

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Overwatch*
Platform: PC, Xbox One, Playstation 4
Genre: Competitive team-based multiplayer first-person shooter
Release Date: May 24, 2016
Developer: Blizzard Entertainment
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Jeff Kaplan (game director), Michael Chu (lead writer/senior designer), James Waugh (senior director, story and creative development [former])

NOTE: This review was originally written in March 2017. It was recently updated in November 2017 to reflect updates that Blizzard has made to the game. Due to the game's ever-evolving narrative, elements may be added or changed in future updates.

Overview

In *Overwatch*, players assume the roles of vibrant, colorful heroes in a near future where the world has been ravaged by the Omnic Crisis, a catastrophic event that threatened to tear apart the fragile harmony shared between humans and omnic (sentient robotic beings), and shaped the war-torn landscapes seen in the game.

The beginning of the game's core narrative takes place approximately thirty years after the onset of the first Omnic Crisis. *Overwatch*, the titular international task force once-celebrated as the saviors who ended the first Omnic Crisis, has disbanded in disgrace after allegations of corruption (ten years prior to present-day lore). A rival corporation named Talon has taken advantage of this power vacuum to advance their own mysterious goals, assassinating leaders of peace and committing other terrorist atrocities that seem to be leading the world into more conflict. Now, heroes have gathered from around the globe to fight for what they believe in and perhaps bring the world back from its current shattered state.

Characters

With over 25 playable characters, *Overwatch* features a large diverse cast of characters, each with their own unique personality and backstory. While a good chunk of their histories remains under wraps, the amount of backstory revealed so far has generated a considerable amount of interest in the playable characters as well as the

gradually-unraveling narrative of the game world itself, a rare feat for a multiplayer game.

Below is an abridged list of important playable heroes in the game. Most of the backstories for the characters listed come from sources outside the game (including videos, comics, written character interviews, and social media), a phenomenon examined in the Breakdown section of this review.

Playable Characters

Members of Overwatch

- **TRACER** – Tracer (real name: Lena Oxton) is a young, spunky British girl with boundless energy. Thanks to her cheerful and outgoing personality, she often comes across as the face of Overwatch (both in present-day lore and real life). Formerly a test pilot for Overwatch, Tracer’s life changed forever when the experimental plane she was testing malfunctioned, causing her to disappear off the face of the planet for months. For the next few months she would phase in and out of existence, unable to cement a place in the world she had once fought so hard to protect. Eventually, the Overwatch scientist Winston managed to create a device to anchor Tracer to reality and help her control her time-shifting capabilities. Now Tracer uses her teleportation abilities to her advantage in combat, and helps out her old Overwatch buddies whenever she can with the idea that, in dark times, people should be able to look to heroes and hope for a better future. Since her accident, Tracer has shown great interest in the spiritual teachings of the omnic preacher Tekhartha Mondatta, who championed harmony between humans and omnic. In addition, she has managed to keep her cheerful personality, greeting others with optimistic enthusiasm and reminding people that *“the world could always use more heroes!”*.
- **WINSTON** – Winston is not the first individual people normally think of when they think of “scientist” due to the fact that he’s a highly-intelligent and very articulate gorilla. Nonetheless, he has displayed amazing analytical intellect in the field coupled with an intense belief in humanity’s potential for good. Born on a lunar colony on the Moon, Winston was part of an experimental batch of gorillas enhanced by science. Upon the discovery of his human-like intellect, he was personally taken in by a scientist named Dr. Harold Winston, who taught him science and preached the power of imagination. After the other gorillas took over the colony and killed all the scientists (including Harold), a heartbroken Winston named himself after his human mentor and escaped to Earth, eventually joining Overwatch as a scientist and champion of peace. Winston sets in motion the events that begin the game by initiating the recall of Overwatch agents across the globe to combat the growing menace of Talon. He has a rather innocent personality despite his bulky intimidating presence, as he approaches problems with child-like curiosity and becomes bashful when complimented. He gets well with fellow scientists Mei and Mercy, and shares a particularly close bond with Tracer who he considers family.

- **SOLDIER:76** – The masked soldier formerly known as Jack Morrison gained fame as the star player of Overwatch, serving as one of the biggest reasons for the organization’s meteoric rise to fame during the first Omnic Crisis. Projecting an almost Superman-like aura, the American native was a beacon of hope to many of those affected by the crisis, and carried out his duties with patriotic zeal. After the Omnic Crisis, the public began to turn on Overwatch due to some shady practices, and infighting between Morrison and fellow operative Gabriel Reyes led to an explosion that “killed” both of them. However, Jack Morrison lives on under the masked identity of Soldier:76, and has become somewhat of a pessimistic vigilante, bitter about his time in Overwatch and everything it stood for. As a character, Soldier:76 frequently comes across as an overprotective father with a heavy past
- **REINHARDT** – Reinhardt is a large man with an equally large personality to match. Hailing from Germany, Reinhardt joined the initial inception of the Overwatch task force and fashioned himself a strong champion for justice. With his giant energy shield barrier and humongous hammer, Reinhardt is a veteran of many fights, and while he gets up there in age his enthusiasm for defending justice has only gotten stronger.
- **MERCY** – Mercy (real name Amanda Ziegler) gained fame as the primary medical expert of Overwatch as well as through her advances in the science of restorative nanobiology. As a staunch advocate for peace, Mercy often disagreed with some of the organization’s more violent methods of getting results, and sought to prevent the weaponization of her nanotechnology. After the dissolution of Overwatch, Mercy continued her altruistic practices by helping victims of war in poor and impoverished areas. Mercy has a very serene personality, the kind that calms patients in times of need, and constantly voices her disdain for violence. Nevertheless, she dutifully accompanies her allies into battle.
- **TORBJÖRN** – The Swedish inventor and engineer Torbjörn carries a lot of guilt with him, since a lot of the omnics that mysteriously turned on humans in the first Omnic Crisis were military bots that he had invented. As such, he carries an intense distrust of sentient machines that manifests itself as a scowl across his face whenever he encounters one. However, while he sometimes comes across as a grumpy dwarf, he still displays a spark for engineering that has stayed with him through the years, most obviously seen in his affection for his turret which he has called “*my darling*” and “*baby*” amongst other things.
- **ANA** – As one of the best snipers in Overwatch, Ana Amari has developed quite the reputation from her native Egypt through the rest of the world. She was easily recognizable by the distinctive Eye of Horus tattoo around her eye, and took many lives in the name of justice. While an efficient sniper, she disliked prolonging the suffering of her targets, and preferred quick clean kills. She had a long partnership with Jack Morrison, forming a formidable tag team in times of crisis. Later, she

began to devote more time to her daughter Fareeha (see: Pharah), although she actively attempted to prevent Fareeha from following her in her line of work (she failed at that; see: Pharah). As friction grew between Ana and Fareeha, it all came to a sudden halt when Ana lost her eye in a sniping battle against Widowmaker after a moment's hesitation. She disappeared for many years after that, only recently resurfacing when she realized her old pal Jack Morrison was still alive and fighting. Ana's personality in the game can best be described as "witty, good-natured grandmother", as she enjoys comparing her skills and abilities favorably to the current generation of heroes and casually deflects insults with good-natured temperament.

- **MEI** – Mei is a scientist from China who specializes in climate science, namely abnormal climate phenomena. During the Omnic crisis, she was deployed to Antarctica as part of a science team tasked with figuring out what was causing the abnormal weather patterns plaguing the Earth. A polar disaster struck the team's camp, and after consuming most of the supplies the team decided to preserve themselves in cryostasis. When the camp was discovered many decades later, the research results were long-lost and Mei was the only survivor. Despite the harrowing ordeal that left all her friends dead and lost her a place in society, Mei maintains an upbeat attitude that seems to be more out of loneliness than anything.
- **GENJI** – A member of the Shimada clan and the younger brother of the famed Shimada brothers, Genji grew up in Hanamura, Japan, living in the lap of luxury. He was a playboy, and had no interest in his family's criminal empire. That all changed when the elder Shimada died, leading older brother Hanzo to try and get Genji to be more interested in the family empire. Genji and Hanzo fought, leading Genji to the brink of death and Hanzo to live on with unimaginable guilt. Genji was rescued by Mercy and Overwatch, who reconstructed him into a masked cyborg ninja in exchange for him helping them dismantle the Shimada empire. Initially Genji sought revenge on Hanzo and the rest of the clan for what they did to him, but eventually he left Overwatch to search for his purpose in life, having become increasingly disillusioned with his cyborg state. His search eventually led him to Nepal where he became a student of the omnic monk Zenyatta, a decision that has led him to adopt a rather laid-back yet honorable personality.
- **MCCREE** – Jesse McCree is a rugged outlaw who follows his own principles of justice and possesses a considerable amount of skill with his six-shooter revolver. In his own words, "*Justice ain't gonna dispense itself*", and his adventures took him through many positions including the Deadlock gang, Blackwatch (Overwatch's controversial black ops program), and general mercenary work. McCree developed a reputation as a vigilante who jumped into action when he wanted to, as evident in the Houston hypertrain incident, where he broke up an entire Deadlock gang operation by himself simply because he happened to be hitching a ride atop the train when the incident happened. McCree respects certain members of Overwatch, especially Ana, who taught him some gunslinging tricks

that he still uses to this day. He maintains rivalries with other members such as Genji, often reminding the ninja “*You might be fast, Genji, but you ain’t faster than a bullet*”.

Members of Talon

- REAPER – The black ops operative formerly known as Gabriel Reyes can best be described as a brooding edgelord. This trait distills down to his fighting style- he has the ability to turn his body into a wraith-like vapor, and tosses his weapons away after using them rather than performing any attempt to reload. Reaper expresses grumpiness and dissatisfaction at every turn, never hesitating to chime in with comments about killing and death. He used to be a decorated leader of Overwatch, but conflicts with his former best friend and ace player Jack Morrison led to a violent confrontation that “killed” both of them in more ways than one. People who knew him as Gabriel Reyes still express disbelief at how far he has fallen, but Reaper continues to make his mark on the world in a ruthless manner.
- WIDOWMAKER – Widowmaker (real name Amelie Lacroix) is well-known to the Overwatch organization because she was the wife of an accomplished Overwatch agent named Gerard Lacroix. She is also well-known to the Overatch organization because Talon kidnapped her and brainwashed her into an unfeeling killer with an icy streak. The newly-created Widowmaker immediately made her presence known, killing various high profile individuals including her own husband Gerard. Widowmaker carries a calm, arrogant sense of superiority about her, and she backs up her smugness with her unmatched skill with the sniper rifle.
- SOMBRA – Sombra is a prodigious hacker from Mexico who obsesses with finding information and solving mysteries. Her real name is unknown, perhaps intentionally erased by the hacker herself, and grew up as one of many children orphaned by the devastating impact of the first Omnic Crisis. She started her hacking career with Robin Hood-like intentions, stealing information in the name of disadvantaged peoples. Her activities caught the attention of powerful organizations, and Talon recruited her to aid in their operations. While Sombra assists in Talon’s global operations, she secretly follows her own agenda- that of figuring out who really runs the world. With this in mind, Sombra has identified threads of a larger conspiracy that could perhaps explain many events including the cause of the Omnic Crisis itself.

Characters of Other Affiliations/No Affiliations

- HANZO – As the elder brother of the Shimada heirs, Hanzo was expected to carry on the burden of his family’s name when the time came. He was said to be a deadly warrior with impeccable swordsmanship. However, after the death of his father, Hanzo had a conflict with his younger brother Genji over family responsibilities, and nearly killed him in the ensuing fight. Believing to have

killed his brother with his own hands, Hanzo cast aside his sword for a bow, left the family and wandering the world disillusioned, having lost his honor.

- PHARAH – Pharah (real name Fareeha Amari) fashions herself as a stoic champion of justice, having grown up in the shadow of her mother Ana and the original Overwatch team. Ever since she was a little girl, she dreamed of becoming a hero like her mother, and her current look reflects that- strong and serious, with an unwavering sense of duty and an eye tattoo eerily similar to the one her mother had. Unfortunately, by the time she established her credentials as a dependable force of justice, Overwatch had long since disbanded. However, this has not stopped Pharah. She gets along very well with former Overwatch members and has shown to be in awe of old legends she used to idolize, like Reinhardt.
- D.VA – The Korean mech pilot teenager D.Va (real name Hana Song) first rose to prominence as one of the best professional *Starcraft II* gamers in the world. Her fame was so great that she ended up having an idol career, appearing in movies and releasing music albums. Her home country struggled to repel constant omnic attacks, and the agency MEKA decided to conscript professional gamers like D.Va to pilot their combat mechs due to the gamers' aptitude for coordination and reflexes. Thus, D.Va became a decorated combat pilot. Her popularity has only grown since then as she live-streams her battles to an adoring public. D.Va obsesses over games, and views life (and consequently her battles) as one big game. However, in rare moments of vulnerability, she has let slip a few times her hopes that one day her country will be able to rebuild and move on from war.

Breakdown

From a storytelling perspective, *Overwatch* brings a unique case to the table because it features a well-developed narrative experience in an exclusively multiplayer game. Despite the disadvantages of conveying stories through the competitive shooter genre, *Overwatch* manages to deliver a lot of narrative content in an engaging manner through both in-game content and a consistent community presence that include video packages, interactive animated comics and social media.

In-Game Content

“We made an effort to have these characters feel as though they could be starring in their own game. So because that they all have different kinds of stories. Sometimes what I find is it’s more like what are you in the mood for? Certain characters and their stories will be interesting at different times.” [1]

-Michael Chu, lead writer

The competitive multiplayer medium provides many challenges towards a cohesive narrative experience due to the emphasis on player-to-player interactions and

repetitive gameplay events. However, *Overwatch* manages to embed its narrative into the gameplay through unique characterization, character interactions, and map interactions.

As a class-based shooter, *Overwatch* finds its identity through the many colorful characters (currently 24 playable heroes) on its roster, and Blizzard recognizes this by making each character completely unique in appearance and personality, emphasizing the identifiable traits of each character to almost caricature-like proportions. For example, the character Junkrat is an unstable criminal with an unfettering love for explosions and chaos, so in most of his in-game emotes and end-of-match highlight intros he laughs maniacally and interacts with his explosives, often with comical results. Through these traits Junkrat becomes more than a collection of gameplay systems; the player associates his actual character and personality with his gameplay kit- that is, everything from his grenade launcher to his concussion mines to his explosive Rip-Tire, all keeping within the theme of what Junkrat as a character brings to the battlefield. The identity of the character makes it easier to remember the character's gameplay kit, and consequently the character's gameplay kit feeds into the expectations of their behavior, making them unique in their actions as individuals and as varied as the amount of kits available in gameplay.

Of course, this approach leads to the potential for the characters to become shallow caricatures of existing tropes, but the developers attempt to avoid this problem by injecting genuine moments of characterization via short one-liners and interactions between heroes to hint at the histories that lie beneath the surface. A short action-less prep period of about 30-45 seconds preface each match to orient the players with each other and in the case of the defending team allow them some time to set up their defenses. The developers take advantage of this period of relative calm to further establish the character lore in two phases. First, the player character announces their arrival with a one-liner as soon as they spawn into the map. For example, every time Hanzo spawns into the map, he says (with a heavy heart) "*With every death, comes honor. With honor, redemption*". This one line establishes Hanzo's character immediately- he feels guilt, and also feels that the only way to assuage that guilt is to fight to the death. At the beginning of the match, only the player who picks Hanzo hears Hanzo's one-liner; players who pick other characters hear their own character's one-liner. This line serves to tell the player "You picked this character" and gets the player acquainted with the character they have chosen to play as.

The second phase deals with the character's relationships to either other characters or the world they inhabit. All the playable characters in *Overwatch* know each other to some degree, and the game explores these relationships through short exchanges of dialogue shortly before the start of the match. For example, sometimes when two players pick Mercy and Pharah respectively the following exchange happens:

Mercy: "*Your mother always hoped you'd follow in her footsteps.*"
Pharah: "*She did? Funny, she never mentioned that to me.*"

These two lines provide an amazing amount of context to the characters and their backstories. With the first line, we learn that Mercy had worked with Pharah's mother in the past, and that Pharah's mother was proud of Pharah. However, Pharah responds bitterly; she resents her mother for being dishonest with her, hinting at an estranged relationship between the two. Players who listen to other dialogue exchanges between Ana and Pharah may also piece together that Ana is Pharah's mother, completing the puzzle. This one blurb of dialogue happens randomly in the warmup period before a random match, and with it the characters Mercy, Pharah, and Ana all receive character development. *Overwatch* is filled with enlightening dialogue exchanges between the characters- Pharah alone has at least 12 shared dialogue exchanges with 8 other characters that reveal various aspects of her character: her pride in her cutting-edge armor, her resentment towards her mother for seemingly abandoning her, her admiration for Overwatch and everything it stood for, and even hints of reconciliation with her recently-returned mother in the face of the current global crisis. Only one or two dialogue exchanges play at the start of every match, and the game randomly chooses the selection of the dialogues based on the characters in play, but in a game where matches are meant to be played over and over again, players eventually hear most if not all of the dialogue exchanges and quickly become familiar with each of the characters through their interactions with other characters.

This same phase also sees characters interacting with the current map they are in, fleshing out both their own backstories and that of the current locale in a very efficient manner. For example, before the start of a match in the map Eichenwalde (a war-torn German village), D.Va can sometimes be heard musing "*The destruction caused by the omnics here... it reminds me of home*". This one line reveals four things: 1) Eichenwalde was destroyed during the Omnic Crisis, 2) D.Va's home country Korea has been similarly devastated by the crisis if not worse, 3) D.Va's somber tone suggests that something darker lurks on in her mind, behind her cheerful gamer façade, and 4) She might be homesick. Once again, different characters have different lines depending on the loaded map, and these lines help flesh out the narrative hidden behind what otherwise would be a normal multiplayer game.

The decision to place these characters and lines of dialogue into the game makes *Overwatch* stand out in comparison to its peers. An epic narrative hides behind what is essentially a multiplayer shooter to be played in endless repetitions, and the bits and pieces sprinkled throughout the matches invite players to piece together the bigger picture while also becoming attached to the playable characters as living personalities rather than gameplay classes.

Multimedia Campaign

"The game is their hub. The game is the core, but we want to build a world around that game and want people to be able to access that world in a lot of different ways". [2]
-James Waugh, former Blizzard creative development lead

In addition to the in-game elements, the developers of *Overwatch* also use an extensive multimedia campaign to flesh out the world and tell the story they want to tell.

This includes interactive comics, video packages, and interviews written from the perspective of characters in the in-game universe. The decision to supplement the game with an ongoing multimedia campaign provides the developers with the conduit to tell the story they want to tell; they can flesh out the characters in ways that cannot be accomplished through the actual game itself. For example, the “Dragons” cinematic animated short cements the connection of Hanzo and Genji as brothers and heirs of the Shimada family empire, and also details Hanzo’s regret for ‘killing’ Genji all those years ago, the main reason for his stoic, bitter personality. Players who keep up with the bonus narrative supplements become more attached to the playable heroes as individual characters, and the impact of these supplements carry over to the main game (many *Overwatch* gamers can recall moments where players playing as Hanzo and Genji refer to each other as “brothers”, an element of roleplaying absent from pretty much every other multiplayer game out there).

The developers take advantage of *Overwatch*’s biggest strength as a multiplayer game- the existence of an active, continually invested community of players. The multimedia campaign keeps this community invested in the world of *Overwatch*, and rewards players for sticking around by periodically adding more tidbits of narrative that add to the growing intrigue. This approach prolongs the lifespan of the game because there always exists the potential for new content to the game, whether through gameplay or narrative. Many members of the community actively speculate on story details, and the reveal of new animated shorts or comics feels like an adventure being experienced by the whole community at the same time, a phenomenon that has been made possible by *Overwatch*’s multiplayer identity. Heroes change costumes and say different things during certain holidays, and regularly-released comics detail certain aspects of characters’ lives (such as Tracer racing to get a gift for her girlfriend for Christmas). In a way it feels like a big story event in an MMO, only in this case the developers release the content to the community directly (via YouTube, Battle.net and social media websites) rather than through the game itself. The inclusion of community participation augments the narrative because players enjoy the story as it happens, and much of this osmosis of community and narrative happens through Blizzard’s media campaign.

The nature of *Overwatch* as a multiplayer game leads to an ever-evolving narrative. In a May 2016 interview with Rock Paper Shotgun, lead writer Michael Chu (who works on both in-game narrative and other game-related media) stated: “*We thought it might be interesting – and in some ways this is a bit of a variation on how we’ve developed stories in the past – if we provided more context and threw some ideas out there and put some hints of things and we didn’t specifically do a big lore document for some of these things to explain the characters. It’s something that’s been really interesting because it’s afforded us space to build the universe as we go... it leaves us space to create connections between the characters and develop a plot as we find out more about it.*”[3] As the developers add more content, the story continues to evolve because of its fluid nature, creating a narrative fabric that feels like a living breathing beast rather than a static portrait.

Strongest Element

The cinematic animated shorts released as part of the multimedia campaign create the most visible amount of buzz across the whole gaming community and beyond. These shorts, animated with quality akin to mainstream Pixar movies, present the characters in dramatic scenarios absent from the main game itself (because cinematic cutscenes in multiplayer games wear out their welcome quickly). As of this writing, the shorts have already generated over *102 million hits* on Blizzard's official YouTube channel alone, and cause a strong ripple through the larger gaming community whenever the developers release one at a convention or similar public event. The developers go all out to integrate the events of the shorts into the game (Characters reference events that happen in the videos, maps are redecorated to match the aftermath of the events in the videos, characters introduced in the videos are released to the public shortly after, etc). The video shorts themselves depict the characters advancing the narrative in some way. Each video short adds intrigue to the overall narrative picture while also supplying the active player community with much more content to talk about. In terms of narrative, *Overwatch* overcomes its storytelling limitations when it has the freedom to expand on the lore through additional related forms of media.

Unsuccessful Element

While *Overwatch* has a lot of intriguing narrative plot points, its very nature as a multiplayer game limits its overall storytelling potential, leaving gamers wanting more. The developers at Blizzard emphasize gameplay over narrative, and rightly so because at its core *Overwatch* still identifies as a competitive multiplayer shooter designed to be fun and engaging via gameplay. However, this means that players only immerse themselves in the narrative if they choose to do so, and that the story itself comes across as optional or non-canonical at times. There is a slight disconnect between the intentions of the developers and the community, because while the developers approach the narrative as supplement to the gameplay mechanics, a good chunk of the *Overwatch* fanbase approaches the narrative component of the game with the enthusiasm of an audience watching an engrossing TV show- that is, they want to be immersed in the story and treat character actions as canon, to believe the characters go through the events in the story in real time. The same forces that immerse players into the characters and worlds of games like *The Last Of Us* and *The Witcher 3* cannot be applied to *Overwatch* because the characters and backstories in *Overwatch*, while engaging and intriguing in its own right, do take a backseat to the multiplayer gameplay mechanics. Many members of the community are left hanging since they want more backstory but know in the back of their minds that the structure of *Overwatch*'s gameplay limits the amount of story progression that can happen. Outside media such as the cinematic animated shorts bridge the narrative elements of *Overwatch* closer to the levels of immersion present in story-centric games, and a larger expansion of the transmedia campaign (such as more shorts, more comics, or maybe even a movie or a TV show) could provide more satisfying levels of immersion while allowing the game itself to stay true to the "gameplay first" manifesto.

Highlight

Overwatch is filled with little bits and pieces of narrative that form a bigger picture, and with the incredibly large cast of characters it is difficult to find a single definitive moment that one can point to and say “this is the best part of *Overwatch*’s story”. However, the biggest element that stands out to me is the implementation of the cinematic animated shorts.

One of such shorts, titled “Dragons”, expands on the story of Genji and Hanzo with exceptional production quality. The video starts with a narration about family and honor using the analogy of two dragon brothers. Then it cuts to Hanzo infiltrating the Shimada compound, taking out guards through non-lethal means. Turns out he infiltrates the compound to make incense offerings at a shrine to honor his dead brother Genji, something he does every year. As Hanzo prays, a ninja appears behind him, and Hanzo takes him to be an assassin. The ninja scolds Hanzo for making incense offerings to a dead brother, which enrages him. They fight, and Hanzo is coerced into releasing his true power in the form of twin blue dragons. However, the ninja counters with a green dragon of his own- an image usually attributed to Genji (foreshadowed by the intro narration). Hanzo, shocked, lets his guard down and the ninja defeats him. “*Only a Shimada can control the dragons. Who are you?*” Hanzo tells the ninja to kill him. However, the ninja spares Hanzo, and reveals himself to be Genji. “*I will not grant you the death you wish for. You still have a purpose in this life... brother.*” The short ends with Genji proclaiming that he has made peace with his past, whereas Hanzo needs to forgive himself for what he did to Genji those many years ago. Throughout these events, the narrator continues his tale of the dragon brothers, strongly mirroring the story of Hanzo and Genji from the point of view of a folk tale. As a standalone piece, the short maintains good quality. However, its association with recognizable characters in the game make it resonate stronger with people who have played it, adding to its value. The short adds a lot of backstory to Genji (who was already one of the game’s most popular characters) and Hanzo, allowing players to see both characters in new positive lights. Such a powerful moment was captured in an online video separate from the game, but created so much buzz that it impacted the lore of both characters in the game itself.

Critical Reception

Eric Van Allen of Gaming Trend gave *Overwatch* a 95/100, and writes: “*Every match of Overwatch begins the same way. An opening line from a character, an exchange of dialogue between two heroes about to charge into battle, a snide remark before the chaos erupts. In music, silent moments speak as loud as the booming fanfare. In Overwatch, that silence is the tepid reveal of character, the nibbly-bits of lore, remarks on a massive and inspiring backdrop before the action begins.*”

It’s hints of detail like this that would seem foreign to any other first-person shooter, and the many ways Blizzard subverts — or even ignores — the prewritten formula of games makes Overwatch something interesting, compelling, and innovative.

... At its core, Overwatch is still a game, and must commit itself to being that over something more akin to a Marvel film or comic book; but the ways it does so works wonder, in ways that both support the idea of the game itself and the transmedia campaign surrounding it.” [4]

Van Allen recognizes that the little details in the dialogue preceding each match add to the in-game universe in a way that sets *Overwatch* apart from other games in the genre. He also marvels at how *Overwatch* further differentiates itself from the others via its transmedia campaign, hinting at the property’s potential of ascending past the status of ‘game’ to a larger, recognizable media entity (like, for example, the collective Marvel universe).

Robert Purchase of Eurogamer writes: *“I’m fascinated to see how the Overwatch story ebbs and flows in the coming months and years, and whether Blizzard will push present day events on - somehow - or instead work on backfilling histories and motives and so on. Tricky when you need a ‘present’ for everyone to play in. But I like how Blizzard is doing it so far; I really appreciate crumb-trails of information and digging to uncover them. Adds a bit of mystery.” [5]*

Purchase highlights the game’s ability to pique the player’s interest in the world of *Overwatch* through the many hints present in the game. He also comments with measured excitement on the game’s potential of maintaining an ever-evolving narrative, highlighting the developers’ ability to both release relevant content on holidays and such as well as their ability to release more lore-centric stories such as character backstories and overall big picture storyline content (like the Omnic Crisis). Purchase also voiced the minor concern of how long the developers would be able to maintain implementing present-day events into the game world, but noted that everything they have done so far has been up-to-par.

Vince Ingenito of IGN gave *Overwatch* a 9.4/10, and writes: *“Bits of story and world-building can be found throughout the beautifully conceived environments. Movie posters in the spawn room of one map reveal that the mech-piloting pro-gamer D.Va’s real name is Hana Song, and that she had a movie career as well. Another map has a row of arcade machines, and if you happen to be playing as Genji, the cyber-ninja might start reminiscing about how many hours of his ‘misspent yout[h]’ he burned away playing there. Sometimes characters who have a past and don’t like each other find themselves on the same team, and you’ll hear about it. Overwatch takes just about every possible opportunity to make its cast and locales seem like people and places rather than puppets and scenery.” [6]*

In his review, Ingenito remarks that so much can be learned about the characters by simply observing the map surroundings, and that *Overwatch* manages to make its cast of heroes seem like actual people rather than gameplay tools.

Lessons

- *Details flesh out personality and allow the player to view them as individual characters.* The characters in *Overwatch* chime in with little tidbits about their past, and small visual hints around the maps (such as the D.Va poster in Hanamura that reveals her to be a movie star named Hana Song, or the reconciliatory dialogue between Pharah and Ana) contribute to the player's view of what the character used to be, is, and can become.
- *Isolated bits and pieces have the potential for huge amounts of conveyance.* In great examples of minimalist storytelling, a lot is revealed through little. On the map Watchpoint: Gibraltar (former *Overwatch* headquarters), Soldier:76 can be heard muttering to himself “*Lots of memories of this place. They weren't all bad.*” This one line reveals the character's former association with *Overwatch*, his current bitterness at the organization, and a poignant reminiscence of happier times- three confirmations to Soldier:76's backstory while also establishing his personality to the player.
- *A multimedia campaign and an active player community gives a narrative longevity and unpredictability.* Blizzard periodically releases new narrative content such as videos and comics, sustaining interest in the game and keeping the narrative fresh by promising change in a genre that is not used to change. By developing the narrative as they go along, the developers also retain a sense of unpredictability as to what they might release in the future (creating intrigue).
- *Multiplayer format = steady active community looking for new content = narrative evolution over time.* By injecting story-driven content into a highly visible multiplayer game with a growing e-sports pedigree, Blizzard essentially guarantees that *Overwatch* continues to generate buzz with periodically released content (much like a TV show) that appeals to gamers not normally interested in the genre, and allows the game to feature an ever-evolving narrative that keeps the title fresh.
- *Immersion and multiplayer gameplay remains difficult to reconcile, but not impossible.* The game sacrifices complete immersion for the sake of establishing an engaging multiplayer gameplay experience, and while it benefits from the existence of an active online community to enjoy the content it cannot fully satisfy fans who seek more story progression and character backstories. However, this is a problem with refreshingly exciting possibilities going forward as the narrative and multimedia campaign continues to expand.

Summation

Overwatch pushes the boundaries of interactive storytelling by taking a genre not known for producing compelling stories (competitive multiplayer first person shooter) and creating a world that manages to not only be compelling and engaging, but also takes advantage of an actively invested community of players that propels the genre to new heights. Through vibrant in-game characterization, dialogue details, and a strong multimedia campaign, Blizzard has established a formula for interactive storytelling that is both successful and sustainable, utilizing an ever-evolving narrative that is flexible enough to adapt over time while retaining interest due to the strong multiplayer format.

Overwatch has startling amounts of potential to become an interactive storytelling vehicle that transcends that of most games due to the impressive combination of engaging in-game universe and community-driven media supplements in a game that can be sustained through high-profile e-sports events and constant multiplayer iterations. The heroes in *Overwatch* feel like real individuals who interact in real time, fostering a community that takes advantage of what draws gamers to both singleplayer and multiplayer games.

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