

Overwatching Blizzard: Ethnicity and national identities in Blizzard's multiplayer shooter.

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INTRODUCTION

Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* has been the target of abundant valuable scholarly work due in part to the huge success and quality of this MMO. Among the publications centered on this game, there are two main trends that are particularly relevant for this abstract: Those which analyze representations of gender and sexuality in the game and those interested in understanding the ways *World of Warcraft* portrays ethnicity. Drawing from these texts it can be argued that Blizzard does a rather uneven job at representing identities. While MMOs lend themselves to interactions where players can enact and reimagine different ways of understanding their genders and sexuality, Blizzard seems adamant in facilitating a world where white-Caucasian comes to be identified as human-normal, while other, non-Anglo/non-white-European ethnicities and cultures find themselves attached to more monstrous representations.

Overwatch, Blizzard's newest multiplayer game and its first online shooter, follows a similar trend to the one followed by *World of Warcraft*. Through character models, skins, in-game interactions, and official webcomics, Blizzard has included a wide variety of gendered, sexualⁱ, and ethnic identities. Yet, while it could be argued that the company is making sure that a limited form of gender and sexual diversity is represented in the game, it is doing a worse job at reflecting on ethnicity as well as national –and international–relations. In a broad sense, *Overwatch* also identifies white skin and Anglo and Nordic origins with a good moral stance.

Out of the three characters from the United States, only Reaper, the one African American in the U.S trio composed by himself, McCree –who follows the Clint Eastwood-like tough but good cowboy trope– and Soldier 76 –a white male from Bloomington, Indianaⁱⁱ– is shown to be evil. Out of all the European characters only Reaper's partner in crime, the French sniper called Widowmaker, sports a purplish-blue skin that separates her from her perfectly white and blond European –and morally good–counterparts. The rest of the not-so-good cast is composed by a female Mexican hacker, a

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female architect from India whom players may dress as an Indian goddess, and, breaking the evil-as-non-white rule, a pair of Australian males whose insanity (Junkrat), animal features (Roadhog), and dirt on their skins (both of them) signifies a departure from what “white” represents for the rest of the cast. Outside of these examples of “non-white” as evil, there are three morally good characters whose skin is not white: Lucio, a male Brazilian DJ; Pharah –a female Egyptian security chief, and Ana –Pharah’s mother and the heroes’ former second in command. In all these examples, however, Blizzard reproduces and uncritically participates in existing racial stereotypes while trying to show a heightened level of awareness in other areasⁱⁱⁱ. This paper will show how Blizzard participates in and reproduces existing prejudices and normative forms of understanding ethnicity and national difference in *Overwatch*.

i

As part of the beginning of *Overwatch*’s 2016 holiday season special, Blizzard released a comic in which Tracer, one of *Overwatch* characters and the game’s main face in the promotional materials before the game was released, was confirmed to have a female partner.

ii Soldier 76’s standard skin shows him with white hair and has his eyes hidden by a visor. However, one of his skins shows him as he was when he was younger and portrays him as a blond, blue-eyed, white individual. Some of his in-game voicelines also confirm him as being born in Indiana.

iii In addition to its declared intention of offering players characters with a wide variety of bodies and sexualities, Blizzard has also done something very peculiar in terms of national identity and national space. All but two maps in the game have a small national flag showing the country where each map is set. The U.S.A, United Kingdom, Russia or Japan are just some examples. Watchpoint Antarctica and Watchpoint Gibraltar are the only two exceptions, showing *Overwatch*’s flag at the beginning of each match. This is easy to understand in Watchpoint Antarctica’s case given the South Pole’s shared ownership among eight countries, with one area not claimed by any country. With Gibraltar, however, Blizzard has done, directly or indirectly, something way more subtle and interesting. Gibraltar is a British overseas territory in the South of Spain that has generated for decades a long list of disputes and tensions between the British and the Spanish, right wing oriented, governments.

OPTIONAL BIO

Juan F. Belmonte is a lecturer on Cultural and Media Studies in the English Department at the University of Murcia, Spain. He completed his Ph.D dissertation on gender and sexuality in video games as a research associate at the University of Murcia. He was a Fulbright Scholar (2009-2011) at Indiana University, Bloomington, and a visiting researcher at McGill University, Montreal, in 2012 and at the IT University, Copenhagen in 2013. His research focuses on the particular ways video games relate to ideology at different levels beyond their most direct audiovisual elements.

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