

# The Pro Strats of Healsluts: Overwatch, Sexuality, and Perverting the Mechanics of Play

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*Obey or play? In digital games, sex is often confined by medial references and mechanical impositions. Tanya Krzywinska, in “The Strange Case of the Misappearance of Sex in Video Games” (2015), explains that games often obscure representations of sex and minimize playing sex. Game series like Mass Effect (2007 – 2017) use cinematic techniques such as the fade to black to allude to the climax to come, whereas games like Playboy: The Mansion (2005) abstract sex into the act of two characters comically bouncing on each other. And when sex is featured as something for players to perform, it often emerges as a mini-game in which the play is restricted by a series of button inputs, from its origins in the 1990 bedroom of Virtual Valerie (1990) to the more recent versions seen in the God of War (2005 – 2018) games until 2010. Far from an emergent, improvisational process, sexual actions in video games feel decidedly assembled and constructed; consider the Second Life (2003) universe, where sexual positions are purchasable encoded processes within “pose balls” that repeat the same action, over and over again.*

*Yet despite procedural and medial impositions designed to control sexual play in digital games, fan communities have found their own ways to erotically engage within—and outside—the game, playing out their fantasies via emergent mechanics, in-game behavior, fan art, roleplaying, and fanfiction. Building upon prior work from writers like Jenny Sundén exploring how a queer relationship within and outside World of Warcraft (2004) responded and implemented mechanics of play (2012), or Stephen Greer’s analysis of how to “play queer” within digital worlds (2013), this paper focuses on one such community surrounding the game Overwatch (2016), a competitive*

*team-based shooter. While Overwatch has cultivated a massive fan community who are drawn to its diverse and non-normative characters, Blizzard Entertainment, the game's developer, has been decidedly coy about the sexualities (and sexual habits) of its cast, making only a few nods via comics and other supplemental media to their love lives. As a Teen-rated cartoonish shooter meant to welcome the maximum number of consumers, little within its designed world of play would seem to acknowledge sex.*

In the short story "Bastet" (2019), written by Michael Chu and officially commissioned by Blizzard Entertainment, a specter follows Jack Morrison. Better known to the multiplayer first-person shooter *Overwatch*'s player community as "Soldier 76," Morrison is one of the game's lead protagonists and features prominently in the game lore. Easy to learn and difficult to master, Morrison is a well-rounded offensive player whose balance makes him a common starting character for new players, and he is also featured as the first playable character that players use in the tutorial to learn *Overwatch*'s mechanics and gameplay. His storyline focuses upon his tenure as commander of the titular futuristic government defense agency, eventually leading to its collapse and Morrison's apparent demise. Five years after his funeral, Morrison returns as a mysterious figure now known only as Soldier 76, who begins carrying out nonviolent raids on decommissioned *Overwatch* facilities.

It would seem that 76 might serve as the series' ghost, both haunted by amorphous neophytes and also haunting former allies and enemies who compose *Overwatch*'s playable cast. Yet 76 is not without his own phantoms. As we learn in "Bastet," the specter of Morrison still lingers, and with him, 76's unrealized future with a man named Vincent. Over the course of the story, 76 is wounded and forced into hiding along his former squadmate Ana; during this time, the two reminisce over photos of *Overwatch* and the relationships lost along the way. In one photo, illustrated for the story, Morrison is depicted with his arm around another man. He reflects:

"Vincent deserved a happier life than the one I could give him." Jack sighed. "We both knew that I could never put anything above my duty. Everything I fought for was to protect people like him... That's the sacrifice I made."

"Relationships don't work out so well for us, do they?" Ana said, unconsciously running her thumb over where her wedding ring used to be. (12)

The specter of Soldier 76's sexuality looms large in these lines, signified through the juxtaposition of Ana's phantom wedding band and the absence created by Morrison's commitment to Overwatch and the kinships forged in the throes of battle. Morrison's ghost reminds Soldier 76 and Ana of everything sacrificed in the name of duty, yet on a larger intertextual level, it may potentially raise an ethical conundrum for *Overwatch*'s players: what aspects of ourselves do we sacrifice in engaging with the game?

Like Ana and Soldier 76, who find their identities at odds with their actions, *Overwatch* struggles with a strong case of dissonance between player action and its characters' narrative identity. Defined by Clint Hocking as "ludonarrative dissonance" (2007), we can observe this effect at work in the in-game environments, which are sites where the *Overwatch*'s cast suffered significant traumas and triumphs. Rather than taking on the emotional and personal resonance we might expect a battlefield to have for someone who once fought and watched friends die there, these spaces are reduced to mere playgrounds for gleefully gibbing other players during game sessions. Team building runs into similar conflicts. Players can freely play as sworn enemies like Reaper and Soldier 76 on the same team despite the impossibility of such a situation within the game narrative (Ramée 2016). Most importantly for this article, the romantic and sexual identities of the game's characters endure a similar dissonance. While *Overwatch* features unlockable costumes and voice lines that gesture loosely towards characters' sexuality, one of the few being the characters Reinhardt and Ana's flirtatious pre-game dialogue, these traces of sexuality simply vanish during gameplay. Where Reinhardt and Ana might coyly banter during one match, in the next they could be found driving bullet and hammer into the other's brain. In short, little, if any, options exist within *Overwatch* for characters or players to express or play their sexuality regardless of its presence within the game narrative.

This division between gameplay and sexuality has been commented on and enacted by *Overwatch*'s design team. Remarking on his apprehension about *Overwatch* porn in an interview with Kotaku's Nathan Grayson (2016), game director and lead designer Jeff Kaplan commented on the place of pornography within *Overwatch* fandom, "Nobody's trying to step on anybody's freedom of speech or any of that, like I totally love people's creative expression. I would just say just be mindful that there are a lot of kids who are engaged with the franchise and as long as things are kept sort of away from them, that's what's important." While keeping sexual content out of a game to broaden its potential audience might pass as a savvy business move, the issue is complicated by Blizzard's decision to issue cease-and-desist orders to adult content creators (Chalk 2017). One order in

particular was sent to the online magazine “*Playwatch*,” which featured “articles, interviews with real-life cosplayers, and yeah, loads of horny fan art...A lot of it was silly—the multi-page interview with Bastion is nothing but beeps and boops—but it also included coverage of the November Symmetra buff, top Hero picks and player rankings for the month, an interview with Jannetincosplay, and even a Spanish-language article about Sombra.” *Playwatch*, which specifically targeted an adult audience with campy humor and fanmade content akin to that found on websites like DeviantArt, seems a curious case as it falls outside of Kaplan’s alleged concerns with open displays of sexuality in the *Overwatch* universe.

Possibly, then, it was *Playwatch*’s decision to combine sexuality with gameplay that made it a target because the magazine violated the *Overwatch* team’s vision of “exclusive inclusivity.” Kaplan explains that “we’ve always wanted *Overwatch* to be a very inclusive universe...that inclusivity spans from game play styles, some people like to play support, some people like to play DPS, to genders and body types and different nationalities” (Kaplan). In his description, as with *Overwatch* itself, there is an apparent division between gameplay and representation, where “inclusivity spans from game play styles... to genders and body types and different nationalities.” Kaplan’s phrasing, compounded by Blizzard’s legal actions, thus divides gameplay from sexuality and embodiment. In *Overwatch* players can choose their gameplay style and their avatar, but the idea of those elements connecting to sexuality within the space of an *Overwatch* match itself are things meant to be “sort of kept away,” in a manner of speaking.

Perhaps somewhat ironically, then, one of the few ways in which *Overwatch* manages to suture players’ experience of gameplay and its characters’ narrative experience is through its division of sexuality and play—a decision that has led many players to question, and “Bastet” to possibly attempt to address, why the sexual identity of its characters matters. We might find answers to this question in the grieving expressed by Ana and Soldier 76 over their decision to play characters in *Overwatch*’s narrative universe who are unable to summon anything but the ghostly memory their former partnerships. As Chu tweeted following the publication of “Bastet,” “Jack and Vincent were in a romantic relationship many years ago” (2019); his use of past tense and the story’s implication that duty comes before sexuality should, for many players, encourage questions about the place of their own sexuality in *Overwatch*. In many ways, Ana and Morrison are mirrors held up to the player, and their grief can be read as a troubling reflection of the emotional experience of having to choose between sexuality or gameplay in *Overwatch*. Ana and Soldier 76 can either play the game

of *Overwatch*, or they can take up their former relationships, but they cannot do both. Must players make the same choice? Can combat co-exist alongside sexuality?

Such tensions are not unusual among fans who identify as part of marginalized communities seeking to find a space for themselves among the texts they love; yet such a challenge does not close off possibilities but rather opens unexpected doors to create, produce, and push back against systems that render such identities invisible. Our article explores a thriving counterculture within the *Overwatch* player community called “healsluts.” The healslut community is an ongoing, evolving space of sexual play that doesn’t end when the round is over. Despite Blizzard and its development team’s best efforts at divorcing gameplay and sexuality, healslutting repurposes *Overwatch* and its mechanics into a space for sexual play. We align the actions of the healslut community with acts of creative resistant fandom such as fanfiction, which—as Christine Handley’s (2012) examination of fan fiction within the *Star Wars* community suggests—allows fans to not pejoratively “poach” content, but provide a powerful “rejoinder” to it (98). The healslut community, in essence, performs an overall action of what J.L Barnes (2015) deems “imaginative resistance” that exists within fandoms, particularly when there appears to be a schism between what characters are *claimed* to be and what they actually *do* in the text (79).

Healslutting invites players to deploy elements of BDSM kink and sexuality not merely within the vocabulary and design of the game, but also in a communal paratext surrounding the game involving forums, voice chat, and viral fan-designed images. Kishonna L. Gray (2015) notes the power of these larger paratextual networks via social media and other online platforms as a way for resisting “masculine-normative hegemonic fandom” in video games, allowing communities like women of color to push back against dominant narratives and create spaces inclusive of their identities (86). Here, avenues like Reddit, Twitter, and—until very recently—Tumblr allow for healsluts to connect, commiserate, and adopt practices that allow for in-game communication. These players actively repurpose and “pervert” *Overwatch*’s mechanics, creating a system of erotic roles and a shared community discourse which allows for pushing back against both the sterilized forms of sexuality that games offer and the means through which designers attempt to discipline sexuality. In so doing, we hope to continue the work set forth by Bo Ruberg and Amanda Phillips (2018) in their call for scholars to more closely explore acts of resistance in games in connection with gender and sexuality which “challenge norms” and “undermine dominant structures of power”—here, in part, by embracing one’s dominant (or submissive) playful side. The healslut community offers an example to us in game studies as to how to productively and provocatively

find pleasure in unexpected places, and how we might continue to align acts of gameplay as not just reflecting, but producing resistant identities.

## An Overview of *Overwatch*

Through a critical examination of player practices within the healslut community, specifically based on the subreddit r/HealSluts (2019), our study contributes to the growing conversation in queer- and gender-based game studies about the role of sexuality in digital games, and specifically on *Overwatch* itself. The limited amount of scholarly material on *Overwatch* tends to focus on its roles within the world of e-sports or spectator gaming, such as Mark Johnson and Jamie Woodcock's (2018) analysis of Twitch noting that "particular streamers have risen to rapid success on the back of such games as *Warframe* (2013), *Super Mario Maker* (2015), and *Overwatch* (2016), often having been broadcasting these games since the day they were released" (7). More intriguing is the early line of inquiry offered at the end of Toby Hopp and Jolene Fisher's (2017) attempt to link gender and genre together in the pleasure playing a first-person shooter; contrasting the game to titles like *Halo* (2001) and *Call of Duty* (2003), the authors claim "the title *Overwatch* (released by Blizzard in 2016) is substantially more popular among female gamers than titles in popular FPS franchises... Such engagement inconsistencies may be due to differences in the games' competitive environment, storyline dynamics, and/or avatar characteristics" (356). Finally, Maria Ruotsalainen and Usva Friman's (2018) research recognizes the multiple player imaginaries attached to *Overwatch*'s characters—particularly the prevalent stereotype that "all women play Mercy," a popular healer character within the game, as one such imaginary invented by the community. Ruotsalainen and Friman explain that this imaginary within the community prominently reads Mercy's players "as feminine and boosted, accessing the gamespace through others (males) boosting them," revealing an implicit gendering that comes with the choice of character. (These binarized gender dynamics, ironically, become a central destabilizing aspect of the healslut community's use of Mercy as its primary character; as this essay will explore, *both* male- and female-identified players turn to this "feminine," supportive characterization as a subversively erotic element of play.) In these studies, Hopp and Fisher as well as Ruotsalainen and Friman tap into the lingering question of *something* being distinctive about *Overwatch*, a mix of its character design, possibilities of play, player imaginaries, and larger narrative opportunities which opens up something beyond the standard experience of a first-person shooter—that, perhaps, being the prospect of roleplaying.

First impressions of *Overwatch* often paint the game as a strictly team-based first-person shooter affair in which players can join a team of up to six other players and compete against another team in one of the game's several modes, such as assault, escort, control, etc. Much of this is conveyed through the game modes, each of which features a distinct set of rules, play-styles, and objectives that players might encounter in a match. Escort, for example, is a gameplay mode built around a moving point called a "payload." Players must collaborate with their teammates to defend and "push," a term for moving the payload forward by standing on or nearby it, the payload until it reaches its goal in the opposing team's base. Control, on the other hand, tasks a team with defending two to three specific areas on a map, which can be captured by the opposing team if they manage to stand on the area without being killed or moved off of the point.

Upon starting the game, however, the importance of playing a role quickly becomes apparent across at least three levels: communication, class, and character choice. Excluding the one versus one mode in Elimination, *Overwatch* is played almost entirely on teams of three or six. Victory in *Overwatch*'s modes depends on teamwork, and the game demands intensive collaboration among a majority of players. These pressures encourage players to collaborate with each other during game sessions via in-game text chat or third-party voice chat applications like Discord, making *Overwatch* a game that mixes in-game and out-of-game identities. Gameplay goes beyond the character that players choose and extends to aspects like players' tone of voice, word choice, media sharing (for example, providing maps and other resources), and a cluster of other performances not strictly limited to the gamespace. Players are not just identified by who they play as, but how they embody those characters both through their gameplay within the game and in its backchannels while interacting with other players.

Take, for example, the Competitive Play setting, which adds a number of extra layers to the gameplay experience. Competitive Play is a high-risk, ranked gameplay setting designed to offer players a serious experience and encourage team- and skill-intensive playstyles. The setting is designed for players looking to break into *Overwatch*'s esports league on a professional level, and as a result, largely breeds a team-based version of what T.L. Taylor (2006) and Mia Consalvo (2007) respectively define as the "power gamer" whose gameplay experience is defined largely by mastery and victory. In Competitive Play, tempers run hot, voice comms are (ideally) supportive but uncompromisingly direct, and a single misplay can make the difference between platinum and gold rank for an entire team—the setting is explicitly designed for a specific type of player.

Quick Play, on the other hand, is a casual-friendly, unranked mode that offers a low-risk play experience. Without the victory-driven pressures of Competitive Play, Quick Play allows a variety of play styles to flourish—some of which are playful and lighthearted, while others are experimental and exploratory. Arcade, the final style, is designed entirely to support the latter play styles. In Arcade, players can find and create game modes not “officially” in the game such as one-shot-to-kill, zero gravity with Hanzo, the game’s longbow user. Whereas Competitive Play demands a high level of obedience to the formal rules of play, and Quick Play is a bit looser in its demands, Arcade allows players to invent their own rules entirely.

Thus, to say that *Overwatch* is a “team-based first-person shooter” radically reduces the layered complexity of its gameplay and player performances, as it potentially involves an ongoing process of communication and identity building through preferred play mode, style of play, text, voice, and even video feeds with other players. Tony Manninen’s “Interaction Forms and Communicative Actions in Multiplayer Games” (2003) identifies at least 12 different forms of play that facilitate the communicative and social aspects of digital games, many of which are necessary for players to be fluent in if they are to succeed in *Overwatch*. The player community has documented these aspects of gameplay in many of the player-produced strategy videos recorded to improve players’ skills. Whereas many of these videos recorded for other games focus on mechanical dexterity, the *Overwatch* videos focus on effective and collaborative communication skills—especially during intensely competitive matches. As YouTuber Dragonmar notes in their video “5 Minute Tips: Communication and Callouts, Talking like the Pros” (2016), “In my opinion, communication is by far one of the biggest separating factors between high level players and high level play and sort of that bottom tier play.” In addition to the key phrases that Dragonmar recommends players use during gameplay, much of the video is invested in identity building, talking players through the steps necessary to perform as a sociable player within the gamespace. Dragonmar states:

I know not everyone’s a people person, and it’s hard for some people to talk, but I personally have forced myself to say hello to everyone in every single match I go into, and I feel like there’s this psychological reasoning to it...it sort of builds like this trust and it makes them like me and it puts some weight on my opinions because I do sort of take that in-game leader role.

Unit Lost’s video “How Pros SHOTCALL! – Communication and Shotcalling Guide” (2017) provides similar tips designed to help players are able to enact the persona of professional players through both their gameplay and their personalities. Such lessons, while fulfilling a pragmatic need,



also add an additional layer of roleplaying for the players themselves that goes beyond the character they choose to play as within the game itself.

Once players have crafted their communication persona, the next choice facing most players is their in-game embodiment that they will occupy for the match: that is to say, they need to pick a character to play as. Playable characters in the game, known as “heroes,” can be selected at any time before or during a match, and *Overwatch* currently features an expanding roster of 29 heroes. Characters are broken down into three main classes: Tank, Damage, and Support. Tank heroes typically serve as the team’s metaphorical shield. Equipped with a large amount of health and attack-negating skills, these heroes keep the pain away from the more vulnerable Damage and Support heroes. Many of their skills are designed to protect friendly players while controlling the opposing team. One such tank, the German armored fighter Reinhardt, has an ability called “Barrier Field” which is a giant, curved shield that covers Reinhardt and surrounding teammates, allowing him to escort other players through the opposing team’s fire. Similarly, the Russian bodybuilder Zarya’s “Projected Barrier” attaches a bubble shield to a distant teammate, allowing them to endure attacks without damage while powering up her own weapons with the absorbed energy from enemy shots.

Although many Tank heroes are slow and bulky protectors who are often easy targets, their presence is formidable and fatal if underestimated. Tanks can deal wide-ranging attacks debilitating many characters on the opposing team. The South Korean pro-gamer D.Va’s “Self-Destruct” launches her mech suit forward into a glowing ball of death for any enemy players in wide radius, while D.Va herself is ejected safely to the back. Alternatively, Australian insurrectionist Roadhog’s “Whole Hog” fires a barrage of shrapnel in a wide cone, allowing him to deal significant damage to a large group and push them back (often off of edges and cliffs to their demise). From patient protectors to hasty aggressors, tank gameplay thus allows players to adopt and express many different personalities through their gameplay. These personalities are added on to the communicative personas adopted in voice communication software, and this range of performed personalities can be found in each of the classes and nuanced even further through the specific styles of gameplay offered in the unique set of abilities offered by each character.

The traces of these gameplay-based expressions can be seen in the fan fiction produced by the *Overwatch* player community. Within the community, characters like D.Va and Soldier 76 are given names unique to the personalities embedded within their play styles. Soldier 76, for example,

is often called “Dad” not because of his age, but rather because of the personality conveyed through his gameplay abilities. In many fan produced comics, Soldier 76 is often depicted providing other characters with their lunch, and he can be seen reminding them that he has “his eye on them,” both of which reference his in-game ability to place a healing beacon on the map and his ultimate which automatically locks his aim on enemy players. Similarly, Pharah is presented as “gremlin” D.Va’s mother who looks out for her by providing an aerial barrage of Mountain Dew. The interaction is a reference to the dynamic shared between D.Va, a tank who is often in the direct line of fire, and Pharah, an airborne attacker whose ultimate ability sends a rain of missiles over her teammates and onto the opposing team. The comic replaces missiles with Mountain Dew as a reference to jokes about gamers’ diets with D.Va positioned as *Overwatch*’s gamer.

While many of these comics serve as a visual and textual index of the range of expression and identity possible through each of *Overwatch*’s characters and classes, they also have served as a means for players to explore the largely absent depictions of kinship and relationships within the game. On the reddit thread, “Overwatch Question: Can someone post a Family Tree?,” VintageKD writes, “Mercy is the mother because her play style basically feels like babysitting. The children run off and get into trouble and you have to save them.” Much like Soldier 76’s position as “Dad” within the fan universe, Mercy’s play style influences her kinship with other characters within the universe. In addition to being depicted as “Mom,” however, Mercy is also depicted as Pharah’s lover with whom she raises their disobedient child D.Va. This representation, called the “Pharmarcy,” has no connection to the game lore; instead, Pharmarcy emerged from Pharah’s gameplay. As the *Overwatch* wiki (2019) explains, “While Pharah can stay fairly safe up in the air, she should not be without support. A common pair for Pharah is Mercy, who can boost her damage and heal her while staying with her in the air.” The sexual pairing of Pharah and Mercy is a response to and expression of this game performance, practicing what Darshana Jayemanne (2018) describes as “the way videogame performances generates bodies and renders them prone to volatility, transformation and seriality” (21). *Overwatch*’s fan community demonstrates that as players play, they actualize potential embodiments through the performative lexicon provided by the game. While fans have manifested these performative expressions in paratextual materials, the healslut community has explored their potential performance within *Overwatch* itself.

**“To suck their cocks, and to fill bars, all of it is one thing”:**

## **The /HealSluts community**

With these topics in mind, the healslut community's function within the world of *Overwatch* comes into view. In exploring how *Overwatch*'s central mechanics, rather than being thoroughly quarantined from sexuality, in fact take on and represent new eroticized meanings among players, it is crucial to take into account the digital spaces in which these meanings are defined, discussed, and ultimately deployed within the game's field of play. Foremost among these spaces is r/HealSluts, a dedicated place of discussion (or "subreddit") within the online message board/aggregator website Reddit. As a discourse community, the r/HealSluts subreddit currently (as of February 2019) has a base of roughly 29,000 subscribers. As taken from the subreddit's "community details" section, it is a self-described "community filled with eager healers willing to do what they can for their team, \*especially their dominant counterparts.\* \*\*Join us as we pervert the act of healing for fun!\*\*" ("Healsluts: Perverting the act of healing for fun"). Far from a peripheral focus, the idea of "perverting" healing—of taking a seemingly benign gameplay act and giving it a sexual undertone—is sealed into the community's header and sidebar description accompanying every view of the website.

Healslutting is decidedly not unique to *Overwatch*, as the community's wiki and various threads list a variety of games and situations where this action already takes place or *could* take place in; consider the thread "Some less known games with slut potential," where opening poster u/ToasterTroll (2018) lists series such as *Fallout*, *Fire Emblem*, and the *Payday* games as featuring mechanics with "slut potential for both healers and slutting in general." A short collection of posts follow, with u/deathride58 (2018) in particular going into detail about everything from turning the force-feedback from music game *Audiosurf* into the commands for a vibrator to refusing to use certain healing commands in the first-person shooter *Killing Floor 2* to provide a sub/dom relationship between teammates. u/deathride58's final line serves as a sort of ethos for the entire community: "Any game can become a slut game if you or your dom(s) try hard enough." Luke Winkie's *Kotaku* article on the community (2016) similarly emphasizes this point, as "the beauty of healsluts is you can make anything—literally anything—part of the kink." All gameplay mechanics serve as a potential outlet for perverse play, offering users the opportunity to engage in "slut" behavior regardless of intent or design from the game's creators.

Linking to other player-driven activities which can twist or even openly disregard the apparent intent of a mechanic or structure, the community's own wiki page titled "Why is this a thing?" describes healslutting as a sort of mod to reinject interest and pleasure into play. According to wiki writer u/LeviathansLust (2019), "[m]ost enjoy a game at it's [sic] default, but others tend to try to

enjoy their experience more and keep it from dulling out via mods. It'll give it a new taste and you'll be satisfied with the game for that much longer." If BDSM practice itself is a type of "mod" to sexual practice between physical bodies, healslutting transfers that process of rethinking existing mechanics to reinvigorate the experience into the digital realm. Kent Aardse (2014) suggests that video games welcome this process due to their nature as digital objects, with players "always reminded that the site is fiction because of the uncanny valley. Bounded by the contract and rules set in place, masochists feel entirely safe engaging in S&M acts in a sanctioned game space, just as videogame players find a safe environment contained in the screen." Such a recognition seems, to u/LeviathansLust, largely inevitable, as "when you take someone who enjoys video games and sexual stuff, you'll fancy the idea of combining them in some way." Yet while, as Aardse claims, there is a potential physical distance between the game and the player's body, healslutting begins to collapse that distance, particularly with players encouraged to act upon their bodies during play in accordance with what happens in-game. There is no neat distinction between what one does inside and outside the game. What I do with my body in both locations feeds into an overall attitude and identity which is performed according to a variety of norms and expectations.

It is precisely this fuzzy boundary between game and not-game, between "real" and "unreal," that seems to attract a number of users to healslutting. A striking number of threads on the board are created by individuals claiming that discovering healslutting provided insight into their sexual identity outside the game as well, or that what they typically believed was "outside" of video games could be integrated in surprising ways. One such example comes from user u/its\_onyx (2019), detailing in a thread titled "I Met My LDR Daddy" how their first physical BDSM relationship emerged from participating in the r/HealSluts community Discord (a voice and text chat app popular among players). The relationship began initially as exploring dom/sub play within games, then shifted to voice chat, then finally into meeting in person at a hotel; as described by u/its\_onyx, this process was "my first ever time being in an in person relationship and in the sub role. There was [sic] many firsts and even then it felt so natural to be in my role." Healslutting provides an initial contact point to what eventually becomes "natural," or solidifies a preference into an overall identity, as with user u/NotaRelNam (2019) in his thread "I didn't even know there was a name for this until a few days ago." In recounting the process of being dominated by a woman in his *World of Warcraft* guild, u/NotaRelNam processes the experience via a series of anecdotes before coming to a statement of self-definition: "And sorry if its hard to follow, I was just trying to get it all down while I still felt telling this to somebody, I've never told anybody about it. I don't really know how common a big sized guy being a Heal Slut is, but I am one." What was previously a sort of

generalized desire is given “a name,” a means through which a larger sexual identity can be confessed—and through that, a set of behavior to follow. Healslutting, in this sense, suggests something akin to what Susanna Paasonen (2018) argues are sexual “spaces of openness and opportunity that unfold in relation to and through an array of norms, scripts and rules,” which end up as “pivotal to the titillating, even engulfing force that sex and sexuality hold in individual fantasies, cultural representations and social arrangements” (547).

How this unfolds, in many ways, becomes a central point of discussion in the HealSluts community, as while the overall name of “healslutting” provides a wide sexual space and point of contact, defining what exactly it *is*—or the specific game mechanics it should prioritize—is an ongoing topic of debate. A whole page of the r/HealSlut wiki (“What are the roles?”) is devoted to role definition, breaking down the distinction, say, between a HealSlut (“a healer who is usually masochistic and enjoys being verbally abused”) and a TankSlut (“they want to hurt and bleed for their partner”). HealDoms can “control whether their partner lives or dies” through the active denial of using their in-game healing abilities, while a DPSDom (short for “damage per second”) habitually flaunts how good they are at killing opponents while reminding their submissive HealSlut “just how useless they are” in winning the game. Posters on r/HealSluts often tag their preferred gameplay role after their screenname, immediately letting users know what category to associate them with. This also structures posting style as well; HealSlut-tagged users often post in deferential, “cute” language until a Dom arrives in-thread to berate them, while “Switch” users aptly enough flow between discourse roles as they see fit. While users are repeatedly reminded to flow and adapt between identities to see what they enjoy most, a strong connection between in-game practice and forum identity forms over time; how I play is how I post is how I identify.

Thus, new users wanting to join in often ask about in-game practice: how *does* one healslut properly, so to speak? A thread titled “Hey, new here; need to learn before I play” immediately jumps into the minutiae of HealSlut mechanics, with user u/BecauseOtters28 (2019) asking the forum, “I’m seeing some things that make healsluts look like a catch-all for playing any dynamic in-game. But I’ll also see other things that seem to assert that it is a very specific master/slave dynamic with degradation and humiliation. So, which is it? Or is it just contextualizing gameplay in any way as kinky play?” From there, an extensive discussion emerges between u/BecauseOtters28 and u/RPDit, with u/RPDit (2019) attempting to define a specific version of healslutting in contrast to “the not-yet-named ‘battle slutting’ type of activity,” which they view as any form of gameplay that is given a sexual undertone. For u/RPDit, healslutting “can be pretty much anywhere on the

[dominant/submissive] matrix... as long as it's sexualized and (in my strongly-held opinion) you're playing a healer," yet admits "we do seem to still be in the phase of trying to agree on where exactly the borders you're asking about are." As their discussion suggests, a role meant to pervert and distort the lines of ordinary gameplay still requires, to some extent, community consensus on what it means and what actions are required within it. Yet the only way to know is to play, a conclusion that u/BecauseOtters28 reaches with a game-related pun: "There's obviously a disconnect happening somewhere, and the only way to fix that is to grind. :p"

Here attention switches (so to speak) to *Overwatch* itself, given its role as the game most posted on and discussed within the r/HealSluts community. In an advice thread for a new player mostly used to *League of Legends*, community moderator u/LeviathansLust (2019) notes that "*Overwatch* is the best to ease into when it comes to this fetish" ("Any example audio that anyone could share?"), and the vast majority of upvoted posts within the community feature visual depictions of *Overwatch* characters involved in sexual acts. The game both serves as easily explainable entryway into the HealSlut structure of play and also offers a set of characters and mechanics considered desirable to inhabit. In particular, the primary healer character Mercy—a blonde female with mechanical angel wings typically clad in white and carrying a staff—serves as community icon and central fetishized object. While other characters, such as the mechanized tank robot D.Va or the older sharpshooter Ana, have various discussions and debates surrounding their use in dom/sub *Overwatch* dynamics, we will predominantly focus on Mercy and the discourse surrounding her use as a way of exploring how the player community has developed rules and expectations for perverse play, as well as the expectations for community discourse.

The first set of mechanics to be perverted directly relate to discourse—specifically, how to let others know you may desire to play in a HealSlut relationship to them without prior establishment of that bond. The question of whether or not other players know or recognize a given individual is healslutting (or any form of eroticized play) is a central one across the r/HealSluts community, given that the act can be undertaken solo or linked to someone else. The wiki directly teases this idea, using hypothetical outraged players as a sort of mocking point of debate: "If you're witnessing any BDSM or HealSlutting happening in public with more than a few... 'Vivid' examples, report them. If it bothers you too much, leave the game" ("Why is this a thing?") Within *Overwatch*, there is the direct—and most dangerous option—of announcing one's intentions via public voice chat, one that runs the active risk of violating Blizzard's terms of service and being banned from play. In lieu of this, the community has created a sort of coded set to announce via gameplay mechanics that

you wish to engage in sex play. Through a mix of pre-designed animations known as “emotes,” icons known as “sprays” that can be placed on the gameplay environment, and voice lines, players can “announce” their intentions to other players aware of the code. As Mercy, for example, the community has defined HealSlut “behavior” as spraying the “Arrow” icon on a wall, using the “Relax” emote (basically resting on the ground, legs tucked under) directly underneath it, and repeatedly calling out the voice line “I’ve got my eye on you.” In response, a dominant D. Va would activate their “Heartbreaker” emote and call out “I play to win.” This would potentially invite both players to take their chat off the public setting and engage in play of their own privately.

In essence, to be a HealSlut in a public *Overwatch* match leans on coded discourse that builds on the basic principles of roleplaying within *Overwatch* and feels decidedly similar to epistemological constructs in other sexual subcommunities. Wearing a particular outfit while going to the right bar on the right night shifts into the activation of gestures and gameplay features never “meant” to carry a sexual undertone. If you do not go into the match already partnered—that is, with someone who already knows your perversion—you are forced to rely upon a collection of underground knowledge that may or may not lead to a connection at all. This may lead to more frustration than success; one thread from the community titled “Does anyone else find it difficult to meet other doms/subs in OW?” finds user u/SissyPiggy (2019) bemoaning how rare it is to find that point of connection. Having followed the community protocol, they admit things haven’t been very successful, as “I’ve been trying the rest + spray combo every game for a few days now with a mild account name, although it’s obvious if you’re into the kink. I know it’s a very very small portion of the community into it, but it seems like no one knows what tf I’m doing.” Poster u/majoragor (2019) commiserates, echoing a further danger of coded discourse: “only problem is once someone replies with an emote you can’t really know if that person understand what happened s/he may think s/he’s just emoting which makes things difficult.” Intent may not equal reception and trying to stay below the surface to avoid not being able to play at all means a strong likelihood of missing out. It is not coincidental most of the community’s connections are made outside of game via subreddit threads, within Discord, or as extensions of existing relationships brought into the game itself.

This question of intent, pleasure, and awareness of not explicitly violating Blizzard’s terms of service in the pursuit of sexualized play takes on an even more fascinating dynamic in the growing community discourse surrounding the use of teledildonics. In one thread titled “Theoretically automating the healslut experience” discussing how to directly turn gameplay experience into data to control the vibration function of a dildo, user u/Spice002 (2019) asks if it is possible to link

directly to the game's affect on run-time memory, as "I was thinking of a vibrator that slowly increases strength as you heal someone up, but from what I heard Bliz is very anal about poking around the game (even if you're just reading it for non-nefarious reasons)." Here, u/Spice002 clearly means "nefarious" in the sense of cheating: gaining an unfair advantage in the match itself. Using the data for a vibrator might be naughty, illicit, perverse, but not nefarious; however, running the risk of incurring Blizzard's wrath makes the prospect a fraught one. User u/graveknight1 (2019) confirms the suspicion, claiming "They are extremely anal about it. I don't ever want to make someone at risk of being banned, so I have not tired [sp] to interact with the OW program at all." As with knowing when and how to emote, knowing exactly how far to push interacting with *Overwatch* itself as a program reflects the HealSlut community's attempts to sustain its desired forms of play while remaining, for all intents and purposes, "legal" participants within the game's rules.

While knowing how far to push Blizzard's own rules on community engagement and software manipulation is one side of the discussion, there remains the question of proper play and adherence to role expectations among HealSluts themselves. Take, for example, a thread by poster u/LittleZera titled "Good Girl or Bad Girl? Offensive as Mercy" (2019). The poster begins with describing their first-ever "Play of the Game" as Mercy, suggesting the most crucial moment of gameplay in the match. However, rather than being a moment of crucially healing a teammate, u/LittleZera earned their honors by acting out of character: namely, by gunning down two enemies on the other team. On a gameplay level, this could only be seen as a net good; within the game's algorithms, the act is clearly valued as a positive one, one worth rewarding and given prominence after the match. Yet on a *community* level, the disruption of Mercy's role as a submissive HealSlut—one whose sole role is to support the heroic efforts of her attached tank or DPS partner—renders the action far more problematic. The tension between gameplay use and erotic roleplay is so much that u/LittleZera asks the subreddit to weigh on the "right" course of action here: "Does this mean I am a Good Girl for achieving it and protecting my team in another way. Or does it mean I've been a Bad Girl because I should've healed my team instead? Feeling a little bit conflicted about it." Note that u/LittleZera does not mention a specific person enforcing these rules on the other team; these expectations are decidedly internalized, governing their perception of play to the point they share the moment of play with others to ensure their feelings are correct.

According to the top up-voted response to their query, the answer is Bad Girl, due to "taking the spotlight from your team. You should've been damage boosting your teammates into the potg."



Being “successful” is, within the values of the community, an *undesirable* outcome, one meant for others to achieve at the submissive “expense” of the HealSlut player. A few posts later, user u/bubbly-blondie (self-tagged as a HealSlut) goes so far as to suggest that a way to avoid this behavior is to literally deactivate access to the mechanic *itself*, claiming “i felt much better after i got rid of the controls for shooting and hitting! it makes me feel much subbier and makes me have to heal all the time, and i know my dom will protect me <3” (2019). The assigning of key actions, decidedly one without any specific erotic purpose originally by Blizzard, suddenly offers a way to provide disempowered roleplay; by forcing the player to only repeatedly execute one given command, this control scheme now enables a style of playing as Mercy that matches the community expectations of a “good girl.” If the player cannot be trusted to (role)play properly, the game itself can be reconfigured to match the desired sexual resonance.

Returning to the fuzzy boundary of inside and outside the game, the denial of certain actions within *Overwatch* is meant to inspire certain actions done physically to (or with) the body of the healslut player. In response to a thread asking “What’s the best way to play Mercy in *Overwatch*?” user u/codemonkeyjay (2019) offers a glib response that garnered 72 upvotes, an extremely high number for the community: “Equip staff, hold R2. Occasionally push Your Ult button. Find a dick, put it in your mouth, suck. Repeat until the match is completed.” The process is mechanical, endless, always directed outward; since Mercy is only acting upon others to serve them on a gameplay level, the player controlling her should emulate that behavior in person. The obvious gendered powered dynamic here of “finding a dick” as opposed to any other genitals to service is one echoed in a large quantity of r/HealSluts discourse; while a number of community posts fetishize the idea of lesbian character pairings, the idea of what the player desires *outside* of the game structure habitually returns to a penis being the object of interest. Whether one attached to a person or a surrogate version like a dildo, players of any gender configuration are encouraged to suck, stroke, or insert in tandem with their in-game performance.

The process of tethering in-game play to self-pleasure has formed a variety of what the community dubs “HealSlut games”; as u/LeviathansLust describes in the “official” thread for archiving and linking the games, these are “sexual mini-games that are played while you play video games. Much like challenges, these games include rules, consequences, and in some cases restrictions” (“HealSlut Games MEGATHREAD,” 2019). In this sense, *Overwatch* becomes a template upon which sexual play can be overlaid and enacted, with the in-game mechanics serving as a general impetus for the larger meta-game bringing about different erotic rules and rewards. It also provides a “single-

player” option for what is both a multiplayer game and (in a dom-sub relationship) often a multi-person configuration, with HealSlut games allowing “HealSluts to enjoy themselves even when they’re alone or too shy to include actual doms.” They additionally provide a sort of interior barrier for exploration, opening a space of play to “closet healsluts who don’t want to include anyone in their fetish but still want to enjoy themselves.” Again, even when perverting the rules of the existing game, the r/HealSluts community provides a structure for that perversion, accounting for different motives, needs, and wants while ensuring that the experience follows particular standards of play. By further exploring HealSlut games, we continue to find what Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux (2018) see in metagames more broadly: “the alternate histories of play that always exist outside the dates, dollars, and demographic data that so often define videogames in industry magazines and encyclopedia entries” (9).

In constructing a HealSlut game, the designer typically creates a visual template which establishes a set of required objects, a timeframe, and a character. Mercy, as the primary interest of the community, has the most unique iterations devoted to her. One such example is the “Healslut Game – Oral Edition” (Image 1), designed to specifically tie in-game actions to emulating oral sex. Requiring a dildo (“preferably one as realistic as possible so you can become properly immersed in your position”) and a place to set it, the meta-game begins with selecting Mercy and immediately preparing one’s body for play: “build up some saliva in your mouth, you’ll need it!” Once the round begins, the majority of in-game results link directly to an act done to or with the dildo, ranging from “slap[ping] yourself with the cock” if killed by an enemy Mercy to being unable to activate Mercy’s ultimate move unless “currently slurping on that cock.” This even extends to in-game correspondence, as being thanked by a fellow player results in kissing the dildo. The quality of one’s overall performance determines whether or not the player is allowed to orgasm after the game, with only a 10-vote result earning the chance to climax—“but be sure to clean the cock with your mouth after it gets dirty in your juices.”



Image 1. A r/HealSluts “HealSlut game,” by user u/Kelhsy.

The design of the meta-game, both visually and mechanically, is meant to shift the non-sexualized process and results of *Overwatch* play into a decidedly erotic, well, outcome. Even the tone of language shifts when moving from gamespace to player body, as a rather dry description of game state—“if you lose the round”—provides the grounds for a much more elaborate result: “take that cock as deep as you can in your throat.” The very nature of the meta-game seems to taunt the expectation that *Overwatch* is not “meant” to be played this way or is potentially a violation of the terms of service. Consider the “difficulty” settings of the meta-game, with each iterative process a more explicit breaking of the wall between game, player, and body. “Medium” requires the player to voice their performance to their teammates, broadcasting “all [their] pathetic gagging noises,” while “Hard”—in a rather deliberate pun—suggests the player exchange the dildo for something else, as “the game is greatly improved by having a real throbbing cock to slurp on!” Each iteration flaunts the idea of *Overwatch* as non-sexualized, pushing the player’s out-of-game actions ever closer to the space of virtual play, and there is a striking ambiguity in antecedent in declaring “the game is greatly improved” with a “real throbbing cock.” Does this mean the meta-game, or perhaps *Overwatch* itself?

For user u/meowmew, there is no division between the meta-game and the game itself. In a striking thread titled “My guide to healslutting” (2018), u/meowmew directly addresses the hypothetical player in one of the more explicit rebukes of the magic circle doctrine available:

This is why you are here, slut. Fill their bars. See all those teammates who have their healthbars half-empty? Take your staff, direct the stream of healing into your teammate, and pump their health up to full. Hear that sound? Fwwwwooooossh. Clink. Fwoooooosh. Clink. Fwoooooosh. Even by itself, isn't it just so satisfying? It's so easy to do, literally effortless.

I know, right? Fantastic. And you know you've always felt this way. You just may have never realized it. That's why you've always loved played Mercy, you little whore. You love having your mouth stuffed with their cocks. Pleasuring them. Non-stop. Over and over. The more you do it the better it feels. To suck their cocks, and to fill bars, all of it is one thing.

There is no outside, no imaginary space between game act and physical want; "all of it is one thing," an erotic process built into *Overwatch* from the visual feedback of the UI changing to the sound effects indicating a completed heal. The bars themselves become phallic, "pumped" back to full by the efforts of the player only to fade in size over time and require attention again. This response does not require a backstory provided by Blizzard establishing the sexual preferences of a given character or a visual design that emphasizes particular physical attributes; it is the mechanic itself, the requirement to "fill bars," that opens up the possibility and expectation of perverse play. In this sense, there is no way to "de-sexualize" *Overwatch* outside of utterly eliminating the very structures that make the game what it is. Healslutting is not so much a response to a character model or a narrative hook—though those can certainly amplify the response—so much as it is a way of exposing and expressing the latent erotic potential in the power dynamics between players of all games. To return to /u/deathride58, "Any game can become a slut game if you or your dom(s) try hard enough."

## **Conclusions: Uniting mechanics and erotics**

In "Play and Be Real About It: What Video Games Could Learn from Kink" (2017), game designer and critic Mattie Brice claims that "[i]f we understand play as the exercising of empathy through engaging contexts, and kink as a type of play design that deeply confronts life contexts, then kink practices stand as a stronger model for engaging people with meaningful play than the overly instrumentalized and decontextualized approach to games propagated by contemporary gaming design" (79). The intersection of the erotic and the ludic is not something that corrupts or renders

games threatening or dangerous; for Brice, learning from sex play means new kinds of gameplay that are more *human*, more honest, more open to the context of everyday life. In a striking comparison to regular sexual practice and the act of playing a video game, Brice notes that “we hop into a dark space with each other and keep our fingers crossed that the other person knows what they’re doing” (80). While this might not mean the literal depiction of sex in-game, the question of when “the game” ends and when “real life” begins—and how these are meant to be kept at an active distance—is precisely what helps to create this contextless “dark space” that actually serves to diminish communication and understanding.

The active re-integration of kink practice by healslutting into *Overwatch* suggests that, for a not-insubstantial number of gamers, this attempt to divide the erotic and the ludic does not lead to inclusiveness as Kaplan suggests. Instead, it pushes the process into the periphery, into the re-reading and reconstruction of play among a metagaming community. The argument that sex in *Overwatch* only “exists” at the edges of its universe in the game’s short stories, in fan fiction, or in actions like healslutting creates a surreal divide that echoes the lived existence of many people in everyday life: like Ana-qua-Bastet and Soldier 76, your identity doesn’t matter *here*. The apparent safety for all of the magic circle becomes what Boluk and Lemieux call “the desire for an ahistorical, escapist gamespace” that voids out questions of ideology, embodiment and inquiry (21). The impulse to make play safe for “everyone” ends up, in many ways, reaffirming the primacy of only those identities and practices considered normative and acceptable. Similarly, it should not be “up” to those in underrepresented communities to create spaces for themselves to be seen and acknowledged. This simply shifts the requirement for labor back on those already unseen, while the existing model of storytelling and mechanical construction stays largely unchanged by the most popular and widespread producers.

This reinscription of normative identities and attitudes can be seen in the wealth of research on toxic gaming culture examining the links between how gender and sexuality are performed and engaged within and outside of the game space. Despite developers’ claims to creating an egalitarian gamespace through greater representation in a character roster or paratextual fiction, research on player imaginaries and stereotypes from Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018), Consalvo (2012), Taylor (2012), and Paul (2018) demonstrate that player performances within these gamespaces are both informed by and re-enact many of the problematic narratives surrounding gender and sexuality beyond the game space. In this way, then, we might read healslutting as an act of rebelling, not just against developers, but also against the normative performances and narratives that the player

community weaves into the dominant “lexicon of play” in a game like *Overwatch*. The healslut community brings to light the ways in which games have always been queer and non-normative despite how broader communities (and even developers) attempt to cast both their spaces and play.

This is not to say that Blizzard should integrate healslutting into gameplay proper, or turn things like erotic play into monetized emotes and thus simply transform a subversive act of play into a new line of profit. But there is a space somewhere between, an acknowledgement of the existence of sex and sexuality in the digital realm, that provides opportunity while refusing tokenism. In *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, Adrienne Shaw argues that “diversity is not the result of demand by audiences but the social responsibility of media producers” (225). It is not because players “want” diversity, but because it *should and can* be done to begin with; only through this active process can the “assumed normative categories of male, white, and heterosexual” be removed from their status as “default” (225). Making only a token gesture to Soldier 76’s gay past in a text deliberately left at the game’s periphery does not provide the “diverse” space that Kaplan claims.

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