but *Half-Life 2* intrigued my little mind. I played through it and

needed more. When my father purchased *Half-Life 2* it came with a copy of *Counter-Strike: Source*, as they were developed by the same company, and I dived into my first experience with a multiplayer first-person shooting game. I remember the shock that came to me when my first experience seeing pornography was on a video game, through custom sprays set on the game, and I was so scared that my parents were going to ban me from using the computer that I instantly joined a clan that was meant to be clean. In the video game, people could upload their own images for their spray, which could be “sprayed” on walls in the game like graffiti; this was obviously going to turn into a bunch of pornographic images on computer screens, as gaming culture has always seemed to have a thing for the worst images on the internet, but I could not comprehend that at twelve. The clan was just a group of people that played the video game together and had their own custom servers with rules and guidelines that revoked any sexual sprays, and bad language. When I started to meet people in the clan, and become friends with some of them, my gender started to matter. I was in the clan for several years before I started being an active member and contributing artwork, member management, and server help. After some time, the group I was in noticed my work and promoted me in the group to an admin position so I could help new people feel welcome. However, the promotion did not go over well for many of the group members.

As a result I was promptly accused of exchanging inappropriate images with the male leadership to gain my position in the clan, at fifteen years old. My friends in the clan, who knew how much work I did for the group, started to dig, and realized some angry members made the claim as several females in the group were promoted before them. Even though, the people who were angry only contributed their time for entertainment and didn’t really contribute the labor of

helping new players, moderating servers, and setting up tournaments. Consequently, my admin position was removed, and the claims were investigated. Yet, I was already embarrassed, and upset over the work I had done being overlooked that I went ahead and just took my leave after I was cleared. Imagine if I had made a Reddit thread, like “bmrtrt,” noting my issues within these virtual environments; would I have been given the same validation? Over time this was not the only sexist experience I was involved in within various communities, and it only got worse as I grew older.

When I was nineteen years old, I picked up *Overwatch* and began playing. The gameplay was unlike any game I had played before, and I loved the diverse selection of heroes. There were female characters who were powerful, and it made me feel a little bit more represented in the video game world. I could play as D.Va who was a “former professional gamer” who uses her skills to protect her homeland (“D.Va.”). I could play as Sombra who was a notorious hacker, and used her hacking skills to manipulate powerful evil people (“Sombra”). I could even play as a climatologist, named Mei, who is working to protect the environment, as no one else will (“Mei”). I moved from *Counter-Strike: Source*, which included only male characters, to *Overwatch*, a group of heroes with some that even looked like me. This was an environment I thought I would never would be created in the gaming community, and I was ready to explore it. I have always played video games under the alias “Maddi,” so usually the assumption was that I was a female. However, when I hooked up my headset to my computer and started speaking, that was usually when I was verbally assaulted. Most of the time, it was just misogynistic derogatory terms, or someone trying to silence me by telling me to go make them a sandwich. And, despite

my excitement about the diverse range of characters, *Overwatch* was no different. I could play as a female character, and still be verbally harassed for being a female.

There seemed to be a large percentage of users who would take it a step further than just verbal harassment, for example, I had one player who claimed I wasn't doing enough damage, so not only did they verbally assault me, but they also added me on six separate accounts until I added them back just to message me, "women like you make me want to go to jail for murder." I reported their main account to Blizzard, but the damage was already done. I will also note, I never received notification that anything was done about this report. Furthermore, this was the least violent harassment interaction I've had in *Overwatch*. I'm always asked the same questions, "why do you continue playing multiplayer games if you are consistently treated this way? Why don't you just turn off your microphone? Why don't you use a different alias, one that is more gender-neutral?" And I'm usually not sure how to answer, because they always have a good point; why do I let myself get treated this way? Despite the sexism that is constant within the video game community, one thing in my life has stayed consistent and that has been my love for video games. My hope for being able to prove my skill in my own skin, and not a fake virtual persona, is one that still exists. In brief, my hope that the community will grow and embrace women is what keeps me moving forward.

In the same way that I received gender-based hatred in an online environment because of my gender, other women have as well and have used social media platforms to create communities of women to support each other. For example, user "Kryrena" on TikTok documents her experience playing *Overwatch* by posting videos of her gameplay and what other users say in the game. In one video, she is playing a healing character and they win the game,

and one guy says to her, “do you have a laptop in the kitchen? How are you playing right now?” (Kryrena). Another TikTok user, “prizzyxo,” revealed another type of in-game harassment, as once the other players on her team realized she was a girl started to sexually harass her and say things like, “spit on my feet,” “please abuse me,” “mommy, let me have milk” and offered to have sex with her (prizzyxo). She shut them down once, and they continued to make sexual comments about her until another guy on the team stood up for her and they stopped. In similar fashion, TikTok user “sabrinaislame,” posts a video of a guy on her team not only using ableist slurs, but saying, “leave it up to a woman,” when commenting on how they lost the game (sabrinaislame). Undoubtedly, TikTok creates a way for these female users to group up and share their experiences, and so do other social media platforms; these users are not only isolated to social media groups though, as many people have written on the toxicity in *Overwatch*. But, to connect to the lack of reaction from *Overwatch* developers in the “bmrtrt” case, female players do not feel welcome in that specific environment.

Naturally, reading “A Rape in Cyberspace” by Julian Dibbell is supposed to feel shocking. Online abuse had not been heard much during that time and regulating the internet did not feel as necessary in 1993. During the aftermath of the event, users of *LambdaMOO* came together and discussed what had happened and tried to figure out how to move forward with events like that. In 2022, events like this are so normalized and happen so quickly in video game culture that women either must move forward and ignore it or uninstall the game, as there are hardly any repercussions. In *Overwatch*, there is no community event where people can talk or discuss toxicity in the game and figure out how to move forward, there is only Blizzard’s reporting system. If a woman posts her experience on Reddit, there is a chance that a lot of the

comments will comment on their gender; and the developers will ignore the thread. A player can report another player for harassment, fill out the graphic details, and then it is sent out into the void; specifically, a female player can report multiple people a day for toxic behavior, and never hear back if that player isn't disciplined, like my experience with someone threatening me.

For example, in an article written by Cecilia D'Anastasio titled "*Overwatch's* Confusing Reporting System is Making Trolling Worse," they discuss the ways that people react to being reported in the game. When a player threatens to report a teammate who is abusing chat, an apology is hardly ever the response; the response is typically one where the player stands their ground and says, "go ahead, report me." D'Anastasio notes that just her hero choice alone started abusive chat as she chose a male tank character named Reinhardt, and one male on her team said, "Oh, I didn't know girls play Reinhardt," in response (D'Anastasio). He continues to harass her, and she threatens to report him, and he says, "Go ahead. *Overwatch's* reporting system is bullshit, anyway." She continues to write that she uses the reporting system often and that she plays poorly when she's angry, so she uses the reporting system as a "self-defense mechanism." When the game was first released the reporting system lacked details, and until May of 2018 most fans of the game felt like it wasn't doing much ("*Overwatch* Patch Notes: June, 2018"). Several players on the Reddit *Overwatch* board experimented with the reporting system to try and figure out how exactly it worked, and their results were intriguing. Reddit user "TheOverwatchInt" was reported a "few dozen times" in "50 quick play games" by just asking people to report them, and after a few days, he finally received an email only saying his account was muted for a week (D'Anastasio). Several fans of the game that commented in this thread noted that a few days is an unacceptable amount of time to react to abusive chat in a video game,

and that they were disappointed with Blizzard's reporting system. D'Anastasio notes that Kotaku reached out to Blizzard to get an in-depth description of how their reporting system operates in *Overwatch*, but they received no direct answer and only that Blizzard is "constantly working on improving the system, as [they] take toxicity and player reporting very seriously" (D'Anastasio). In brief, this article was written in 2018, and the reporting system has stayed the same since then when digging through patch notes. The reporting system attempts to create a panoptic system where everyone feels watched, but they fail on the one thing they need the most for this to be successful: actual repercussions.

When conducting an advanced Google search to find out the most recent update to the *Overwatch* reporting system, I noticed that players have been complaining about the report

system since the game was launched. In Figure 2, as seen below, many players ask for updates about the report system and complain about its inefficiency.

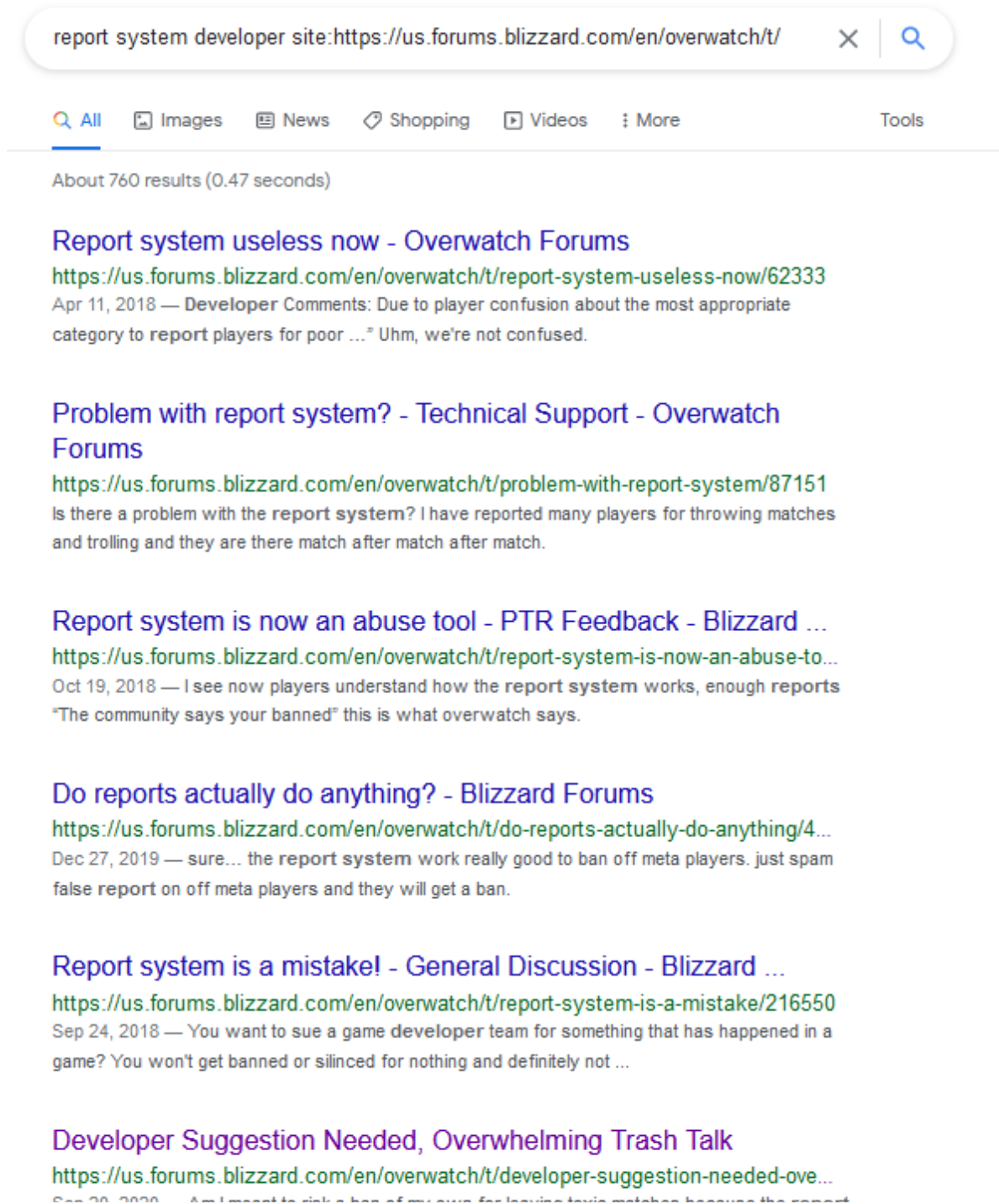


Fig. 2. Self. Example Google Search, 2022.

Yet, when looking for the last developer note about the report system the most recent developer post about it was in June of 2018 about the endorsement system. That was the most recent update to the reporting system they have made publicly. The patch notes state that “changes have been made to the player report system” and that players who receive a report will be notified with a warning, and eventually if reported more, they will receive punishment to their in-game communication (“*Overwatch* Patch Notes: June, 2018”). This update is what was already in place, the only difference is that reported players are now notified. Without an actual update to the report system, users are under the impression that *Overwatch* is a place where toxicity can thrive. And yet, blocking a player does not stop the blocked player from being on a player’s team. It only changes the interactions between the two players. As noted on Blizzard Support’s page, blocking a player “will ignore all communication from the player” and the blocked player will not be allowed to add the person who blocked them (“Ignoring Players in *Overwatch*.”). This does not prevent the blocked player from playing in the same game as the person who blocked them; a person would have to add that user to their avoid list to not be paired with them again. However, a player can only have up to three avoided people on their list at once; meaning if a player runs into more than three toxic players in a single day, which is likely to occur, they can only avoid three of them for every seven days. After those seven days, that player will be taken off a user’s avoid list and the user will be able to run into them again. To summarize, blocking a player only blocks communication and friend requests, it does not block running into the player again in a game; the developers added an avoid system to help alleviate this, but it is capped at three and only lasts seven days.

As noted earlier, when discussing the endorsement system that is in place in *Overwatch*, it was compared to the Panopticon. The endorsement system was officially added to the game. The endorsement system and the reporting system aim to give players enjoyable teammates and alter negative behavior. In fact, the endorsement system combined with the reporting and avoid system should be enough to deter players from acting toxic; but it still doesn't, as seen above, as players still complain about the toxicity that exists in the game. In an article by Sian Tomkinson and Benn van den Ende titled "Thank you for your compliance: Overwatch as a Disciplinary System" they discuss the endorsement system in *Overwatch* and how it, "actively construct[s] gamers to fit a pre-defined mould" (Tomkinson & Ende, 198). Critically, they define toxicity in a broad way, meaning "above kinds of antisocial behavior," and note that "women, racial minorities and those who identify as LGBTQ receive a disproportionate share of abuse" (199). Through the lens of this paper, *Overwatch's* endorsement system does work, but when looking through different lenses, it fails. They note that there is a "disciplinary power which surrounds the culture of the game," and that players must sacrifice personal information to participate in multiplayer games now, and that could be another factor that deters negative behavior (Tomkinson & Ende, 202). They even comment on user's profiles in *Overwatch* and how they exhibit Foucault's "mechanism of 'the art of distributions,'" and create more visibility for users to look at other users' information. In other words, players can open a toxic player's profile and view all their detailed statistics from time played on a specific hero, to win rate percentage on each hero, and this information can provide ways for players to help initiate team communication or even use the information to start toxicity against other players. To clarify, if a user was looking at a damage player's profile and noticed that they had a low win rate on a specific hero,

they may use that to start abusing the player in the game. This can be looked at a different way too, if a player has a low win rate on a hero and is incredibly toxic in chat, people could start saying that the player is throwing. In competitive video games, throwing is a term used to point out if a player is trying to lose on purpose for any reason. To repeat, the profile statistics page by itself is a form of discipline but can be used in either direction, as the profile allows players to be “under the disciplinary gaze of other players,” and “serve as part of the gaze themselves” by monitoring their own data to make sure their account looks like one of an ideal teammate (Tomkinson & Ende, 205-206).

As discussed previously, *Overwatch* incorporates multiple ranking systems. The first ranking system incorporates a user’s playtime; the image below shows a player’s rank based on their playtime. Every game a user plays will give them experience points to level up their account, this just shows how long a user has been playing the game. The second-ranking system is a player’s competitive score; this ranking system reveals what rank a user plays at competitive. When a player launches into a competitive game, everyone’s competitive score is on their icon; it is resembled by the platinum badge icon located on the image below. The third-ranking system is a player’s endorsement score through the numbers one through five. This reveals a player’s ability to play as a team, as discussed above.



Fig. 3. Account Border.



Fig. 4. Account Rank.

There are also hidden tier systems in the game as well, which is a bit more informal, like the different tiers of character selection and the benefit that they can provide to the team. For example, players can choose between three roles of characters: healers, tanks, and damage characters. Certain healers are referred to as “off-healers,” meaning they do not provide as much healing as “main” healers provide. These aren’t labels that are in the game, but they are labels that are given by players who play the game often. When two healers play “off-healers” things can already start on a toxic level, as most team compositions require one “main” healer and one “off-healer.” This also applies to tanks as well through “off-tanks” and “main-tanks,” as “main-tanks” provide more shields while “off-tanks” provide less shields but more damage (*Overwatch*). In “Foucault and the Politics of Resistance,” Brent Pickett notes that Foucault had an idea that “power is only accepted to the extent that it is hidden.” (Pickett, 459). These unofficial expectations required of *Overwatch* players can lead to players becoming toxic on or off *Overwatch* through social media, or they could even be “enacted in a disciplinary sense within the game itself” (Tomkinson & Ende, 206). Players can report other players for playing “off” roles, even though that isn’t really a reportable offense; and as the Reddit user “TheOverwatchInt” pointed out if a person is reported more than three dozen times, they will get disciplined, even if they didn’t do anything wrong. By not following hidden or pre-defined norms instilled in the game, players can be replaced by another player who will follow those rules.

The endorsement system encourages the use of the system, as stated earlier, by rewarding people who use the system. As stated, the more players endorsed, the more loot boxes a player can get. This can lead to a player who can be incredibly toxic in voice and text being a high

endorsement, solely because they play a lot in the game. According to Tomkinson & Ende's piece the endorsement system "contributes towards a robust disciplinary apparatus in that it serves as a way of guiding players to a pre-defined norm" (Tomkinson & Ende, 209). It would be assumed that the players under an endorsement level of two are toxic and hard to play within a team. Anyone above a three seems to not be toxic and can work well in a team setting. Thus, the endorsement setting is a way to establish and attempt to enforce the way all gamers should behave, in a non-toxic and respectful manner. The way Foucault discusses normalizing judgment in discipline applies to the way that the endorsement system wants to work; a player steps out of the behavioral norm expected, and the endorsement system is used to punish them. As Tomkinson & Ende note about disciplinary societies, "individual players that are subject to the disciplinary gaze also serve as components in its functioning," as the players that are being watched, are also watching for wrongdoings (Tomkinson & Ende, 210).

Although Tomkinson & Ende praise the endorsement system for working, players that have played under the endorsement system feel differently. When doing a Google search for the endorsement system in *Overwatch*, user feedback is quite negative on the Blizzard Forums and Reddit's *Overwatch* board. The system, as explained by Natasha Miller at the Game Developer's conference in March of 2019, is an ideal way to contain toxic behavior, and it should work (Miller). But when a group of people has been allowed to thrive and socialize in a virtual video game community by being toxic, the ideal behavior that people are voting for depends on the person voting. When only 16 percent of players in *Overwatch* are female, only 16 percent of voices that don't consider toxicity normal are being heard (Ericsson & Bergström). To illustrate, if five players on the team are men, and one is a woman, and all the men find it to be more

normalized to be toxic, the men on the team are not going to realize it is abnormal to act like men normally do in virtual video game environments. Those players will endorse each other simply because there were more of them, and if they all act the same way, it feels normal and that feels like the system that *Overwatch* intended for in the first place; a team of players at the same endorsement level who all communicate in the same way, toxic or not. Those five players are a part of a culture that have attempted to keep women out for a long time, and they are going to see that as normal.

CHAPTER 3

CONNECTING ALL THE PIECES AND CONCLUSION

The developers enforced a panoptic system to enforce good values and behaviors in a virtual setting that they do not uphold in their work environment. The California Department of Fair Employment and Housing stated that Activision Blizzard enables a “culture of harassment,” where the “watchers,” the CEOs and top executives, were aware of the situation and ignored it (Hollister). Female employees at Blizzard unanimously stated that “working for [Blizzard] was akin to working in a frat house, which invariable involved male employees drinking and subjecting female employees to sexual harassment with no repercussion” (Hollister). It subjected them to various forms of sexual comments, advances, groping, and other forms of harassment in physical and virtual settings. Supervisors and top executives encouraged the behavior. In one example, male supervisors would usually make “derogatory comments about rape” (Hollister). For example, as discussed above, one female employee even took her own life after experiencing sexual harassment so extreme and feeling as if no one would ever fix the work setting. He is no longer with the company, but it took public outrage and possible profit loss for Blizzard to react. The way video game culture appears in a corporate setting allows it to fester in a virtual setting. Critically, when Blizzard upholds these values in their corporate offices, the developers that program and develop video games unknowingly or knowingly bring their biases with them into development.

These hidden stories were uncovered, and women spoke out. Blizzard finally released a statement that said: these stories are false. Pictures of group chats with executives and supervisors were unveiled, revealing the infamous “Cosby suite” where one top executive stayed

and harassed women. Over a quarter of Blizzard's current staff and former employees "signed on to an open letter rebuking the company's current handling of the allegations," revealing that Blizzard was trying to bury the environment they created (Zwiezen). Executive after executive began stepping down for various reasons, but all the evidence pointed towards ignoring and taking part in extreme sexual harassment and abuse. The panoptic structure of Blizzard's management and the company was used to develop their economic benefits, with little regard for the human value or life of marginalized people. The frat-boy behavior was encouraged, and even participated in by employees and management at Blizzard, and thus allowed for the culture in-game to feel similar.

In the same light, the panoptic structure of the systems in place in *Overwatch* are used to reward players who spend a lot of time in the game, rather than players who are respectful and not toxic. The 16 percent of women that play the game are faced with negative comments against their gender, voices, and online presence, but hardly gain any kind of justice. Just like the way Blizzard normalized frat boy-type behavior in their offices, that same behavior is normalized in their virtual games as well. They release an endorsement system to reward good behavior, but if a community is inherently toxic, how can they determine if their teammates are playing fairly and nice if the status quo is to be toxic. The endorsement system does work, but not without unintended consequences based on the culture that already exists. The developers will add patches, like the ones discussed above, but they have very clear flaws; like the avoid system resetting after a week, how endorsement can be abused, and how blocking only really blocks communication in the wrong spaces. In a study done by Jesse Fox titled, "Lifetime Video Game Consumption, Interpersonal Aggression, Hostile Sexism, and Rape Myth Acceptance: A

Cultivation Perspective,” they found that there is a relationship between playing video games and toxic behavior in the form of sexism (Fox, 1922). They go on to say that “system justification perspectives suggest that many participants defend existing systems that perpetuate sexism” (Fox, 1924). This notion leads back to the point that they will defend and use the endorsement system in place in the game to keep the behavior normal, where normal is an already sexist environment.

Critically, video game culture’s toxicity does not start or stop with *Overwatch*. It started as early, or earlier, than *LambdaMOO* and *Counter-Strike: Source*. There are many more Mr. Bungles in video game culture, and just like Mr. Bungle, they can use anonymity to continue the normal hegemonic masculine world that exists in video games. These anonymous players see that at Blizzard offices these ideologies and sexist behaviors are normalized, and don’t feel bad about portraying these behaviors online, on an anonymous platform. Blizzard employees can do it in public view and get away with it for many years without even being noticed. This culture that exists online causes the 16 percent of female players to face sexism, not communicate in the environment, thus limiting their chances of ranking up, or hiding under a false persona to avoid discrimination. For example, an *Overwatch* player called “VoraRose” on the Blizzard forums claims that by using a voice changer to make their voice sound masculine and deep, it makes their life in *Overwatch* easier. They note that they have to “relinquish [their] femininity and gender for [the] sake of blending in,” and that “with deception, they have found equality” (VoraRose). While having to relinquish their actual identity and create a counterculture of women that do the same to be treated respectfully in a video game, they are blending in and

feeling more involved in the community. But the women that work at Blizzard don't have the same luxury.

Regarding *Overwatch*, Blizzard tried to save face to ensure the sequel to the game would do well. They released a statement on Twitter that states that they “built the *Overwatch* universe around the idea that inclusivity, equity, and hope are the building blocks of a better future” and that “it is necessary to change the name of the hero currently known as McCree to something that better represents what *Overwatch* stands for” (Gach). Jesse McCree, one of the 32 characters in the game, was named after Jesse McCree, a developer at Blizzard who was involved in the sexual harassment of female employees. The developer was photographed, as shown in Chapter 1, in an image from BlizzCon in 2013 in the “Cosby Suite.” As a result, the developers in *Overwatch* renamed Jesse McCree to Cassidy Cole to try to repair the damage. They didn't change the name to make their 16 percent of female users more comfortable, they changed it so more people would buy the sequel *Overwatch 2*. The way they handle toxicity in the game reveals the way they work to uphold the discrimination that exists in video game culture. Critically, that code that is written into the game comes with biases from the same people that acted that way at BlizzCon.

Renaming a developer-named character in a video game that attempts to uphold good values does little to nothing for those who experienced harassment, abuse, sexual assault, and death because of employees' actions or those who are verbally harassed online. Blizzard executives, employees, and developers are at fault, and renaming Jesse McCree is just a way to increase the preorders on their new game and continue to silence the sixteen percent that play *Overwatch*. Video game culture along with female gamers and developers suffer daily from

people who prefer upholding the hegemonic masculine culture that has existed within video games for as long as its existence. *Overwatch*'s panoptic system is enforced virtually and rarely, allowing for an environment that rewards players for upholding the discriminatory environment that video game culture has continued to be. Jesse McCree, the digital character, is just a reminder that renaming a character or developing a reward system for positive behavior does little to stop the company's abusive behavior and video game culture. Naturally, the game is developed by those who take part in the harassment of others, and the game's culture reflects that.

Thus, if the future in video game culture can become one where discrimination is not considered the normal behavior that video games reward, it would be one where previously silenced voices can participate without trying to blend in. But that cannot happen if the women that work in video game-related fields still face the same discriminatory issues as they do now. The only way to start to repair the damage that has been done, and to pave the way to a more inclusive future for video games, is to allow more voices to be heard. Game developers need to create systems like the endorsement system in *Overwatch*, but ensure the norms being used to create the system are ones that are more inclusive. In Mary Flannigan and Helen Nissenbaum's *Values at Play in Digital Games*, they discuss the notion that values can be built into video games through features that are designed and built; players will interpret these values through their own lens, which can cause features like the endorsement system to not be as effective as it should be (Flannigan & Nissenbaum, 9). Those that design video games have the power to shape the values that should be upheld in their communities. If the developers had harsher punishments or a reporting system that worked, these values could be instilled into the community at a much

faster rate. If the norms being used to create the system are more inclusive, virtually and within the workplace, e-sports might see a rise in female player participation, and women may not be discouraged to pursue careers in video game development. “Geguri” will no longer be the only female *Overwatch* league player and will have paved the way for future female professional players. The future in video game culture and development can be an exciting one if more voices are recognized, heard, and not forced to be hidden behind a voice changer.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Madison Armstrong was born in Fort Worth, Texas. After graduating at Northwest High School, Madison started her college career at Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas. She transferred to The University of Texas at Dallas in 2017, and entered the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication undergraduate program. She graduated in May of 2020, and then entered the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication graduate program at The University of Texas at Dallas. At The University of Texas at Dallas, she was employed as the Employee Resource Group Coordinator for the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and was a HASTAC Scholar.

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- MA** The University of Texas at Dallas 2022
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RESEARCH INTERESTS

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Betty and Gifford Johnson Travel Award
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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

**The 2021 DiversAbility Summit Process-Driven Math:
New Frontiers in Access to Education and Careers,** October 2021
The University of Texas at Dallas
Co-Producer

ERG Signing Day, The University of Texas at Dallas September 2021

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Diversity Awards Ceremony, The University of Texas at Dallas April 2021

Co-Producer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4v6Fx1OlfpE>

Deloitte Conversations on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Series March 2021

Integrating Work and Well-Being, The University of Texas at Dallas

Co-Producer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WWvP_1LBxM

Women Leading in Diversity, The University of Texas at Dallas November 2020

Co-Producer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeQlhWeDxLM>

DiversAbility Summit 2020: Increasing Access and Opportunity: October 2020

While Facing a COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Change,

The University of Texas at Dallas

Co-Producer

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PUBLICATIONS

Conference Papers

Armstrong, Madison, “TikTok: Has the Clock Even Started?” Midwest Popular Culture Association and Midwest American Culture Association, Oct. 7- Oct. 10, 2021.

PRESENTATIONS AND INVITED LECTURES

Paper Presentation, “TikTok: Has the Clock Even Started?” Midwest Popular Culture Association and Midwest American Culture Association. Minneapolis, Minnesota. October 2021.

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