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Blizzard's Winning Formula in *Overwatch*: What makes a game successful?

I.   Introduction

What if there was a magic formula that ensured success? It's normal for a

company to enjoy some wins and losses, but there are some companies that seem to

avoid the latter. One such company is Blizzard. Blizzard is perhaps best known for their

game changing Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) *World Of*

Warcraft (WOW). Released more than a decade ago, the game remains the most

popular MMORPG. What's fascinating about this is that with the large amount of media

choices for consumers to indulge in, that kind of longevity is rare. What's even more

fascinating is that Blizzard didn't stop there. Each subsequent release of theirs have

also been critically successful. This level of consistency is what makes Blizzard a

developer worth researching.

What makes Blizzard's games successful? The games industry is a saturated

market. New releases are common and large video game companies flood consumers

with big budget titles on a fairly regular basis. Even with all of these games to choose

from, Blizzard's games manage to standout, consistently. Blizzard's games also tend to

be somewhat derivative. It seems that they excel at refining previously established

genres and game types. We could argue that most games are derivative, but analyzing

Blizzard's games makes it seem that their games are just a little more derivative than

most. I believe that their success largely hinges on their ability to improve upon the pre-

established game types. However, Blizzard is not the only company that creates games in pre-existing genres. Yet, their games manage to outshine others.

Countless studies have already been conducted with WOW as their primary focus. Blizzard's latest game *Overwatch* will be the primary focus of this research. In traditional Blizzard fashion, the game has been extremely popular and successful, and it largely resembles another game. *Overwatch* seems to be mostly inspired by Valve's *Team Fortress 2 (TF2).* Both games are team based first person shooters that have multiple character types to select from. Certainly, Blizzard has made some unique changes, but even the game's director Jeff Kaplan has acknowledged some of the comments regarding their similarities. Kaplan commented on the *TF2* comparisons "There are some similarities in the team-based objectives" (PC Games N). However, *Overwatch* isn't the only game that bears some similarities to *TF2.* 2K Games' *Battleborn* released a few weeks prior to *Overwatch*, and just before releasing a lot of people were already pointing out that both games looked quite similar. *Overwatch* released to great fanfare, but the reception for *Battleborn* was lackluster.

Despite being created by a large well known video game company, *Battleborn* was unable to captivate audiences the way that *Overwatch* did. *Battleborn's* developer acknowledged the comparisons and stated "it's impossible to avoid the comparison" (Gamespot). That brought me to the question: how does Blizzard manage to consistently release games that are successful? I believe that the answer lies in Blizzard's design principles. Their games are familiar, but it's the subtle touches that set them apart. Their games are known for their quality. Blizzard's games usually release in a very polished state that has become increasingly less common in the industry. Their

games tend to accessible and streamlined. If Blizzard consistently achieves success with their games, shouldn't it be possible for other companies to follow suit?

If Blizzard's strategy really revolves around improving pre-existing game types, it would be interesting to learn what happens when a company improves upon Blizzard's philosophies. Answers to the questions at hand would be most valuable to anyone interested in media creation. By gaining an understanding of what makes Blizzard's games successful, it should be possible to apply some of their principles to the creation of media. If this proves to be the case, creators and companies can have a better idea of what areas of a game's design people find important. Armed with this knowledge, a company should be able to design their products in a way that ensures that they'll be successful.

The research will take the form of a formal analysis paired with an ethnographic study. By combining two research methods, it'll be possible to dissect *Overwatch* in greater detail. A formal analysis will provide objective insight into the elements that went into the creation of *Overwatch*. Special attention will be paid to the user experience and the user interface. Story, music, and characters will also be explored. Some analysis is required from related games such as *TF2, Battleborn,* and *Paladins*. By analyzing the related games, it should be possible to highlight the elements that have made *Overwatch* a success. Conducting an ethnographic study will provide a means to confirm or refute my initial hypotheses. It will also confirm or refute some of the findings and assumptions made from the formal analysis.

I believe that it is entirely possible to develop business practices and design philosophies that ensure success. Blizzard is a game company that has constantly

delivered successful products. Studying their latest game *Overwatch* and how it differs from its closest competitors should provide insight into their design principles. Understanding how and why *Overwatch* has become a critical success will aid in isolating the Blizzard formula. Creators and companies stand to benefit from gaining a deep understanding of what makes Blizzard's games successful.

II.   Research Question

What elements of Blizzard's design principles make their games consistently successful?

III.   Literature Review

Blizzard has been the subject of numerous research articles. It's widely acknowledged that their games are successful, and consumers have come to expect a certain level of quality from their products. However, there seems to be a lack of research that identifies the reason that Blizzard's games become hits. As stated in the research article, Building an MMO with Mass Appeal, "Multiplayer game designers have long been in search of the "magic bullet" (Ducheneaut et al. 281). While the article presents an in-depth analysis regarding player behaviors in WOW, it focuses a bit too much on the ethnographic side of the research. It doesn't provide much in the way of analyzing what makes players want to play *WOW* instead of other MMO games.

WOW has been around for more than a decade, which has allowed for a lot of research to be conducted. Since *Overwatch* is relatively new, research is scant. The article *Overwatch*: not just another *Team Fortress*, also corroborates a lot of the hypotheses of this research. In particular, the article mentions "Blizzard is known for

repackaging the strongest aspects of a genre's antecedent titles to create something that is original and yet at the same time feels familiar"(Brown). The article skims the surface of *Overwatch* but doesn't really go into depth to explain how *Overwatch* differs from *Team Fortress.*

Although there are some similarities with the aforementioned articles, none of the available research draws parallels between Blizzard's derivative nature being a part of their winning formula. It appears that most research acknowledges Blizzard's power in the video games market but don't actually attempt to decipher what makes them powerful. By pairing together a formal analysis with an ethnographic study, this research aims to tackle the question head on. What makes Blizzard's games consistently successful?

IV.   Theoretical Framework

The research will be carried out with a postpositivist approach. Although great care will be taken to ensure that the results of the research are as neutral as possible, I believe that personal bias can influence the research. My personal knowledge of game design and preferences can lead to viewing some of Blizzard's design choices more favorably. As a result, the postpositivist theory aligns with the nature of this research.

V.   Research Proposal Methods

In order to investigate the research problem, a mixed method approach will be required. The research will employ a formal analysis as well as an ethnographic study. The mixed method works well for studying video games because it allows us to gather

data in two distinct forms that can be used to effectively validate or refute the hypotheses. By conducting a formal analysis we will be able look at *Overwatch* in a scientific manner, thoroughly analyzing its components. By conducting an ethnographic study we will have data gathered from other players that will allow us to supplement the findings from the formal analysis.

The formal analysis will require analyzing *Overwatch's* graphical user interface, player actions, story, and setting. The aforementioned components will be under intense scrutiny. They will be directly compared to *Overwatch's* closest competitors such as *TF2* and *Battleborn.* The data that should be gathered consists of things such as simplicity, color palette, number of options, ease of use etc. The ethnographic portion will gather data from user surveys, interviews, and professional review data.

The data will be analyzed statistically. By gathering player input data from the ethnographic study, I will seek to draw conclusions to either validate or refute the observations from the formal analysis. Professional review data will also be included to allow for a greater amount of data. Survey results will translate into easily quantifiable statistics. On the other hand, interviews will provide supplemental information that can be used to expand upon formal analysis findings.

Certain criteria has been established to determine the correct subjects to study. In order to qualify for the study, all players must have experience playing *Overwatch.* 50% of participants will only be required to have played *Overwatch.* The remaining participants will be determined as follows: 25% of players will have to have played *Overwatch* and *TF2.* The remaining 25% of players will have to have played *Overwatch* and any combination of related games, such as *TF2* and/or *Battleborn.* In order to

obtain the necessary samples, I will employ a stratified sampling procedure. By using a stratified sampling procedure, I will be able to break down participants categorically and fit them into the desired sample groups.

VI.   Ethical Considerations

Numerous measures will be taken in order to protect the participants of the study, as well as the game designers and companies under study.

- All participants will be asked to sign consent forms.

- Participants will not be forced or pressured into signing consent forms.

- Participants who do not sign consent forms will not have any collected data disclosed nor used in the research.

- Anonymity will be maintained, unless otherwise requested.

- Participants will not be told of the research hypothesis in order to prevent influencing their responses.

- Similar games will not be spoken about negatively.

- The research will assume an objective tone, in order to avoid bias.

VII.   Results

Once the research has concluded the results will be published in a scholarly article. The article will be distributed amongst the academic community. In order to reach a wider audience, the results will also be implemented and discussed in an educational video presentation. By incorporating the results into a video presentation, the study and its purpose can easily be explained to others in a non-academic environment. The supplemental video footage will provide a visual component to demonstrate the findings of the study.

VIII.   Timeline

The research is not designed to be conducted in a full time capacity. Time estimates have been determined in order to allow for the researcher to work full time, and continue to study while the research is conducted.

Goal	Start Date	Expected Completion Date
Submit research proposal	N/A	4/28/2017
Receive research approval	N/A	5/29/2017
Receive approval from ethics committee	N/A	6/19/2017
In depth Literature Review	3/6/2017	7/3/2017
Data Collection	7/3/2017	8/14/2017
Data Analysis	7/10/2017	9/18/2017
Formal Write- up	9/18/2017	10/23/2017
Submit completed research	N/A	10/30/2017
Release Video Presentation	11/13/2017	1/15/2018

IX.   Conclusion

The successful completion of this research will lead to great insight regarding the design philosophies of Blizzard. The findings of this research will be beneficial to anybody who works in the media creation field. By adopting similar philosophies and design standards creators may be able to ensure that their games or products will be successful. The research will also benefit companies that do not engage in the creation of interactive media. Analyzing Blizzard's latest game *Overwatch* and comparing it to the games it most closely resembles will allow us to distill Blizzard's winning formula.

Works Cited

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