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Depiction of Female characters in *Paladins*: Symptoms of a Larger Epidemic

For this paper, I wanted to touch on a medium of entertainment that I personally have been involved with. I did not want to pick a movie or other entertainment product that I had not experienced first hand. Which brings us to videogames, and one game in particular: Paladins. Paladins is a free to play, first person shooter by Hi-Rez studios, set in a fantasy realm where the moon is a fox girl goddess, and goblins can drive large mechanical suits. If you have even the slightest understanding of the arguably more successful game in the genre, Overwatch, then you already know almost everything about the gameplay loop and even some of the controversies.

Now, onto the topic of this paper, and the reason that I stopped playing the game. I stopped playing due to the representation and depiction of the game's characters. It is my belief that the women of the game are depicted in a way that objectifies them. Nothing new for the videogame industry, unfortunately, but to a degree that I believe warrants a conversation. Due primarily to the fact that the game is set in a fantasy world, I won't focus on representation in the game, but note that it is lacking.

I want it to be known upfront that I have actually spent a good amount of time with the game. I have almost 60 hours of playtime according to my statistics on Xbox, and am at a decent level in the game. I just want to be clear that I am not making a snap judgment, and I made a conscious choice to not continue playing the game.

Of the 48 total characters in the game, there are 20 that are identified as female, based off of character bios, where she/her pronouns are used, and the remaining 28 are as male via the same method. That breakdown is not incredibly surprising, and within the realm of what I would expect. I would say that most videogames likely have a target demographic of male, so having a slight tip of the scales to the male side is not entirely unheard of.

Now, my main issue lies with the majority of the female characters- they are designed as tall and slender, with long legs, and exaggerated chests. On top of the same body type being used almost all 20 times, there is very little in the actual design of the character themselves that does anything to convey them as a character. Not backstory, or much from those character bios mentioned earlier. These designs look to exist only for objectification, rather than for the sake of the character as a whole. For instance, let's take Io. Io is described as the literal goddess of the "broken moon," one that has taken a human form. But rather than having design choices that show that, she has... fox ears? The design of the character is focused on the fetish that people have around characters with animal ears, rather than doing anything to portray the backstory or any relation to the moon, which is a very important character beat. They also gave her the same body type as every female character - slender, long legs, and exaggerated chest. This time, exacerbated by a window in her outfit whose only purpose is to show cleavage. And she is not even the only character to have that same design choice! There are five other characters with the cleavage window.

I think that there is a character that better exemplifies the objectification present in the game, however. There is a male character named Pip, who very much draws inspiration from Rocket Raccoon from Guardians of the Galaxy, and Ratchet from Ratchet and Clank. That is fine, characters like that have been around for a while. But, one of the cosmetic "skins" as they

are called, appears to change Pips presenting gender, for no reason. The design of this skin has no cleverness about it, and is designed purely for objectification. There is no other explanation other than objectification here.

So, why is this important?

Paladins is free to play, the only barriers to entry are the system you want to play on and an internet connection. That means that this



game can reach a much larger audience than other games in the genre, like Overwatch at its \$60 price point. It has a fantasy setting, and a lack of focus on intense violence, which makes for a perfect entry into the genre and industry as a whole for new players. Free, accessible, and inviting make for a dangerous combination when promoting unrealistic expectations of femininity and gender. In *Racial Formation in the United States*, the authors Michael Omi and Howard Winant talk in depth about how the idea of race came to be created, but also how gender has been largely treated the same way and how the two intersect. “The chattelization [ownership] of the body has been a common experience for both people of color and women. In many ways racial difference and sex/gender-based difference resemble each other because they are both grounded in the body.” (370) The objectification of human beings, and women in particular has ultimately persisted, despite decades of fighting against it, and the games industry, unfortunately, is one of the worst offenders and contributors to the issue. Women are portrayed as figures to ogle at, and many times even more provocative cosmetics are sold for real world money. Now,

with player numbers higher than ever due to the ongoing pandemic, more and more people are being introduced to these unrealistic depictions of female characters. It is unfortunate that this issue is not new to the videogames industry as a whole, but it is really only the big name studios that get called on these kinds of issues.

In the end, I just find it unfortunate. Paladins is no outlier, these issues are present across the industry. But, in all my time playing video games, it stood out to me. It felt egregious, and didn't sit well with me. I know people will continue to play, and that isn't bad. In my eyes, it is more important to recognize why a piece of media, literature, or a videogame is problematic than it is to stop partaking in that media. This just happens to be a case where I stopped partaking.

Bibliography

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. Routledge, 2015.

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