

'Overwatch' game developers find creativity in diversity

May 17 2016, by By Derrik J. Lang



This image released by Blizzard Entertainment shows Mei, a character from the "Overwatch," video game. For years, the video game industry has been criticized for not depicting a more diverse array of characters. However, a new wave of multiplayer games like "Overwatch" are featuring heroes of different races, genders, nationalities, sexual orientations and body types. (Blizzard Entertainment via AP)

When the makers of the globe-hopping video game "Overwatch" were coming up with the backstory for a character with the ability to freeze enemies and erect ice walls, their initial inclination was to make her

homeland a stereotypically chilly place, someplace like Iceland, Canada or Norway.

"That's what you would expect," said game director Jeff Kaplan. "We asked ourselves, 'What if she was from somewhere else? What if she was from China? How would that look?' It's not your normal expectation, and that's what is cute, adorable, endearing and exciting about that character."

Inspired by Chinese ice sculpture festivals, "Overwatch" lead character concept artist Arnold Tsang crafted a look for Mei, the bespectacled climatologist among the 21 characters of various races, genders, nationalities and sexual orientations which players can portray in the superhero-inspired multiplayer game out May 24.

Mei's unlikely heritage and ability to encase her body in a chunk of ice aren't her only unique attributes. She doesn't sport a busty, Barbie-like physique that most female characters have in video games.

"From a visual standpoint, we want every character to have a different silhouette, not just because that's more interesting to look at but because you want to be able to know which character is coming at you from a distance when you're playing," said Tsang. "With that sort of philosophy, it's easy to embrace diversity."

For years, the [video game industry](#) has been criticized for relying on stereotypes and not depicting a wider array of characters. Many games invite players to construct their own avatars, but a new wave of multiplayer games such as "Battleborn," "Paragon" and "Overwatch" are providing dizzying rosters of defined characters—each with different looks, abilities and histories.

The initial line-up of 21 heroes for "Overwatch" features 10 men, eight

women, a pair of robots and one genetically engineered gorilla. (By contrast, the original "Mortal Kombat" featured six men and one woman when it was first released in 1992.)



This image released by Blizzard Entertainment shows Soldier: 76, a character from the "Overwatch," video game out May 24, 2016. For years, the video game industry has been criticized for not depicting a more diverse array of characters. However, a new wave of multiplayer games like "Overwatch" are featuring heroes of different races, genders, nationalities, sexual orientations and body types. (Blizzard Entertainment via AP)

Kaplan said the top three most popular "Overwatch" characters in the game's open beta, which was played by 9.7 million people earlier this month, were nefarious French female assassin Widowmaker, hardened American male vigilante Soldier: 76 and high-flying Egyptian female security chief Pharah.

The decision to construct such an assorted cast apparently wasn't motivated by the bottom line. Kaplan said the studio didn't use any player demographic data gathered by publisher Activision Blizzard Inc. over the years to conceive characters that might generate more sales in particular regions of the world. However, actual Chinese gamers will be able to play as Mei. Blizzard tapped Chinese online company NetEase Inc. to release "Overwatch" in China.

"I think diversity is a nice byproduct of us trying to create heroes that people will love," said Kaplan. "We didn't set out to have a hero of every race, nationality, body type or gender. That's not the goal—or really even possible with a game like this one. However, by not limiting ourselves creatively, it steers us back to this diverse place."

"Overwatch" is the first new franchise in nearly 20 years from Blizzard, the studio behind the wildly successful "Warcraft" and "StarCraft" fantasy and sci-fi series. It also more closely resembles the real world, despite all the futuristic laser guns and over-the-top superpowers.

"When we decided to set 'Overwatch' on this optimistic, near-future version of Earth, the most exciting thing was that we could take inspiration from all these different places and cultures," said senior game designer Michael Chu. "For me, that was exciting after working on Blizzard games that took place in totally fantastical worlds."

Chu noted that the developers aren't attempting to appease every fan or create a character to represent every region. He's hopeful players will find different aspects of themselves in the heroes of "Overwatch."

While the game's focus is more on squad-based action than a detailed storyline, Blizzard is expanding on the fiction in animated shorts, comics and other material outside the frenetic matches that make up "Overwatch" gameplay.



This image released by Blizzard Entertainment shows Lucio, a character from the "Overwatch," video game. For years, the video game industry has been criticized for not depicting a more diverse array of characters. However, a new wave of multiplayer games like "Overwatch" are featuring heroes of different races, genders, nationalities, sexual orientations and body types. (Blizzard Entertainment via AP)

Other characters include a pink-haired Russian bodybuilder named Zarya, who is equipped with a cannon and gravity bombs, as well as a Brazilian disc jockey with the power to heal or speed up his teammates with his beats. His name is Lucio, the game's only black character.

"We do have a level set in a first-world African nation called Numbani that is a place that humans and robots built together in harmony," said Chu. "We've got so many ideas for more characters. If we could make 100 characters, we'd still have more ideas. This is just where we're starting."

More information: www.playoverwatch.com

© 2016 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: 'Overwatch' game developers find creativity in diversity (2016, May 17) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-overwatch-game-creativity-diversity.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.