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Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: What the Recent Lawsuit against Activision Blizzard Tells Us about the State of the Industry

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The digital-gaming industry is a place notorious for two problems: crunches and ever-present sexism. In this context, it seems that 2021 has not been kind to Activision Blizzard, or at least to its top representatives, although Activision Blizzard is not the only name shaken by accusations of macho culture, a toxic environment, or sex-based discrimination. But why is it so important? Firstly, this case includes every infamous trope that we know. It is a display window into misogyny in the digital-gaming industry containing dangerous and tragic behaviour extending to the highest places. Let's take a look at the events leading up to this moment in a simplified factual timeline:

- **2019-2021:** Two years of investigation by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) that ends in a 7 pages long complaint against Activision Blizzard. An investigation was initiated into allegations of allowing and encouraging sexual misconduct towards female employees, allegation of frat boy culture and sex-based discrimination.¹

¹ For more information, see: WIPPER, J. L. et al.: *Department of Fair Employment and Housing v. Activision Blizzard Inc.* Los Angeles, CA : Superior Court of California, 2021. [online]. [2021-12-08]. Available at: <<https://aboutblaw.com/YJw>>.

- *July 20, 2021:* The State of California files a lawsuit against Activision Blizzard. The next day, Blizzard publishes a statement in which it denies the allegations and calls the report distorted and, in many cases, false. Blizzard also claims that the report does not represent the present-day workplace.² This statement is criticized to the point that over 2000 Blizzard employees sign an open letter condemning it. They ask for immediate corrections that would hold abusers accountable and create a safe environment.³ The letter is sent on *July 26*.
- *July 22, 2021:* Blizzard President J. Allen Brack sends an email to staff in which he addresses the lawsuit. Shortly after, more apologies come from former or current Blizzard representatives and executives. The staff also receives an email from Chief Compliance Officer Fran Townsend, which is less apologetic. According to Townsend, the lawsuit presents „a distorted and untrue picture of our company”.⁴
- IGN sources claim that it was Townsend's response that sparked the initiative to organize a walkout that happened on *July 27 and 28, 2021*. Employees get support from the videogame industry (from Ubisoft, per se) and they present a list of demands.⁵
- *August 2021:* Blizzard President J. Allen Brack steps down and is replaced by both Jen Oneal and Mike Ybarra. Amid this, some senior developers depart from the firm without official reasons – other high-profile departures follow. HR is accused of shredding documents.⁶
- *September 2021:* Blizzard settles another lawsuit, filed by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for 18 million dollars; this is later objected to by the DFEH, for it could seal evidence and cause harm to their lawsuit against the company.⁷
- *October 2021:* BlizzOnline is cancelled. Some of the departed colleagues around Chris Kaileki form a new company, Notorious Studios. The new company is safe from sexual harassment allegations, as no women are hired. The only female staffer is a dog named Ellie.⁸
- *November 2, 2021:* Jen Oneal steps down from the position of co-president – three months after taking the position. Revelations by the Wall Street Journal say that just one month into the job, Oneal wrote to Blizzard's legal team that she had been sexually harassed while at the company and that she was being paid less than Ybarra, while holding the same position. “I have been tokenized, marginalized, and discriminated

2 CARPENTER, N.: *Activision Blizzard sued by California over widespread sexism, sexual harassment*. Released on 22nd July 2021. [online]. [2021-12-08]. Available at: <<https://polygon.com/22588407/activision-blizzard-sexual-harassment-sexism-california-lawsuit>>.

3 GACH, E.: *Over 1,000 Activision Blizzard Employees Sign Letter Condemning Company's Response To Allegations [Update: Now Over 2,000]*. Released on 26th July 2021. [online]. [2021-12-08]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/over-1-000-activision-blizzard-employees-sign-letter-co-1847364340>>.

4 SCHREIER, J.: *Activision Blizzard executive Fran Townsend, who was the Homeland Security Advisor to George W. Bush from 2004-2007 and joined Activision in March, sent out a very different kind of email that has some Blizzard employees fuming*. Released on 23rd July 2021. [online]. [2021-12-08]. Available at: <<https://twitter.com/jasonschreier/status/1418619091515068421/photo/1>>.

5 BAYLEY, K.: *Fury, Worry, and Walkouts: Inside Activision Blizzard's Week of Reckoning*. Released on 30th July 2021. [online]. [2021-12-08]. Available at: <<https://www.ign.com/articles/inside-activision-blizzards-week-of-reckoning>>.

6 BANKHURST, A., SKREBELS, J.: *Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Timeline: The Story So Far*. Released on 1st December 2021. [online]. [2021-12-08]. Available at: <<https://www.ign.com/articles/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-timeline-the-story-so-far>>.

7 LIAO, S.: *Activision Blizzard asks to pause harassment lawsuit, citing dispute between two government agencies*. Released on 20th October 2021. [online]. [2021-12-08]. Available at: <<https://washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/10/20/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-dfeh-eeoc-feud/>>.

8 JIANG, S.: *Former World of Warcraft Devs Start Studio Where Only Female Staffer Is A Dog*. Released on 27th October 2021. [online]. [2021-12-08]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/former-world-of-warcraft-devs-start-studio-where-only-f-1847945629>>.

against”,⁹ says Oneal. It is not a good look for the company, and two months later, she steps down from the position. Her message is rather positive; “I am doing this not because I am without hope for Blizzard, quite the opposite”.¹⁰

- *November 16, 2021*: A report by the Wall Street Journal says that Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick not only knew about harassment and rape within the company for years and did not inform its board of directors; but also his own past behaviours and actions are being questioned; it seems like the so-called frat boy culture extends to the highest places.¹¹
- *November 18th*: Over 1000 Activision Blizzard employees from various studios react with a petition for the removal of Bobby Kotick. Another walkout is held. “Bobby Kotick has proved that he does not care about his employees, and that he is not fit to be the CEO of Activision Blizzard. This petition will not guarantee his removal, but it will show him that we are not okay with him blatantly ignoring the cries of his employees”.¹²
- *December 2021*: Kotick has not stepped down and his resignation is demanded not only by a segment of employees, but by a group of Activision Blizzard shareholders as well. Jessica Gonzales, organizer of the walkouts, is resigning from the company: “It’s been a long and exhausting road for change, but it isn’t over”.¹³

But so far, it doesn’t seem like it will continue to a just end. There are voices calling for a watershed, claiming that the tide is turning; but until today, this story has not reached a satisfying conclusion. Seven years after *Gamergate*, this story is sad rather than cathartic; voices are heard, but perpetrators, accomplices and enablers are not held accountable. It is a story of manifesting rape culture (how else to see jokes about ‘Cosby Suit’), stories about tokenization (Oneal is an Asian-American lesbian), about exploitation and abuse. Whatever appalling concept or trope imaginable, it is there, somewhere within the report by the DFEH or during later events.

Could Blizzard’s unfolding crisis be a purgative moment, another reality check that the industry so desperately needs? Or as Renee Gittens, executive director of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) puts it: is it just a tip of the iceberg, or “another example of a chronic problem that we (as a videogame industry) face”?¹⁴

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*In Memory of
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