



Modes of Esports Engagement in Overwatch

Maria Ruotsalainen · Maria Törhönen
Veli-Matti Karhulahti

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PREFACE

In 2018, the Academy of Finland made a historical decision by funding the Centre of Excellence of Game Culture Studies: an 8-year long enterprise for charting the evolving practices of play in society. In addition to producing quality research, the centers of excellence pursue to carve out new avenues for study and train new talented researchers. The idea of this book was to contribute to all the above three domains: provide a constructive and supportive publication platform for especially younger scholars (but not excluding senior scholars) and to develop quality scholarship in the rapidly progressing area of esports research. *Overwatch*, which became a new focus for numerous debates in the esports field soon after it was released in 2016, was chosen as the book's theme due to its controversial role as the game that tried to “carve out new avenues” in many regards, from character design and marketing to tournament organization and monetization—with varying success, as the upcoming chapters illustrate.

Following the above, this book is mainly an outcome of the work by the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies. By choice, we did not post an open call for chapters: an open call would have enabled us to compile a more global and wide-ranging collection of contributions, but it would also have made it impossible for some of the less conventional chapters to make the cut. To balance out biases, we invited several scholars from outside our project to contribute, three of which made it to the final publication. Regrettably, we were unable to obtain a chapter about the Asian *Overwatch* scene, which must be noted as a limitation.

As editors, we followed the development strategy of *Overwatch* by pursuing a book that is not explicitly about esports but has “something for

everyone,” both methodologically and content-wise. We allowed the authors of each chapter to choose their arguments and points of view—the editorial process mainly ensured quality and thematic coherence. Some promising chapters could not reach the final stages of revision by the time limits set by the publication process; we hope to see those chapters finalized and published in other venues soon. All the included ten chapters (as well as the excluded ones) were externally reviewed by at least three experts. We are truly thankful for the work of these 40 reviewers who generously shared their time during the difficulties of the pandemic and helped us make this book the best possible.

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Introduction

*Maria Ruotsalainen, Maria Törhönen,
and Veli-Matti Karhulahti*

A decade ago, it was still somewhat conventional to start a study by writing how “esports is a novel phenomenon.” As we write this introduction in 2021, that is no longer true. Today, more than a thousand studies have been published on esports, including several books and special issues. Moreover, the work is no longer conducted purely in the “game studies” related fields, but across numerous domains from medical and health sciences to economics and sports. *Esports is no longer a novel phenomenon, not even for researchers.* As both the industry and academia of esports

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progress—with hundreds of digital (and some analog) game titles being played as “esports”—it is more and more difficult to address “esports” in general. As the need for more specific case studies keeps increasing, this book on *Overwatch* responds to that need.

The global esports scene is currently dominated by roughly two dozen major game titles, ranging from long-standing series, such as *Counter Strike* and *StarCraft*, to some recently skyrocketed newcomers like *Fortnite*. In this group, *Overwatch*—first released in 2016—belongs to the middle tier in terms of popularity; however, with an eventful (even if short) history, which includes numerous significant cases specific to its cycle of development. The goal of this book was to set up a platform for discussing these *Overwatch* specific cases, but without ignoring the elements that link to and overlap with other esports. As such, the upcoming chapters paint a carefully and deliberately framed picture of esports through the limited scope of *Overwatch*, which, as the upcoming chapters demonstrate, can and should be perceived through many non-esports perspectives as well. Regardless of the chosen perspective, what remains of primary interest are *Overwatch*'s numerous *modes of engagement* that the game provides for its diverse audience.

For a long time, it has been acknowledged that participating in esports is not only about *playing esports* but includes several experiential dimensions that attract and retain large audiences with differing interests (e.g., Seo 2013). Arguably, one of the key strategies behind *Overwatch*—both explicit and implicit by the developer Blizzard Entertainment—was and still is to satisfy an exceptionally large range of interests that their potential players (and non-players) might have. Against competing titles like *League of Legends* that were typically promoted as esports for “hardcore” players, *Overwatch* was released expressly for players of all kinds and levels. The plurality was further expanded by an excessive focus on the so-called lore that had virtually nothing to do with the competitive design, but rather provided the audience an avenue to engage through more conventional hermeneutic means via comics, short films, and written narratives. As this book illustrates, managing such a diverse audience turned out to be a titanic task; and as some would argue, a mission impossible due to which the game's rapid rise into one of the world's most popular esports was soon followed by a downfall, from which the game has not recovered yet. Nevertheless, this is exactly what makes *Overwatch* an interesting object of research and a chapter in esports history, deserving to be documented in book-size depth.

MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

Despite Blizzard Entertainment's strongly voiced strategy to approach *Overwatch* as their flagship esports (Scholz 2019), this never meant exclusive focus on competition. From the start, the game was produced and marketed officially to have "something for everyone" (Kaplan 2016), and in addition to its own diversity by design, the actual modes of fan and player engagement quickly exceeded the developer's original plans (Part III of this book). When *Overwatch*, right after its release, was recognized as the "esports of the year" by several respective awards, competitive play (Part II of this book) was only one of the celebrated features. This enabled the game to gather a large international player base in an unseen time period—also briefly reaching the sought-after first place in the Korean most-played PC bang games list (Allegra 2016)—but it also resulted in continuous friction among the player base (Part I of this book).

When a player launches *Overwatch* for the very first time, they are greeted with a short cinematic in which Winston, a genetically engineered gorilla (and one of the playable characters), struggles to write a message to the former agents of "Overwatch," which in the game's fictional universe is an international task force to combat self-reproducing sentient robots, "omnics," that have attacked humankind. While writing the message, Winston recalls the past of *Overwatch*: successfully ending the war against the omnics and becoming the "greatest champions of the peace mankind has ever known," but then disbanded after and ultimately labeled as criminals. Winston is convinced that the task force is needed again, however, and by sending the message ("Are you with me?"), he calls *Overwatch* to return.

After the above, the narrative of *Overwatch* is left on the background and the player can choose from different player-versus-player game modes instead, plus occasional story-driven missions that are limitedly available. As play begins in the former and two six-player teams are set against each other, Winston's message has lost meaning. In fact, it is even possible to have two Winstons battling each other, which narratively makes no sense. That said, a player *can* learn more about Winston and his message, but this information must be sought from outside the competitive in-game matches.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Overwatch is a transmedia product, namely, the playable videogame artifact is only one of the many channels through which the developed content is mediated to the audience. The items that represent these media include animations, comics, video materials, and written short stories, among others (see also Jin and Yoon 2021). Hardly any narrative progress takes place in actual play, but the static storyworld is rather described through hero descriptions and voice lines, which reveal but do not advance the particles of the fictional universe. For instance, to learn about the game's cover character, Tracer, one must exit the videogame and enter the developer's online comic section where the story "Reflections" (Chu 2016) tells the player about Tracer's past.

In addition to providing several in-game and out-game means for players to engage with the product, *Overwatch* was designed with an explicit diversity philosophy (McKeand 2016). This meant, for instance, crafting a character ensemble with a carefully balanced representation of ethnicities and sexual orientations (Hayday and Collison 2020; Hawreliak and Lemieux 2020), and at the time of writing, the number of male and female characters is somewhat equal. The characters also come in different body shapes, ages, and disabilities (Cullen et al. 2018), thus deliberately breaking some of the conventional design stereotypes (e.g. Kirkpatrick 2016). Again, players engaging solely with competitive play modes will not be able to access all these details (e.g. Bohunicky and Youngblood 2019), as many of them must be unearthed from non-playable online materials.

At the same time, we recall the design of *Overwatch* to be essentially founded on competitive play, as represented by regionally distributed multi-tiered ranked systems and an international professional scene. Players who wish to engage with the game as a sport and develop themselves as players are invited to follow frequent meta changes and develop new team strategies—which may be ultimately rewarded in high-prize tournaments online and offline. To an extreme beyond any other esports, Blizzard Entertainment regulates their *Overwatch* esports detail-by-detail and leaves very little freedom for its professional collaborators (Scholz 2021).

Since 2018, the *Overwatch* esports scene has been dominated by the global Overwatch League consisting of 20 teams around the world, owned and operated by Blizzard. Despite having been designed and marketed as a "global" league, in 2021 almost all teams come from North America and

the system is modeled after their local sports leagues. As such, *Overwatch* played a key role in bringing franchised professional leagues to international esports, but not without costs, as the numerous financial and political crises (some of which are presented in the below chapters) illustrate.

TEN CHAPTERS

This book provides a multidisciplinary and multi-methodological approach to *Overwatch*. The 15 authors, while experienced in game research, come from various backgrounds ranging from the studies of communication and folklore to literature and psychology. Methodological variety follows naturally the above, yet mainly as diverse qualitative approaches (following the traditions of game culture studies) with one chapter also presenting a clear quantitative enterprise. As the chapters provide a far-reaching analysis of *Overwatch* and its modes of engagement, not all the findings necessarily cohere with each other—as it should be in scientific work. We did not start with a predefined rhetoric or theory, but rather let each author speak with his/her own authentic findings and voices across three thematically identifiable parts.

Part I “Playing *Overwatch*” concerns players and their different relationships with the game. Chapter 2 carries out a quantitative cluster analysis (Vahlo & Karhulahti) and suggests at least two *Overwatch* player types to emerge from the masses of esports players. In Chap. 3, the conflicts between *Overwatch* player types are further investigated qualitatively via discussion forum analysis (Blamey). Chapter 4 moves to look at the authorial power of Blizzard Entertainment as the controller of *Overwatch* players’ interpretative agency (Blom). The first part ends with a qualitative examination regarding the differences in *Overwatch* character reception (Chap. 5 by Välisalo and Ruotsalainen).

Part II “Competing in *Overwatch*” focuses on the competitive esports scene of *Overwatch*. This part starts with a discursive construction of nationality and ethnicity in the context of the *Overwatch* World Cup 2019 (Chap. 6 by Siitonen and Ruotsalainen). The themes of nationality continue in Chap. 7, which provides a unique case study of competitive Brazilian *Overwatch* by means of sentiment analysis with both local and global public reports (Caetano). Chapter 8 of this part looks at competitive *Overwatch* through the notion of “toxic meritocracy” by applying thematic analysis to the media coverage of the player Ellie (Friman and Ruotsalainen).

Part III “Playing with *Overwatch*” goes deeper into the modes of non-playing engagement. This final part begins with a review of the game’s fan contributions, which are analyzed against Blizzard Entertainment’s official responses to them (Chap. 9 by Wirman and Jones). The follow-up chapter (Chap. 10) moves to close-read popular *Overwatch* porn materials with an argument that misogynist tropes from both gaming and porn history together reinforce the game’s discourse that is unwelcoming for women (Apperley). The book ends with a content analysis of loot box reception in *Overwatch* based on online forum data, finding players to attach various motives and values to look box purchasing and use (Chap. 11 by Macey and Bujic).

We hope the book to represent the future of esports and gaming research in one specific regard: instead of (or in addition to) trying to address and capture large phenomena as holistic macro entities, it may be more useful to focus on one of its instances more closely, as in this case, *Overwatch* and its *modes of engagement*. Needless to say—and regardless of the narrower focus—the book has its limitations; for instance, not being able to fully address regional variety (especially the Asian scene) and lacking larger-scale quantitative inference. With these weaknesses acknowledged, we believe the ten chapters provide a foundation for understanding how a title like *Overwatch* operates both as an esports and as a more general entertainment product at the same time. We do not know what the future of *Overwatch* will be after 2021, but we look forward to seeing scholars both counter and corroborate the varied findings of this book along with the evolving development of esports research.

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PART I

Playing *Overwatch*



CHAPTER 2

Two Overwatch Player Profiles

Jukka Vahlo and Veli-Matti Karhulahti

INTRODUCTION

What are Overwatch players like? The goal of this chapter is to map out surface characteristics of those who play Overwatch in order to better understand the game and its players' roles in the larger context of esports play and players. To do this, we employ relatively large-scale esports survey data and carry out game-specific cluster analysis: the surveyed players are divided into groups, which are identified based on the players' gaming habits. Ultimately, our study will identify six esports player clusters, two of which include distinct Overwatch players. By comparing these two Overwatch player clusters with each other as well as with other esports player clusters, this chapter sets hypotheses that help interpreting the rest of this book's chapters and, we hope, also the accumulating and diversifying literature on esports players more widely.

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ESPORT PLAYERS AND OVERWATCH

Although the focus of this chapter is not so much on Overwatch as it is on its players, a few words about the game's identity are in order. First, it is important to acknowledge that Overwatch was released in 2016—a year before Fortnite but several years after now-canonical Counter-Strike, Dota 2, and League of Legends—which is important to keep in mind when assessing its players who have moved to play Overwatch from other similar titles, and *vice versa*. Second, we highlight the hybrid design of Overwatch as a game—with a clear competitive esports scene and at the same time also an evolving transmedia universe with a rich character pool and lore (Koskimaa et al. 2021)—which suggests that the profiles of Overwatch players might be more diverse than those of many other similar competitive games. In particular, the premise that the game's audience is strongly polarized between “casual” and “core” players (see Blamey in this volume) makes it an interesting case study.

Perhaps the most problematic convention in contemporary esports research is the equation of the phenomenon with “professional gaming” (instead of the more descriptive “competitive gaming”). As in any other game or sport, players can become professionals by various standards; however, most participating individuals typically engage with an amateur, casual, fan, or semi-serious attitude without ever even dreaming of professional careers. Accordingly, when we speak of esports and Overwatch players, we are not exclusively interested in professionals (see, e.g., Chung et al. 2019; Zhou and Zhou 2020; Rudolf et al. 2020).

Previous research on esports has identified several participatory tendencies. Whereas some players enjoy these games primarily as a social activity or media that allows them to see others play (e.g., Seo and Jung 2016; Siutila 2018; Taylor 2018), a significant number of people play with clear competitive goals (e.g., Martončík 2015; Nagorsky and Wiemeyer 2020; Karhulahti 2020). Games like Overwatch also support player experiences that involve narrative or worldbuilding elements, which complicates the potential modes of engagement still (e.g., Blom 2018; Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019; Gandolfi and Antonacci 2020).

The idea that players play multiple games with multiple styles—sometimes at the same time—has been a premise in games research for a long time. Over the past decades, researchers have developed various player typologies and behavior models that aim at understanding the increasing diversity of players and play styles (e.g., Kallio et al. 2011; Park et al.

2011). Along with the ever-growing number of new videogames and players, such genre- or videogame-specific models often struggle to remain relevant, however (Cowley and Charles 2016). Accordingly, in this study we do not rely on any specific hypotheses or stereotypes regarding Overwatch players but rather start with a simple premise: many contemporary players of videogames play Overwatch, and it is possible that such Overwatch players differ from the rest in respect to their gaming habits, motivations, or other variables.

DATA AND METHOD

A survey was organized in 2019 to investigate videogame player preferences. The survey data ($N = 1506$, ages 18–75) was collected via a UK-based crowdsourcing platform Prolific that holds an online panel of approximately 70,000 users in multiple countries. Two samples from the UK ($n = 1089$) and the USA ($n = 417$) were collected simultaneously by using identical questionnaires. The surveys included questions about played videogames, genre preferences, gaming motivations, experiences, and gameplay, as well as challenge preferences. In addition to this, the surveys included background questions about the respondents' age, gender, weekly play time, and money spent in gaming during a typical month.

Because we did not receive financial support for the data collection of this study, the assistance provided by Prolific was compensated by a collaborating data analytics company which now owns the data; thus, we cannot share the data publicly. The study did not require a local ethics committee statement.

The surveys in both countries were targeted only to those participants who had previously specified to be at least a bit interested in playing videogames (1 = Not at all interested, 2 = Only a little interested, 3 = Moderately interested, 4 = Interested, 5 = Very interested). Prolific cleaned the data from those respondents who had answered the survey too quickly. Those participants who had submitted incomplete responses were also excluded, and therefore the final sample did not contain any missing values.

We were interested in player preferences and profiles of five videogames in particular: Overwatch, Fortnite, League of Legends, Dota 2, and Counter-Strike. We address these titles as “esport games” with “esport players” to highlight their specific competitive features, but acknowledging that the label “esport” also simplifies what the games and players are (see later). Survey participants were then asked to report how much they

had played each title (0 = Not at all, 1 = Only a little, 2 = Moderately, 3 = Quite much, 4 = Very much). A total of 731 survey participants reported to have played one or more of the five esports games at least a little (1–4). We used this information to generate subsamples of esports players ($n = 731$, 48.5%) and non-esports players ($n = 775$, 51.5%). Descriptive statistics of the overall sample and the esports subsample are reported in Table 2.1.

Since the focus of this chapter is on Overwatch players, we do not analyze the overall sample or the esports subsample in detail. However, it is worth noting that esports players spend significantly more money and time on gaming than non-esports players. Also, as a general remark, our sample is clearly biased on players who identify as females, which we consider a significant benefit for the study. With reference to previous large-scale studies that have found women representing as low as 4.1% of certain active esports populations (e.g., Ratan et al. 2015), our subsample is uniquely balanced with a somewhat equal gender representation among

Table 2.1 Descriptive statistics of the sample of this study ($N = 1506$) and the subsample of esports players ($n = 731$)

	UK	USA	Total
<i>All respondents</i>	1089	417	1506
Male	374	169	543
Female	705	243	948
Other	8	5	13
Not disclosed	2	0	2
Mean age	38.1	34.3	37
Weekly play (hours), Computer	2.4	3.7	2.7
Weekly play (hours), Console	2.1	2.3	2.1
Weekly play (hours), Mobile	2.3	2.1	2.3
Money spent each month	19.8	27.1	21.7
<i>Esports players</i>	484	247	731
Male	239	138	377
Female	241	104	345
Other	3	5	8
Not disclosed	1	0	1
Mean age	34	31	33
Weekly playtime/Computer	3.8	4.9	4.2
Weekly playtime/Console	3.2	2.9	3.1
Weekly playtime/Mobile	1.8	1.7	1.7
Money spent each month	33.3	39.1	35.1

those who play esports games. Due to the major differences between esports titles and the rapid evolution of esports cultures, we cannot know to what degree our gender balance represents the reality of esports or Overwatch players.

Lastly, we must also make a note about our respondents' age: although the average age of our esports players (33 years) is well in line with the steadily increasing average age of videogame players, it is clearly higher than those of other recent studies. For instance, in a large German convenience sample of esports players collected in popular online sites (Rudolf et al. 2020) the average age was 23 years (92% male), and in a similar English sample (Nagorsky and Wiemeyer 2020) the average age was 21 years (95% male). Elite or high-level players have been reported to be even younger, below 21 years (97% male) (Kari et al. 2019). Because our sample was collected via Prolific and the adult population only, it is likely that the collection method explains a large part of this difference; however, in the same way as with gender, we have no way of knowing what the true average age of esports players is in general or in Overwatch. Whereas the above gender aspect likely explains some of this variation, we cannot know if the popular online esports sites, which produce young, nearly all-male samples, represent the reality of all players or if such online sites are more used by this demographic in particular.

MEASURES

The survey included three psychometrically validated measures. We report Cronbach's alphas for each scale and factor in parentheses. Intrinsic Motivations to Gameplay (15-IMG) inventory measures how important a set of motives are for one's videogame play (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Very important). The inventory consists of five factors. *Relatedness* ($\alpha = 0.89$) measures social motives such as playing because friends play. *Competence* ($\alpha = 0.72$) consists of motives such as playing because of challenge. *Immersion* ($\alpha = 0.82$) measures motives such as playing to identify with in-game characters. *Fun* ($\alpha = 0.78$) measures to what extent one plays because gaming is entertaining. *Autonomy* ($\alpha = 0.84$) measures motives to play because one can experience, for example, freedom (Vahlo and Hamari, 2019).

Challenge Types in Gaming (12-CHA) is a 5-point scale for measuring sustaining player preferences in four types of challenges (1 = very unpleasant, 5 = very pleasant). *Physical challenges* ($\alpha = 0.77$) assess preferences in

kinesthetic challenges such as fast reaction. *Analytical challenges* ($\alpha = 0.78$) consist of problem-solving. *Socio-emotional challenges* ($\alpha = 0.82$) cover moral and ethical challenges. *Insight challenges* ($\alpha = 0.72$) measure preferences in stable tasks such as puzzles (Vahlo and Karhulahti 2020).

Gameplay Activity Inventory (15-GAIN) is a 5-point measure (1 = very unpleasant, 5 = very pleasant) for assessing preferences in activity types that contemporary videogames present. *Aggression* ($\alpha = 0.94$) measures preference in, for example, killing, sniping, and shooting. *Caretaking* ($\alpha = 0.83$) includes activities such as dressing up and hanging out with friends. *Coordinate* ($\alpha = 0.85$) consists of activities such as performing in athletics, racing, and running. *Exploration* ($\alpha = 0.88$) covers activities such as developing characters and collecting rare items. *Management* ($\alpha = 0.88$) assesses preference in activities such as construction and crafting (Vahlo et al. 2018).

Due to Overwatch's reputation as a game with a diverse audience, we also included six questions about the players' preferred game experience types. Survey participants were asked to state how pleasant the following game experiences were for them (1 = very unpleasant, 5 = very pleasant): "Experiences of hardcore gaming which really tests your skills and wits", "Experiences of laid-back relaxing casual gaming", "Experiences of competitive gaming in which you want to win", "Experiences of story-driven gaming in which you focus especially on the fiction of the game", "Experiences of short-term gaming which offers a little break to your everyday routines", and "Experiences of intensive and long-term gaming without any interruptions". In what follows, we will call these items with shorter names: "hardcore", "casual", "competitive", "story-driven", "short-term", and "long-term" game experiences.

Finally, in addition to the above validated measures, the surveys also included a set of questions about what the participants have played and how much. We asked the participants to report how much they had played the genres of action games, action-adventure games, adventure games, racing, role-playing, platformers, puzzles, sports, simulation, and strategy (1 = Not at all, 5 = Very much). Specific videogame titles had to be named, including the mentioned esports games.

ESPORTS AND CORRELATIONS

We start by reporting the distribution of the esports games within the subsample (Table 2.2). First, a total of 47.2 % ($n = 345$) of our esports players reported that they play Overwatch. Of these Overwatch players,

Table 2.2 Esports players of the sample ($n = 731$) and their esports-related play behavior

$N = 731$	n	<i>Only a little</i>	<i>Moderately</i>	<i>Quite much</i>	<i>Very much</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Counter-Strike	354	133	84	64	73	2.1
Dota 2	175	72	43	24	36	1.5
Fortnite	524	207	142	82	93	2.5
League of Legends	297	113	70	45	69	1.9
Overwatch	345	92	97	59	97	2.2

Those who responded “Not at all” are not included in this table

32 played *only* Overwatch whereas the remaining 313 also played some of the other esports games. Similarly, only five players reported that they played *only* Dota 2 and 27 players reported to play *only* League of Legends. Finally, 51 told that they play only Counter-Strike. Fortnite was an exception, as no less than 187 survey respondents reported this to be their only esports game.

Based on the above initial results, our first finding is that, more likely than not, the most common type of Overwatch player is not *only* an Overwatch player, but rather a player who plays Overwatch as one of their esports games. Again, we highlight that (due to our limited sample) there can be a large number of players who play Overwatch as their sole esports game, however, compared to this unknown number, the number of those who play Overwatch *as one of their two or more esports games* is larger—probably multiple times larger. The same seems to concern other esports titles too, with the possible exception of Fortnite.

Because reliable statistical analysis of our 32 Overwatch-only players would not be possible with the present methods, we pursued the analysis based on (Pearson’s) correlations between the five esports games (Table 2.3). As for these correlations, Overwatch play was moderately or strongly correlated with every other esports game play, and the same was true for Counter-Strike, League of Legends, and Dota 2. Also, Fortnite play was correlated with a habit to play other games, but these correlations were not as strong as those between other esports games.

To better identify those players who play Overwatch as one of their esports games, we continued to explore their profiles with an explorative approach, enabled by a cluster-analysis procedure.

Table 2.3 Esports game players of the sample ($n = 731$) and their esports game play behavior

	<i>Overwatch</i>	<i>Fortnite</i>	<i>League of Legends</i>	<i>Dota 2</i>
Overwatch				
Fortnite	0.466			
League of Legends	0.530	0.426		
Dota 2	0.491	0.362	0.491	
Counter-Strike	0.507	0.400	0.502	0.519

All of the reported correlations are statistically significant on the level of $p < 0.001$

Table 2.4 Esports player clusters, constructed based on questions about survey respondents' habits to play the five esports games

	<i>Cluster 1</i>	<i>Cluster 2</i>	<i>Cluster 3</i>	<i>Cluster 4</i>	<i>Cluster 5</i>	<i>Cluster 6</i>	<i>NA*</i>
<i>N</i>	93	112	53	242	131	81	19
<i>Play freq. standardized</i>							
Overwatch	1.05	-0.16	-0.24	-0.52	0.87	-0.20	
Fortnite	1.03	-0.63	-0.44	1.89	-0.60	0.84	
League of Legends	-0.37	-0.24	-0.71	-0.35	0.74	-0.63	
Dota 2	-0.90	-0.64	1.11	-0.52	-0.57	-1.12	
Counter-Strike	-0.81	1.67	0.28	-0.50	-0.45	1.10	
<i>Esports play mean</i>	2.40	1.86	2.75	1.58	1.97	2.45	
<i>Play freq. mean value</i>							
Overwatch	3.56	1.76	2.51	1.17	2.92	2.28	
Fortnite	3.54	1.26	2.26	3.05	1.33	3.30	
League of Legends	2.01	1.68	2.17	1.34	2.76	1.83	
Dota 2	1.40	1.24	3.87	1.16	1.34	1.28	
Counter-Strike	1.49	3.37	2.96	1.18	1.5	3.57	

CLUSTER ANALYSIS

An exploratory cluster analysis with Stata 14.2 software was carried out to investigate how players differ in their habits to play esports games. Those readers who are not interested in the actual analysis procedure may skip the below paragraphs and jump directly to the point after Table 2.4 where we describe each cluster that the analysis produced.

We began the clustering process by computing z-standardized response scores for each of the five esports per survey participants. Standardizing is considered an important step in analyses in which a specific variable in the analysis may dominate the results (Everitt et al. 2011). In the case of our

study, we wanted to make a cluster analysis which would not be affected by how much a respondent reported playing any of the five esports games *in total*. Instead, we were more interested in identifying esports player profiles based on the respondents' relative esports gaming profiles, that is, if they would play a specific game more than other four games, or, for instance, two games clearly more than the rest of them. If we would have made a cluster analysis with non-standardized data, the analysis would very probably have resulted in heavy esports players, moderate esports players, and light esports players, which would have not been the most informative solution for our study.

By standardizing esports game play responses for each survey participant, we generated a 0-value for each participant and then investigated how a participants' own esports game responses compared to this relative 0-value. As an analysis procedure, standardization excludes data from cluster analysis; in our case, the amount of playing esports games in total. However, this information was included in the following steps of analysis when we interpreted the results of the cluster analysis.

Next, we examined the data to get the optimal cluster solution. This is usually done by using a scree plot and searching for anomalies (a kink) in the curve that is generated from the within sum of squared (WSS) or its logarithm [$\log(\text{WSS})$] for all examined possible cluster solutions (Makles 2012). We examined both of these methods and decided to construct six player clusters as both WSS and $\log(\text{WSS})$ suggested a six-cluster solution.

We then conducted a k-means clustering for a six-cluster solution. K-means is a partition cluster-analysis method by which observations are grouped into a distinct number of groups that do not overlap. In the grouping procedure, observations are grouped together with those observations which share the closest means. In our case, these closest means were the standardized profiles of esports play. Since we decided to construct six clusters, the k-means procedure utilized this criterion and grouped each observation into one of these groups. We used k-means instead of hierarchical clustering models because we did not have expectations of a latent hierarchical structure. Indeed, clustering methods are tools for generating hypotheses rather than for testing them (Everitt et al. 2011). Descriptive statistics of the background variables for each player type are presented in Table 2.4.

In **Cluster 1** ($n = 93$, 12.7%) participants reported to play Overwatch more than participants of the other five clusters. However, they reported playing Fortnite equally much. These players had the third-highest esports

play mean value. Participants of **Cluster 2** ($n = 112$, 15.3%) can be labeled Counter-Strike players, as these players showed low values for all the other four games. **Cluster 3** ($n = 53$, 7.2%) was the smallest identified player cluster. These players had the highest esports play mean value and they reported playing Dota 2 in particular. **Cluster 4** ($n = 242$, 33.1%) was the largest cluster. The players in this cluster reported to play only Fortnite, and they also had the lowest esportsS mean of the six groups. **Cluster 5** ($n = 131$, 17.9%) reported to play League of Legends more than the other player clusters, but also Overwatch. They did not play Overwatch as much as players in the first cluster, however. In **Cluster 6** ($n = 81$, 11.0%), people played Counter-Strike and Fortnite, and they had the second-highest esports mean value. Based on the above, this chapter's focus will be on how the first cluster (**OW1** = people who play Overwatch and Fortnite) and the fifth cluster (**OW2** = people who play Overwatch and League of Legends) differ from each other as well as from the rest of the clusters (Table 2.5).

We should also note that a total of 19 survey respondents reported to play all five esports games equally much (marked with * in Table 2.4). While this is an interesting result in itself, their gaming behavior also means that they do not have an esports gaming profile similar to the

Table 2.5 Esports player clusters, constructed based on questions about survey respondents' habits to play the five esports games

	<i>OW1</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>C3</i>	<i>C4</i>	<i>OW2</i>	<i>C6</i>	<i>Non</i>
<i>n</i>	93	112	53	242	131	81	794
UK ($n = 1089$)	5.4%	6.8%	2.9%	17.5%	6.2%	4.8%	56.4%
USA ($n = 417$)	8.2%	9.1%	5.0%	12.2%	15.4%	7.0%	43.2%
Male %	50.5%	69.6%	62.3%	36.4%	43.5%	74.1%	22.7%
Female %	48.4%	28.6%	37.7%	63.6%	51.9%	25.9%	76.6%
Other %	1.1%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	4.6%	0.0%	0.6%
Not disclosed %	0.0%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Age	32.97	32.63	28.57	35.51	30.86	32.74	40.6
Money spent/month (\$)	47.4	29	35.3	26.2	37.6	48.3	10.5
<i>Weekly play hours</i>							
With computers	5.3	5.1	5.9	1.6	5.6	6	1.4
With consoles	4.8	2.0	2.4	2.8	2.5	4.5	1.3
With mobile phones	2.3	1.4	0.9	2.1	1.6	1.6	2.7

remaining 719 survey respondents. We decide therefore to exclude these respondents from the remaining analyses.

DATA ANALYSIS

Before moving to analyze the two Overwatch clusters in more detail, it is worth highlighting that some players of the four other clusters had played Overwatch too. In other words, our results yield evidence for a hypothesis that people who play esports games, like Overwatch, do at least experiment with multiple titles. That said, the six-cluster product also indicates that, when it comes to people's esports habits, they do clearly prefer some titles over others and usually commit to one or two. As for Overwatch, the most common profiles surface as players whose playtime is primarily shared between Fortnite (**OW1**) and League of Legends (**OW2**).

As we now move to look at these two clusters more closely, let us start with demographics and other more general variables. First, we observe that both Overwatch clusters are well balanced in terms of gender, which is not the case with the Counter-Strike (C2), Dota 2 (C3), and mixed (C6) clusters that all have a strong male bias. The Fortnite cluster (C4), however, had even more of its players identify as female. It is possible that Overwatch and Fortnite appeal to women players more than many other esports games do.

The average age of an Overwatch player in **OW1** is 32.3 years and in **OW2** 30.9 years. We ran paired t-tests to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the mean ages between these two clusters and between them and the other four clusters. There was a statistically significant difference in both cases, between **OW1** and **OW2**, $t(222) = 1.65$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen's $d = 0.22$ (CI 95%) as well as, for instance, between **OW1** and C3, $t(144) = 2.84$, $p < 0.005$, Cohen's $d = 0.489$ (CI 95%).

Furthermore, we observe a key difference between the two Overwatch clusters: in the first one (**OW1**), players play more on their console than any other esports cluster (4.8 hours per week), whereas in the second one (**OW2**) console gaming is somewhat average (2.5 hours per week). This is important to keep in mind, as we move to examine the Overwatch players' motives, spending, and preferences.

As for the money that Overwatch players spend on gaming, their average monthly expenditures of US \$47.4 (**OW1**) and US \$37.6 (**OW2**) were outnumbered only by the mixed cluster (C6). Considering that the

players in the mixed cluster also play Overwatch significantly (with other esports), it seems that Overwatch players are at the top of the esports hierarchy in terms of spending. The fact that Overwatch—unlike the other listed esports—is not a free-to-play game might contribute to this, but our data and analysis cannot produce answers to that hypothesis directly. We thus investigated the titles further with a linear regression between the habit of playing the five esports games and money spent on playing video-games. We also included gender, age, and squared age to the model as confounding variables to better understand the specific effect of esports game playing habits on spending money on gaming.

We included in the model reported in Table 2.6 the full sample of 1506 survey respondents to be able to analyze the effect of esports game play on spending money on games. The model explained approximately 10% of the variance in the variable reporting money spent per month. Three of the independent variables included in the model had a statistically significant and very similar effect on spending: Counter-Strike, Fortnite, and Overwatch play. Playing Dota 2 or League of Legends did not have a significant effect on spending, and the same was true for age, squared age, and gender.

Table 2.6 A linear regression on the impact of playing esports games, age, squared age, and gender on spending money on games ($N = 1506$)

<i>Spending on games</i>	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>Std. err.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β
Counter-Strike	4.21	1.06	3.98	0.000	0.13
Dota 2	-1.05	1.38	-0.76	0.449	-0.02
Fortnite	3.28	0.85	3.84	0.000	0.11
League of Legends	1.31	1.09	1.21	0.227	0.04
Overwatch	3.59	0.98	3.67	0.000	0.12
Age	0.19	0.41	0.47	0.641	0.07
Age, squared	0.00	0.00	-0.69	0.489	-0.10
Female	-2.70	23.80	-0.11	0.910	-0.04
Male	-1.48	23.82	-0.06	0.950	-0.02
Non-binary	-7.99	25.50	-0.31	0.754	-0.02

BEYOND ESPORTS GENRES

To better understand Overwatch players' gaming habits in general, we asked them to rate their videogame genre preferences. We employed a conventional 10-genre model, as noted earlier. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Bonferroni multiple comparisons were run to examine if the mean genre play values between the six clusters varied in a statistically significant way (Table 2.7). The ANOVA test confirmed statistically significant differences between groups on their genre play average $F(5, 599) = 5.00, p < 0.0001$, and we continued to explore differences in the level of specific genre play between groups. In addition to showing statistically significant differences compared to each other, all clusters had significantly higher mean values for action, action-adventure, adventure, and role-playing genres than those players ($n = 794$) who did not play esports games at all. For instance, a pairwise t-test between esports players and non-esports players was $t(1258) = 18.04, p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.02$ (CI 95%). In contrast to this, the non-esports player group had a statistically significantly higher mean value for the puzzle genre than any of our esports clusters $t(1258) = 10.03, p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.57$ (CI 95%).

As for the identity of the two Overwatch clusters, our genre analysis yields one central finding. As a general tendency in the first cluster (**OW1**), players in this group have a relatively high liking for all ten genres,

Table 2.7 Clusters constructed based on the questions about the respondents' habits to play the five esports games

	<i>OW1</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>C3</i>	<i>C4</i>	<i>OW2</i>	<i>C6</i>	<i>Non</i>
<i>n</i>	93	112	53	242	131	81	794
Action	3.7	3.5	3.3	3.0	3.4	3.8	2.2
Action-adventure	3.8	3.5	3.6	3.0	3.6	3.7	2.3
Adventure	3.7	3.5	3.7	3.3	3.7	3.7	2.6
Racing	2.8**	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.2**	2.5	1.8
Puzzle	3.3	3.0	2.8	3.5	3.2	3.0	3.9
Role-playing	3.6	3.3	3.7	2.8	3.8	3.5	2.4
Simulation	3.3	2.9	2.8	3.0	3.1	3.3	2.5
Sports	2.5**	2.0	1.8	2.3	2.0**	2.7	1.6
Strategy	3.0**	3.5	3.5	3.3	3.5**	3.4	3.1
Platformer	2.8	2.6	2.8	2.5	2.6	3.0	2.2

"Non" refers to those players ($n = 794$) who did not report to play any of the esports games. Bolding refers to significant differences between OW clusters ($*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$)

especially in comparison to the second Overwatch cluster (**OW2**). Although the genre play average of **OW1** (3.23, SD 0.58) was not higher than the genre average for **OW2** (3.13, SD 0.59) in a significant way, there were three genres that had statistically significantly different means between these OW clusters, namely racing [$t(184) = 2.72, p < 0.01$, Cohen's $d = (0.40)$], sports [$t(184) = 2.43, p < 0.01$, Cohen's $d = (0.36)$], and strategy [$t(184) = -2.70, p < 0.01$, Cohen's $d = (-0.40)$] with 95% confidence interval.

Here we also recall that the first cluster had the highest console usage amounts of the entire esports subsample. These observations imply that **OW1** represents a more omnivorous Overwatch player type, that is, these players seem to have a more diverse liking to different types of gaming—including a significantly higher preference for racing and sports games—with the exception of strategy videogames (this can be explained by the fact that **OW2** players were also heavy League of Legends players, which is sometimes classified as strategy). Whereas **OW1** players clearly play Overwatch and Fortnite more than other esports games, their general gaming preferences have a wide range. Since we did not explicitly ask about the players' time spent on Overwatch, we cannot know if, for instance, **OW1** are less committed to Overwatch *per se* than the players of **OW2**. We move on with this hypothesis, as we next look at the players' other preferences and motives (Table 2.8).

PREFERENCES AND MOTIVES

For preferences and motives, too, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Bonferroni multiple comparisons showed significant differences between the esports clusters. These differences were the most significant in the case of the preferences in aggressive gaming activities ($F(5, 592) = 13.00, p < 0.001$, CI 95%), followed by the preferences for caretaking ($F(5, 592) = 2.7, p < 0.05$, CI 95%), exploration ($F(5, 592) = 4.58, p < 0.001$, CI 95%), and coordination ($F(5, 592) = 5.89, p < 0.001$, CI 95%) as part of gaming experiences. The clusters also showed differences in terms of insight challenges, and whether the players considered immersion to be important for them. Once more, the differences were more remarkable between esports players and non-esports players than among the esports player clusters.

Here, the first cluster was, again, significantly more diverse with caretaking and coordination having the highest values among all esports

Table 2.8 Player clusters, their motives to play digital games, and their preferences in challenge types, in-game activity types, and game experience types

	<i>OW1</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>C3</i>	<i>C4</i>	<i>OW2</i>	<i>C6</i>	<i>Non</i>
<i>n</i>	93	112	53	242	131	81	794
<i>Motives to play</i>							
Relatedness	3.23	3.00	3.40	2.84	3.15	3.14	2.11
Competence	3.72	3.77	3.73	3.72	3.83	3.96	3.42
Immersion	2.91	2.79	3.13	2.42	3.00	2.94	1.98
Fun	4.48	4.46	4.30	4.23	4.45	4.47	4.18
Autonomy	3.16	3.09	3.36	2.78	3.18	3.14	2.44
<i>Challenge pref.</i>							
Analytical	3.98	3.96	3.80	3.91	3.92	4.01	3.76
Socio-emotional	3.48*	3.24	3.36	3.18	3.24*	3.29	2.77
Insight	3.62	3.36	3.30	3.79	3.44	3.61	3.75
Physical	3.19**	3.14	3.15	3.14	2.85**	3.28	2.59
<i>Activity pref.</i>							
Aggression	3.19	3.36	3.33	2.86	3.17	3.65	2.17
Caretaking	2.78*	2.28	2.49	2.59	2.53*	2.45	2.32
Coordinate	3.08***	2.74	2.83	3.01	2.66***	3.04	2.43
Exploration	3.81	3.60	3.67	3.53	3.89	3.77	3.13
Management	3.22	3.45	3.39	3.14	3.35	3.45	2.64
<i>Experience pref.</i>							
Hardcore	3.39	3.37	3.35	3.27	3.43	3.62	2.60
Casual	4.09	3.97	3.72	3.89	3.94	4.07	3.89
Competitive	3.48	3.41	3.52	3.52	3.39	3.58	2.88
Story-driven	4.01	3.86	3.65	3.60	4.04	4.01	3.16
Short-term	3.85	3.84	3.70	3.88	3.79	3.95	3.94
Long-term	3.36*	3.65	3.59	3.28	3.64*	3.68	2.74

“Non” refers to those players ($n = 794$) who did not report to play any of the esports games. **Bolding** refers to significant differences between OW clusters ($*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$)

players. Furthermore, with a 95% confidence interval, **OW1**’s mean value for both caretaking [$t(184) = 1.86$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen’s $d = 0.28$] and coordinate [$t(184) = 3.54$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.52$] was significantly higher than that of **OW2**. Regarding challenge type preferences, **OW1** had significantly higher preference for socio-emotional challenges [$t(184) = 1.71$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen’s $d = 0.25$] and physical challenges [$t(184) = 2.39$, $p < 0.01$, Cohen’s $d = 0.35$] than **OW2**. There was a significant difference in Overwatch players’ preferences in long-term intensive game experiences [$t(184) = -1.66$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen’s $d = -0.24$]. But general motives to play videogames for **OW1** and **OW2** were essentially

the same and did not show statistically significant differences between the clusters. Of note, there were no significant differences between the esports clusters in terms of self-reported casual and hardcore preferences.

Finally, we made multiple regression analyses on the effect of the OW clusters, age, squared age, and gender on the variables that had significantly different means between the OW clusters. Due to spatial limits, the details of these analyses are provided elsewhere (<https://osf.io/f9jg2/>); however, the results largely supported what we reported in Tables 2.7 and 2.8. Accordingly, our analysis points to two popular Overwatch player types: those who play Overwatch—mostly with their consoles—among many other videogames for multiple reasons and with higher preferences for physical and emotional challenges (**OW1**), and those who play Overwatch—mostly with their PC—as one their esports games, with less wide-ranging gaming preferences and a special liking to League of Legends (**OW2**).

DISCUSSION

The goal of this entry chapter was to identify some limited characteristics of Overwatch players and their position in the larger context of esports players. Perhaps the most fundamental of our findings was that the majority of Overwatch players, like many other esports players, tend to like many other videogames too and they also play other esports titles. Based on their self-reported habits, our Overwatch players ended up being clustered into two main groups: those who play Overwatch and Fortnite (**OW1**) and those who play Overwatch and League of Legends (**OW2**). We highlight that 32 individuals in the sample also identified as “pure” Overwatch esports players, and although this amount did not allow us to analyze such type statistically, it is good to keep in mind that—considering the overall number of Overwatch players—those who play Overwatch as their sole esports game may differ from our clusters significantly. To identify these potential differences, larger sample sizes are needed.

Previous research on Overwatch has suggested that its “competitive” discourse is often contrasted with a more general, cultural-product-like reception (Ruotsalainen and Välisalo 2020). Our findings complement and complicate this picture with two large player clusters surfacing from the data—the first of which is oriented toward gaming culture more

generally and widely. It is unlikely that any stereotypical casual/competitive binary would be useful for explaining these two or more types; and indeed, we did not find any esports clusters differing significantly based on such characteristics. Rather, we should acknowledge that some Overwatch players consider the game as a significant part of their overall interest toward gaming and new gaming trends, whereas others may be more specifically committed to Overwatch in particular, in more than one way. In fact, we note that our instruments also asked about the players' gaming motives, preferred game experiences, and competitiveness in particular, and none of the two Overwatch clusters or other clusters differed significantly from each other in this regard. The only difference in experiential play preferences was found to be associated with long-term gaming experiences.

In general, it seems that classifying players into casual and competitive might blind us from a reality where a large part of "casual" players play in order to compete and many "competitive" players, in turn, enjoy the lore and other non-competitive features. Future research could investigate if people's evolving modes of engagement explain player behavior better than any stable "mentality". Regardless of what kind of genres, activity types, and game challenges a player prefers, they may have needs for both "casual" and "competitive" experiences. In line with these more complex scenarios, our data shows that there might be an Overwatch player type preferring physical challenges and emotional interactions, and another type preferring long-term game experiences, both playing other different esports games, too. The below summary of the two Overwatch clusters presents their key characteristics.

OW1: These individuals prefer a wide range of videogames in different genres, and of esports games, they specifically play Fortnite and Overwatch. These players use the console more than any other esports players, and they enjoy various elements in their gaming habits such as caretaking and coordination, and physical as well as socio-emotional challenges.

OW2: These individuals may be more focused on esports, as they play Overwatch and League of Legends in particular. Their key platform is the PC. Whereas the PC is often seen as a more competitive platform with higher accuracy enabled by mice, the players did not report more competitive preferences.

As a major limitation, we must acknowledge that our data did not include objective information regarding the players' actual behaviors (e.g., by in-game tracking), and our survey items did not distinguish between the time of accumulated esports gaming experience. Hence, we cannot draw causal or other inferences between the participants' overlapping experiences of multiple esports games. Also, our methodology did not include qualitative investigations that would have enabled us to better understand how players engage in Overwatch in more detail. Combined with the fact that our sample was not representative of all Overwatch let alone esports players—and the Anglocentric bias in particular—more research is needed to better understand in-depth gaming engagement across different esports games.

Lastly, we note that in both of the above Overwatch clusters half of the players identified as female. Compared to our other esports-specific clusters that were defined by Counter-Strike and Dota 2, this was an exceptionally high percentage and only comparable with Fortnite players. As to gender, our findings thus indicate that Overwatch, with Fortnite, might be a form of esports that many women prefer over other esports. To better understand the players of Overwatch and esports in general, future research should pursue in more detail the patterns of psycholudic development, that is, to what degree players attach to a game like Overwatch, and how their relationship with the game evolves along with their changing lives.

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CHAPTER 3

One Tricks, Hero Picks, and Player Politics: Highlighting the Casual-Competitive Divide in the Overwatch Forums

Courtney Blamey

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will provide the post-structural textual analysis of the official *Overwatch* player forums (McKee 2003) to highlight the issues experienced by players with the specific moderation systems deployed by *Overwatch*'s developers. The purpose of this chapter is to look primarily at the player input for *Overwatch*'s gameplay issues created (or solved) by moderation strategies. This chapter introduces and discusses each moderation tactic discovered through my research, with a brief explanation as to what it is, and then delving into the player responses over time to the specific tactic. Then, I will briefly summarize the player discourse and interventions on the systems. My intention for this analysis is to use the discourse surrounding the moderation systems to highlight the rift between casually and competitively identifying players, and how this rift causes conflicts in what players might expect and want from their *Overwatch* gameplay experience.

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First, I address the terms “moderation strategies” and “moderation systems” to provide clarity on what they mean, and how they are applied to this research. Concerning “moderation strategies”, I draw from De Certeau’s definition, according to which strategies are the tools for those in power, that shape and enforce particular spaces (in this case, Blizzard Entertainment and the *Overwatch* development team) (De Certeau 2011). Strategies allow for the exertion of control over spaces. “Moderation systems”, on the other hand, are the units of the strategy—the different social systems in place to manage and govern players (the report system, Avoid as Teammate, and Endorsements, all to be discussed in more detail). Essentially, moderation strategies are an umbrella term for the amalgamation of these different moderation systems. I will be referring to them as precisely as possible throughout; for the most part with these terms, it is a question of distinction and scale.

EARLIER RESEARCH

Considering the large amount of scholarship on participatory governance and moderation practices in online multiplayer (TL Taylor 2006; Gray 2014; Kou and Nardi 2014; Busch et al. 2015), what sets Blizzard Entertainment and *Overwatch* apart from others? Initially, a significant component behind Blizzard Entertainment’s peripheral marketing around *Overwatch* was its “Developer Updates” on their Play Overwatch YouTube channel. Among their promotion for upcoming new competitive seasons and hero releases are detailed videos explaining the social systems being implemented into the game, and updates made to them along the way. The emphasis on sustainable social systems is part of Blizzard Entertainment’s corporate rhetoric, specifically for *Overwatch*, as these developer updates exist as a way to “converse” with players—to show that their feedback on the forums is fruitful and taken into consideration.

In addition to game-based moderation systems, the moderation of online platforms is relevant, too. Current literature focuses on “internet governance” regarding the interplay of media policy, social media, and online community management—both in the technical infrastructure and in the regulation of users (Freedman 2010; DeNardis and Hackl 2015). Duguay and colleagues specifically analyze Tinder, Instagram, and Vine to determine queer women’s experience with how the platforms moderate content and users, often to the detriment of underrepresented groups—and highlight “the disconnect between platforms’ formal governance

rules ... and the impacts on user experience of platform architectures and cultures” (Duguay et al. 2018, 2). These platforms, in other words, make use of formal governance ignoring the cultures of use on their platforms. Tinder, for example, has a formal report mechanic on their app; however, many do not use it because reporting does not seem to have any concrete effect. A similar dissonance is prevalent in online game moderation as well.

Tarleton Gillespie (2018) identifies platform developers as “custodians” who facilitate, and are responsible for, the interactions that take place on their platform. Another point that makes Blizzard Entertainment and *Overwatch* central to moderation research is their custodian role in the play space. Especially, as *Overwatch* is a live-service game,¹ it emulates the legalities and policies similar to those found when joining Twitter or Facebook in the form of a Code of Conduct (CoC) and End User License Agreements (EULAs) that players must sign to access the game client. The tribulations in trying to manage online spaces are similar between social media and online gaming—issues of misogyny, racism, homophobia, as well as hacking, misuse of software, to name but a few problems, run rampant across online platforms. What I identify through this analysis is that players will subvert the systems presented to them to make the systems operate in the way they desire, rather than the developers’ intended purposes.

Previous literature has investigated how players become professionals in esports (Taylor 2006; Witkowski and Manning 2017). Juul, on the other hand, indicates players focused on “mastery” to show great discontent toward the “no fail” mode in *Guitar Hero*, too, not wanting their own ability to be “diminished” (Juul 2012, 143). Next to the above, Consalvo and Paul unpack the legitimacy of “casual” games and their audiences being subsequently deemed not “real” players (2019). This value judgment is perpetuated by “real”, committed, hardcore players to distinguish themselves from casual and leisurely players. TL Taylor identified “power gamers” as those with the utmost commitment to their play in *Everquest* with distinct knowledge on how to optimize their characters mechanically, as opposed to players who spend a moderate amount of time in a game (2003).

In *Overwatch*, especially in the quickplay mode, the player population is an unpredictable mix of players who might identify as either casual or competitive (see Vahlo & Karhulahti, this volume). For this chapter, I define *casual players* as ones who play *Overwatch* for leisure, and while obviously wanting to win, they are less invested in optimizing their play performance. *Competitive players*, in turn, are ones attempting to emulate

professional players, usually by engaging in meta play² and trying to climb the competitive ranks. Both casual and competitive attitudes are present in the *Overwatch* community, and they are taken into consideration in the game's design. *Overwatch* makes use of components identified by Juul as part of casual game design; for instance, "juiciness", where "excessive positive feedback" is central to the game's aesthetic (Juul 2012, 45). Additionally, there is the "interruptibility" component in quick play (Juul 2012, 30). Quickplay matches also run significantly shorter than competitive matches, which allow less commitment. Although individual matches cannot be paused, they are segmented into short rounds and permit short play sessions. At the same time, *Overwatch*'s design also champions instrumental play through optimizing one's playstyle (Taylor 2003). *More powerful meta* heroes, for instance, can be chosen over less powerful but potentially more "fun" off-meta heroes, and in both cases, learning to play the heroes properly often takes a lot of time and effort.

Multiple scholars have embarked on research that this chapter is in conversation with. Kishonna Gray's foundational work on the racist and misogynistic culture of Xbox Live pushed discourse around the impacts of allowing such behaviors to proliferate and oppress minorities in online leisure spaces (Gray 2012). Lajeunesse (2018) engaged with the media dispositive that surrounds the *DOTA 2* community, reinforcing toxicity, through autoethnography, participant observation and analyzing journalism, community forums, and official Valve correspondence in order to build a picture of what allowed toxic behaviors to metastasize. Blizzard Entertainment, and more specifically *World of Warcraft* (WoW), has been extensively researched, as it endures as one of the most financially successful game studios to date (Jordan 2018). Through investigating Blizzard forums, Crenshaw and Nardi sought to analyze WoW player reactions to patches that altered how social interfaces worked, resulting in some players remaining on unpatched (and illegal) "Vanilla"³ versions of the game (Crenshaw and Nardi 2016).

In the first year of *Overwatch*, the online community was reported to be less toxic, and more supportive compared to other online PvP games (e.g., *DOTA 2* and *League of Legends*), thus potentially heralding a more positive player base and building collegiality (Purslow 2016; u/Fyre2387 2016; Webster 2016; Stuart 2017). However, with the introduction of the competitive mode, tensions and frictions began to arise (Grayson 2016; D'Anastasio 2017; u/LordAurora 2017). This chapter investigates those tensions and frictions.

DATA AND METHODS

Methodologically, I apply close reading forum analysis. The *Overwatch* community has a burgeoning presence on various forum sites, such as Reddit with r/overwatch and r/overwatch competitive as active subreddits on the site. The data in this chapter was obtained from both the official [Battle.net](#) and Blizzard *Overwatch* forums. I chose the official Blizzard forums because they act as a pseudo direct line to the developers who regularly cite the fact that they read the forums for feedback, especially on managing the community's behavior (PlayOverwatch 2018). Sometimes the developers will respond directly to player threads, either to explain an issue, or to provide context on a topic (Kaplan 2018). These forums have a high volume of player opinions around the implementation and execution of the different moderation strategies and systems, thus making it the site for my data collection.

The official *Overwatch* forums are split across multiple topics (general, competitive, story, technical support) with my data coming primarily from the general and competitive topics. I read and collected some 200 separate forum threads (as screenshots) by searching moderation-relevant terms between June 2016⁴ and March 2019 (Blamey 2019). These terms included, but were not limited to, “report”, “chat”, “banned”, “communication”, as well as the names for the moderation systems “avoid this player”, “avoid as teammate”, and “endorsements”. I organized the search results by the “most relevant” feature in order to avoid off-topic forum threads. The length of forum threads varied from one single post to discussions extending nearly six months.

I discuss three official moderation systems in this chapter: the Report, Avoid as Teammate, and Endorsements systems. These were the “social systems” promoted by *Overwatch* developers at the time of data collection. Below, I briefly define each system and analyze a selected example thread as a case study. This data was collected in accordance with the Canadian and Concordia University ethical research guidelines in 2018–2019.

MODERATION/REPORT SYSTEM

The in-game report system of *Overwatch* has evolved since its initial launch in May 2016. In the early months, a player would go into their “social menu”, find a list of “recent players” (up to 63), and click on a player to

report them to the authorities for: “inappropriate Battletag⁵”, “harassment”, “spam”, or “cheating”. Around 2017 (when the report system was added to consoles) three additional categories were added: “poor teamwork”, “griefing”, and “inactivity”, while “harassment” was removed (JayWaddy 2017). Descriptors were added to clarify what was and was not considered part of that category, likely to avoid false reporting. In May 2018, Blizzard Entertainment updated these categories again, merging “poor teamwork” and “griefing” into “gameplay sabotage”. One of *Overwatch*’s principal designers Scott Mercer explained that the new category made it easier to know why a player was reporting another player (Mercer 2018a, b).

A significant number of the forum threads I found discussed how the forum itself was moderated⁶ and some players disputing why they were banned.⁷ As a result of this, many forum threads may have been deleted for containing inappropriate content before I began this research, meaning the remaining threads have been somewhat “curated”. With the purpose of this chapter being to highlight player interventions and discourses surrounding the moderation strategies, it is useful to analyze how they discuss moderation and reporting in a more general sense, before going into specific moderation systems. I will be referring to the original posters for all forum threads as “OP”.

MARCH 17, 2017, “MODERATION OF IN GAME VOICE COMMS”

This thread⁸ discusses how to best moderate voice chat in *Overwatch*, with just two respondents offering their opinions—in direct opposition of one another. In this post OP acknowledges that dealing with voice chat is a complicated issue, not to be addressed simply by players with “banhammers or instant mute nuke buttons”, but via an authoritative body in the form of the support staff, with the assistance of the players tagging toxic individuals for them (RATSTAB 2017).

OP makes specific reference to “Xbox Live circa 2013” to describe how players are behaving in voice chat. Xbox Live is commonly known as a toxic communication space, with an abundance of racist and sexist comments being used against players who do not fit the hegemonic ideal of a white, male gamer (Gray 2014). The OP’s post highlights how toxic players in voice chat have maintained the same attitudes from other online

game spaces and are behaving inappropriately in the chat function provided to converse with teammates, creating an unproductive and negative communication space. There is an expectation within forum posts on the topic of verbal abuse or “comms abuse” (Blamey 2019) that with time, player behaviors should have developed beyond this toxic mindset of verbal abuse being an acceptable way to talk to other players, yet unfortunately, this is not the case.

The second respondent calls out OP for muting people they do not want to hear, deeming them equally as problematic as those being toxic stating: “Mute that person you cannot stand? What exactly do we find “problematic” now?” highlighting the subjectivity of what players deem problematic, and therefore mutable, in voice chat. OP does not respond to the replies on their thread and so the conversation ends.

The “just mute” approach to problematic players is not a new phenomenon. In the late 1990s, Julian Dibbell wrote on governance in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), specifically LambdaMOO, where a player used a sub-program to force another player to perform virtual sexual acts against their will. This was met with much uproar and calls for the offending player to be removed entirely from the game, but when it resulted in a wider questioning of how LambdaMOO was to be governed in future instances, many players highlighted that experiencing mean players was inevitable and using the “@gag”⁹ command was a simple and effective method without censoring players (Dibbell 1998). Dibbell argues that “gagging” players in LambdaMOO instead of actioning them only prevents the intended victim from seeing what is being said, there are still witnesses who can see the violation occurring (Dibbell 1998, 7). These witnesses could easily be just as impacted by the attack as the victim.

Voice communication and in-game chat abuse was a frequent topic in the forums, voicing futility in moderating toxic players. Temporary bans, which were used as punishment, removed problem players only momentarily, so why bother in the first place? (Goedmaker 2016; YJG 2017). Compared to Xbox Live’s report systems, *Overwatch* players simply wait out their ban and then continue their prior behavior. A more holistic issue with abusive voice chat in online games is its lack of protection for under-represented groups, to whom particular slurs can be more damaging than to others.

The suggestion from forum threads to turn off voice chat entirely comes with more damaging consequences for those not offending than those who are. For instance, playing online games, especially

competitively, without voice comms can harm a player's chances as they are unable to communicate with their teammates—women make up a large majority of those who will mute themselves, and are already underrepresented within esports communities. Nakamura specifies that voice chat has allowed for a “new kind of mediated race, sex, and gender discrimination” and that users had begun to create blogs to expose players participating in these discriminatory practices (2012, 2). Gray explains how voice chat is a form of “synchronous communication”, providing a space for real-time anonymous toxic chat (Gray 2012), meaning that underrepresented players cannot pre-emptively mute offensive players and are consistently at risk for verbal abuse. Additionally, these problematic players are not situated in either camp of casual or competitive players; rather they are prevalent across the game.

Although the community has the tools to mute, block, and report players, these limited, and sometimes exploited, functions leave little room for impactful moderation on their end, and when the moderation ball is in Blizzard Entertainment's court, it takes a high volume of reports for an account to be actioned. As players explain in other threads on this topic (Blamey 2019), muting offensive players results in being reported for lack of communication, so using the tool provided results in a player being wrongly reported and actioned. This shows that Blizzard Entertainment is holding accountable those who do not cooperate with how the game needs to be played (with communication) equally to players who are abusive to their teammates. While Blizzard Entertainment has publicly punished their pro players and streamers when they behave poorly in public and Blizzard Entertainment represented spaces (such as tournaments and Twitch), the consensus from the collection of forum threads is that professional players can get away with poor behavior in private, and often these instances of punishment are due to the extremeness of the offending professional players' actions. Consalvo, in her study of cheating in video-games, writes that players of multiplayer games who cheated but were not punished by the game-owning companies also lost trust in the companies and played less (Consalvo 2009, 144). Moreover, the missing console report system placed PC players (who compete more) at a higher priority than console players. Although Blizzard Entertainment has so far claimed that they do not sanction disruptive behavior, it appears to the player community that they have been selective in who and when they punish (Alexander 2018).

AVOID AS TEAMMATE

The “Avoid as Teammate” (AaT) feature evolved from “Avoid this Player”, *which* allowed players to not play against chosen opponents. As this feature was soon abused to skew matchmaking in order to avoid difficult opponents, “Avoid as Teammate” eventually replaced it, only allowing players to remove up to three players from appearing on their team for seven days.

MARCH 25, 2018, “AVOID AS TEAMMATE GRIEFING UNPOPULAR HEROES”

At the time of this thread, the development team had just announced AaT in a YouTube video “Developer Update—Avoid as Teammate” featuring Jeff Kaplan (PlayOverwatch 2018). The official justification behind the removal of AtP was because of a mass-avoided top-ranked Widowmaker player being unable to queue into any competitive matches. Blizzard Entertainment removed the tool directly as a response to this in June 2016, and due to the unlimited amount of “avoid” slots, and players using them liberally, meant that the game’s matchmaker systems struggled to generate matches overall (Prell 2016). This thread¹⁰ was a response to the potential impacts AaT might have, generating a discussion of 40 comments. Interestingly, it was immediately flagged by OP as a potential “griefing” tool, trying to explain that AaT’s functionality does not protect players choosing to play “off-meta”. In their post, OP states that:

The new “avoid teammate” feature you are proposing will in most part actually be abused by toxic people on players who may use unpopular heros [*sic*], more than its intended use. This will affect those honest players more so than anything else. (Zeron 2018)

OP predicts that AaT will be used to avoid off-meta players. Players had ostensibly been throwing matches¹¹ already because a teammate selected an “unpopular” hero, with the avoid feature gone, and no other way to exercise their dislike for off-meta players. OP’s stance is that “meta” players are likely going to use AaT to punish players who are not playing the “meta” heroes. OP then clarifies the issue: an “honest” player (off-meta) would avoid two toxic (strictly meta) players, whereas ten toxic meta players would avoid the one honest player, thus causing the honest player longer queue times due to their play style. Essentially, OP’s point is not

that playing meta makes a player toxic but *forcing* players to play meta is. According to the other AaT forum threads, optimizing one’s team composition by how professionals play is more important to competitive players than others. Casually identifying players are generally less concerned about playing meta heroes, which places them at risk of being avoided when competitive players mix with casual players in the quickplay mode.

The discussions in this thread around the AaT tactic open up a larger debate on what is right to “avoid”. In developer update videos Jeff states that players can avoid others for any reason they see fit—it is not solely for toxic players (PlayOverwatch 2018). While the report system is still in place, it seems that the developers are enabling off-meta players to be punished for their play styles. These “avoided” players do receive a warning when avoided by “a considerable number of players” (WyomingMyst 2018). It is unclear whether or not it is the developers taking a stance on play styles, but it can certainly be inferred that there is a very real possibility that off-meta players will face undue punishment. The sentiment in a lot of the forum threads was that off-meta players will use AaT to avoid disruptive players, and meta players can use AaT to avoid off-meta players and disruptive players (Blamey 2019).

Notably, the labels that characterize players’ styles such as “off-meta”, “meta”, and “one tricks”¹² have been created by the player community, not the developers. Christopher Paul writes on “theorycrafting”, a practice in *World of Warcraft* (WoW) by which players analyzed the world’s underlying mathematics to find the optimal way to play. This shifted play styles in WoW, and theorycrafting, in the community, became synonymous with “good” WoW play (Paul 2011). Theorycrafting, like meta play, is used within the games’ sub-communities to self-define “good”, but there is also resistance to this “optimization of play” as restrictive (Paul 2011). While the game mechanics may afford the space for all these different play styles, the clash between players debating what is the “right” way to play the game is down to the players.

The forums voice that the implementation of the AaT has not reconciled formal systems and nuanced player practices (TL Taylor 2006)—and no significant adjustments to the AaT have been made to reflect this.¹³ The discrepancy over off/meta play arises from competitive players in the competitive mode, seeping over into quickplay and causal competitive player spaces, generating a conflict in player expectations. While AaT may have created a preventative method in reducing toxicity in matches by

stopping players who do not play well together, it at the same time fostered a climate where players could dictate how people should play the game and who, canonically, was avoidable.

ENDORSEMENTS (RELEASED JUNE 2018)

Endorsements were introduced as a tool for positive reinforcement. Instead of punishing bad behavior, this system rewards good, cohesive play in a team. At the end of a match, players can endorse up to three teammates or enemies (not players on their “friends” list) via three different types: “shot caller”, “good teammate”, and “sportsmanship”. Endorsement levels range from 1 to 5 (lowest to highest), and often a sign of a positive player is one with a higher endorsement ranking. As an incentive, going up and maintaining endorsement ranks also provide “periodic” loot boxes¹⁴ (Overwatch Wiki 2019).

JULY 1, 2018, “FLAWS IN THE ENDORSEMENT SYSTEM”

This particular thread¹⁵ spanned several months between July 2018 and April 2019 with 71 comments. OP begins their post by praising the endorsement system, how it has improved their opinion of quickplay in comparison to competitive play, and then proceeds to pull apart the endorsement system’s issues. To sum up the lengthy post, OP highlights how the system is counterintuitive in increasing a player’s endorsement level. For example, you can only endorse a player once every 12 hours, so OP points out that there is no reason to stay in a group once all six teammates have endorsed you if you want to prevent your endorsement level decaying over time.¹⁶

OP’s main complaint is about not being able to endorse friends. While understanding how easily endorsing friends could break the purpose of the system—players could have high endorsement levels with enough friends—they suggest the friend’s endorsement value to be a small fraction of a regular endorsement. Since successful competitive play requires a team of six players, according to OP, not being able to endorse friends seems to punish playing the game in an optimal manner.

During the first set of forum responses between July and August 2018, the endorsement system is relatively new and while there are issues, players seem to agree that even the “fake nice” players looking to increase their endorsement level have made the game considerably less toxic. However,

the consensus of the thread seems to be that the endorsement system is somewhat unfavorable to the most optimal way to play, and it lacks credibility. Many state that the endorsements they have received do not make sense, for example, someone without a microphone receiving a “shot caller” endorsement. Others concur that, as a result, endorsements exist as a blanket “you did good”. On the other hand, some discussants found that the different types of endorsement have levels of rarity, with “shot caller” being the rarest and most sought after.

In the AaT section of this chapter, players were concerned that the tool could only be effective for the top 15% of OW players (Sofrito 2018). This concern is echoed once again regarding the endorsement tool. One player highlights that proportional to the amount of time playing, one will receive more endorsements, meaning that those dedicating more time to *Overwatch* can go climb the endorsement ranks faster than those who play less (Deus 2018). As the most dedicated demography consists mainly of streamers and semi-professional/professional players, the forum discussants feel that the content creators for *Overwatch* benefit from the system where others might not. A month later, a player describes that the “shiny has worn off” (Truen 2018) the endorsements, and players solely endorse to gain an extra 150XP, which multiple players agree within their responses to OP. By endorsing without reason to gain the maximum amount of XP per match, these players are simply gaming the system to their advantage. A new wave of responses in the thread came in October–November, some three months later. One player highlights that endorsements are more easily received for support players and voices concern over how difficult it is to maintain a high endorsement level. The decay rate of endorsements has frustrated a majority of players. Although they receive an endorsement from another player, they may soon drop an endorsement level regardless. Working to maintain a positive attitude with players only to find that the endorsement level drops anyway is demotivational and counterproductive. Players have no insight into the numbers operating within the endorsement system, as in the report system, so that it cannot be gamed by players; however, this also means that it appears entirely nonsensical to players who drop an endorsement rank. Another second-wave respondent also points out that endorsements occur more frequently when a team has won, meaning when a team loses, players acknowledge less. The system might thus favor players with higher win rates.

All of this suggests there are significant flaws in the system that are not being addressed by the developers. Players are keen to keep their

endorsement level high as it ties into how they will be perceived by other players in matches (level 1 is holistically understood as a toxic player), but they do not feel supported in how to maintain the level when it seems to drop without warning.

CONCLUSION

A key conflict at the heart of *Overwatch* is the mixing of players with diverse—and even opposite—motivations. All the game’s moderation systems are closely linked to one another, forming a tight-knit moderation strategy with solutions as well as new problems. Each moderation system, despite their good intentions, seems to have issues and is often abused for various purposes.

These issues exist across most online gaming platforms, however, and especially in those with an esports scene. Moderating large-scale communities online is hardly a trivial task, and Blizzard Entertainment is known to respond to its community more than many other companies do. Perhaps what makes *Overwatch*, to some degree, a unique case is its early inclination to serve the less competitive player base, now contrasted with a strong focus on the esports scene and balancing for high-level ranked play.

The solutions suggested by players voice active participation in governance with a desire to improve the systems they are a part of (TL Taylor 2006; Kou and Nardi 2014; Duguay et al. 2018). Repeatedly, players disagree with the developer’s choices, pointing at where the system is not functioning as it should.

John Banks discusses the tensions between developers and community members surrounding the co-creation of games during his time consulting for Australian game company Auran (Banks 2009). The development for Auran’s game *Fury* used a mixture of developers and community testers, but in the final months, there were multiple disagreements about the game’s design between “the expertise and creative control” of Auran and “the collective intelligence” of the game’s community (Banks 2009, 80). *Fury* flopped, and the lack of response to the community’s concerns was highlighted as part of the reason for the failure. Although the renovations in the moderation systems have had an apparent positive impact on the game, as shown by 40% less reports on toxic behavior since 2018 (Grayson 2019), it is evident that the systems are hardly flawless. The persistent issues are at least partly a product of conflicting player expectations in the community, which consists of players who play *Overwatch* for different reasons.

NOTES

1. Games as live-service usually indicates a game client that a player must log into, free regular updates and patches, regularly released paid content (often cosmetics). They are also typically either subscription-based or free to play.
2. Meta play in *Overwatch* is based around the arguably optimal team structure (2 Tanks, 2 Support, 2 Damage heroes) and the best hero pairings to make the most of their Ultimates.
3. The version of *World of Warcraft* with none of the new features or expansions.
4. This was when *Overwatch* had its first competitive season.
5. Battletags are usernames for Blizzard games (named from their [Battle.net](#) client).
6. Blizzard has community moderators who close threads if they get too “toxic” or off-topic, or timeout users who are trolling the forums.
7. This is against the forum rules (Blizzard Entertainment 2019).
8. Collected 02/05/2019.
9. When player A uses @gag command on player B, player B’s words will not appear on their screen.
10. Collected 03/25/2019.
11. Throwing matches—players allow the enemy team to win either to troll, or to cut a game short without receiving a leave penalty (punishment for abandoning games early).
12. “One tricks” are players who play only one hero and often decline to change their choice when teammates suggest they pick a hero that can deal with the enemy team hero choices better.
13. The number of slots was increased from 2 to 3 in August 2018, but no other changes or comments have been made in conjunction with the AaT system.
14. Loot boxes are in-game and purchasable rewards containing five randomized cosmetic items, such as character “skins” (costumes/outfits) or new player icons. These cosmetics vary in rarity, with the rarest items being highly sought after by players. Gaining more loot boxes means another chance at receiving the rare items.
15. Collected 05/18/2019.
16. “Decaying” refers to a time period where a player receives no endorsements, either through not playing matches or simply not receiving them from other players, and the endorsement level declines over time—the rate at which is not disclosed by the developers to avoid players gaming the system.

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CHAPTER 4

The Player's Interpretative Agency and the Developer's Disruptive Powers: How Blizzard Enforces Authorial Intention in *Overwatch*

Joleen Blom

INTRODUCTION

With the overhaul of Mercy, one of *Overwatch*'s healer characters, in August 2017, Blizzard Entertainment changed the healer's ultimate ability to resurrect all allies at once to one where her abilities were only amplified in order to prevent Mercy players to hide until her ability was ready to be used. This change to the hero caused the player to not only adjust to how they engage with Mercy inside the *Overwatch* game, but also influenced how they perceive her as a fictional being—as a character, that is. According to Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019), in our participatory culture of the digital age, the meaning of media works is constantly negotiated as more people participate in writing, reading, playing, and watching different media for work and leisure. The players of games, like anyone

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who engages with media content, do not simply consume, but take an active part in the construction of the game to create their own unique version of the work (Mortensen 2003). However, more than ever before, games require constant internet connection to be played, which grants developers, such as Blizzard Entertainment, the possibility to alter their content rapidly and frequently based on fluctuating financial and other strategic needs. *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016b) represents one such product: being systematically altered by Blizzard Entertainment so that the players' interpretative agency over their meaning-making—how they make sense of the game and play it—is heavily subjected to the developer's evolving authorial intentions.

Within our current transmedial practices, fictional characters are a vital component of users' engagement with media such as novels, films, comics, and games, among others, and play a major role in the strategies that companies employ to attach users to their products (see Brooker 2012; Harvey 2015; Pearson 2019; Blom 2021; Nakamura and Tosca 2021). *Overwatch* too uses characters to create a narrative landscape in its peripheral media on which the competitive matches of the game take place, frequently updating the game with new heroes, which not only broadens the narrative landscape, but also lets players explore new gameplay possibilities in each individual match. Yet Blizzard Entertainment frequently adjusts the game's heroes to the extent that complete mechanics of the heroes are changed around, as in the case of Mercy's overhaul. This means that in this game and its peripheral media, players are in a continuous process of having to piece together, re-adjust, and change their understanding of the constantly fluctuating characters in the game product they have already bought and played. Blizzard Entertainment's frequent interference with the characters, their abilities, and their background stories demands a closer look to the relationships between players and developers: how are the players' interpretations of *Overwatch* content guided and limited by Blizzard Entertainment's decisions to modify that content? Thought of as long gone (see Barthes 1967), perhaps the "author"—with authority over their product—has returned?

Methodologically, this chapter applies a reader-response aware close-reading and close-playing of a selected *Overwatch* character, Mercy. The approach emphasizes the role of the reader—or in this case, player—to construct meaning from a "text"—here understood as any kind of interpreted cultural product, ranging from a written codex to a visual art piece or a comic, or as in this case, a game. This chapter will argue that in games such as *Overwatch*, the developer's power to alter the game's structure directly and frequently turns the game into what I call a "fluid text." As a

result, the developer interferes with the players' interpretative agency and enforces players to follow changing authorial intentions that serve the company's renewed strategic needs. Ultimately, I argue that the players' interpretations of characters as game pieces and fictional beings—among other game content—are systematically outplayed by Blizzard Entertainment's executive agency, which modern online technology has equipped with power that enables it to change the *meaning* of game content whenever the need be.

THE PLAYER'S INTERPRETATIVE AGENCY OVER A GAME

With the rise of the reader-response discourse during the late 1960s and 1970s, in literary theory, the reader became the most prominent figure to create meaning from a text. Prior to this discourse, the meaning from a text was distilled from the author, who was seen as the voice of their work, endowing the work with a single truth that the reader had to decipher (Barthes 1967). Michel Foucault (1969) describes the author as a function that serves to bring together a group of works under a single discourse that imply “homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization” (19). Within this discourse, the author has an almost holy status as the figure who determines the actual meaning of their work. However, reader-response theory came as a critique against the author, and instead scholars such as Roland Barthes (1967) argued that the place where meaning distilled from the text is made is the reader. As the emphasis shifted from the author to the reader, the text became less important on the account of the reader who holds different paths of which the text can be constructed (1967, 6). Following up on his critique against the author, Barthes (1974) made a distinction between “writerly” and “readerly” texts. The former refers to texts written in such a way that they are open for interpretation, that they can be reinterpreted by the reader however they want. The latter refers to texts that are easy to consume but difficult to interpret from different perspectives (1974, 4) so that the meaning of these texts is easy to decipher and clear-cut, but the readers themselves have less interpretative agency over the text.

In the reader-response discourse, the relationship between text and reader plays an important role to the reader's interpretative agency over a text. Initially an empirical reader in the early stages of the discourse, Louise Rosenblatt (1938) asked an active awareness from readers to critically assess how they came to a certain interpretation. But, in the late 1960s,

the reader became a model defined in accordance to the text, when Wayne Booth's "implied" reader (1961), as the image of the reader the author had in mind when writing, was used by Wolfgang Iser to consider it a structure of the text (Iser 1978; Schmid 2013). The implied reader became a model that had all the requirements for the text to exercise its effects as demanded from the text itself (Iser 1978, 34). In response, Umberto Eco constructed a "model" reader, resembling the implied reader, but one that also acknowledges an actual reader's intertextual knowledge of other texts (Eco 1979, 7–8). Their knowledge of other texts gives empirical readers an intertextual frame to overcode the text's meaning as originally intended by the author. In that sense, the relationship between the model reader and the text can be understood as one where empirical readers are constantly in dialogue with the text, comparing it with other texts and their own experiences in life to derive meaning from it.

The dialogue between author, text, and empirical reader is still prevalent in our current age where many have a constant connection to the internet. Thomas (2019) explains that more than before people negotiate and rewrite the meaning of texts in "hybrid multimodal and multilingual constellations" across "asymmetrical trajectories" (154). Thomas' work can be placed among a line of studies on participatory culture consisting of scholars who describe the negotiation between fans and the texts of their fancy (such as Jenkins 1992; Evans 2008; Lamerichs 2018), with her focus being on black readers' re-imagination of popular cultural works specifically written for and by white persons. One of her examples is writer J.K. Rowling's tendencies to announce aspects about the identity of her characters from the *Harry Potter* universe in peripheral situations, outside of the main story line and mostly through social media, such as Dumbledore's queer sexuality, Hermione's racial and ethnic identity as possibly being black, and Rowling's doubt about the characters' romantic relationships. The response to Rowling's control over the text and the empirical readers' interpretative agency comes in the form of a readerly versus writerly dialogue, namely that while Rowling offers a readerly text, whereas readers negotiate this aspect, transforming it into a writerly text for them to rewrite as they want.

Nevertheless, texts such as the *Harry Potter* books and film series are *nonergodic* texts, that is, readers of these books and films only have to make trivial extranoematic effort to traverse them and derive meaning from them (see Aarseth 1997, 1). However, nowadays, there is an abundance of work where the structure of that work is such that users have to

put in non-trivial effort to traverse and interpret them, and end up in different paths depending on how they traverse the product, such as video-games (ibid.). Within participatory culture, players engage with the interpretation, reconfiguration, and construction of games as any other popular media text (Raessens 2005). Responding to the importance of the relationship between the reader and the text, Aarseth had already written back in 1997 that in games the user becomes a more integrated figure than the reader in reader-response theory. For the latter, the meaning-making process takes place in the head of the reader, but in the former, players will see and experience something else than other players depending on how they engage with the game (1997, 62).¹ In contrast to nonergodic texts, in games, the user does not only have an interpretative function, but also has a configurative function because of all the decisions they make within the text (65), thereby the text embodies Barthes' concept of the writerly text. The position of the player in relation to the text is, as Mortensen (2003) states, one of influence: "computer games do not presuppose a consuming user, and not even an actively understanding reader, but a manipulating reader who is part of the player" (92). Just like nonergodic texts have an implied reader, games have an implied player as a structure of the text itself to exercise its full effect (Aarseth 2007). That is to say that the implied player is the optimal player to fully exercise the effect of the game, giving the impression that the author is fully in control as they are the ones who decide the implied player of their game. However, empirical players have different play skills and different intertextual knowledge of other texts. Although players are subject to the type of players the developer has in mind for their game(s), players will display various degrees of going along and counteracting against the developer's ideas of what players should and should not do in their game (see, e.g., Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020). As such, even for the implied player we should take into consideration that the model can have different skills and knowledge as well, adding to the model's configurative function, which determines what they will see and how they interact with it, thereby affecting their own meaning-making process both on the level of the game and on the level of their own imagination. In other words, two players of one game may end up interacting with diverse content due to their different choices, skills, and knowledge.

Yet, although the structures of games (see Aarseth and Calleja 2015) are discussed as dynamic, where the content players engage with depends on their choices, the debates I have sketched above seem to assume that

the text is finished by the author—that the author cannot touch the work anymore. However, most videogames that we currently play have an online nature, enabling developers to regularly adjust the game when necessary, or add content to the game’s narrative world. A game such as *Overwatch* is constantly updated and changed by the product’s developer. Blizzard Entertainment introduces new characters and new stories and adjusts play modes and character moves on a regular basis. This allows Blizzard Entertainment to expand *Overwatch*’s narrative landscape as a whole so that players gradually learn about the new and existing characters’ motivations, fears, hopes, and lives surrounding *Overwatch* as a fictional task force. At the same time, the constant connection to the internet, required to play *Overwatch*, also gives Blizzard Entertainment the possibilities to update existing characters. In the case of the hero Mercy, they even went as far as adjusting her mechanics because Blizzard Entertainment did not like the kind of behavior Mercy players maintained during competitive matches. As a result, we should not think of *Overwatch* as an ergodic or nonergodic text, rather, I propose to call it a “fluid text,” which I consider a text whose structure the author can directly change. In the case of *Overwatch*, Blizzard Entertainment has an almost god-like power over the game, directly affecting how the implied player relates to the game, how they traverse the game, and thereby influence the player’s understanding of *Overwatch*’s construction of its characters, narrative landscape, and gameplay. In the next pages, I will provide several illustrative examples to show how the fluidity of *Overwatch* affects the player’s agency over the interpretation of and engagement with the game and its characters.

PUZZLING CHARACTERS TOGETHER

During its initial release in May 2016, *Overwatch* contained 21 different heroes, each of them assigned to one particular role: supports, tanks, offense, or defense. This was later changed to tanks, supports, or damage dealers. These heroes exist simultaneously as game pieces, representations of the players, and as fictional persons with background stories. In their article on the method of analysis for video game characters, Schröter and Thon (2014) present three ways in which (model) players perceive video game characters and their representations: a narrative experience, a ludic experience, and a social experience. In *Overwatch*, the ludic experience and the social experience are the primary means through which players

experience the heroes during gameplay, which means as game pieces and as representations of other players to play matches with and against.² On the other hand, the players' narrative experience of the heroes as fictional beings with an inner life occurs primarily through the game's peripheral means for which Blizzard Entertainment maintains a transmedial strategy. On the importance of stories in fighting games, Hutchinson (2019, 71) explains that the psychological development and depth of characters are among the main appeals for games of the fighting game genre, but these games do not deepen a character's background story by linear progression. Instead, she argues that a fighting game's story and its characters are hinted through peripheral aspects of the game, such as the fighters' move-sets, abilities, or cinematic cut-scenes, among others, to give a fuller understanding of the game's overall narrative (73). These pieces of story and characterization of the fighters function like a puzzle, "which players must piece together in their minds as they play through the game" (Hutchinson 2019, 73), showing that the player's agency over the text is both configurative and interpretative as they construct the game's characters.

Overwatch provides players the same form of agency, with its different play modes, matches, and goals within these matches. The game's story progression and the characters as fictional beings are told through peripheral channels: by in-game details such as dialogues between the different characters, yearly Archive missions,³ and within the paratexts (extra material other than the main story) on Blizzard Entertainment's official website, such as *Overwatch*'s animated shorts, hero profiles, and origin stories. The player then gathers and engages with different pieces of information about the figures in order to construct them into a whole. As the player pieces the characters together, they obtain a double perspective between perceiving the heroes as fictional beings and as game pieces. This perspective differs slightly from how characters are usually seen in literary studies where they have historically been discussed as either a construct within the text or a fictional being, or, since recently, both (Heidbrink 2010). The heroes have the position of a construct (game piece) in the game, they simultaneously function as persons in a story (fictional beings), and they are the players' avatars (representation of other players). In this chapter, I emphasize their double function as game pieces and as fictional beings. As a game piece, the heroes are effectively defined through their role in the gameplay and the abilities that they have. Mercy, the hero who I prefer to play, is a support character. In the paratexts, her real name is revealed as

Angela Ziegler, her age to be 37, and they show that she worked for the Overwatch task force as its head of medical research, for which she donned a Valkyrie suit to heal her team members on the frontlines of the war against the robots. Surprisingly, in the game, Mercy's healing kit is rather limited; she is not a powerful team healer like support heroes such as Ana or Baptiste (who are both introduced after the initial main cast of which Mercy has been a part since the release of the game), and instead focuses her healing primarily on a single target. Her value as a game piece mostly derives from damage boosts she can give to allies and her ability to resurrect allies when necessary, which is something exclusively Mercy can do out of the complete hero cast. She is also not much of a fighter; unless players are particularly skilled, Mercy, if left alone among enemies, will stand little chance to fight them off.

While not being the game's strongest healer, as a fictional being, Mercy is still nonetheless depicted as the main doctor in the *Overwatch* story. Within the game product, players receive hints about the characters' backgrounds and relationships with each other through the game's voice lines, the different environments, visual appearance and skins, and abilities. For example, Mercy's original outfit is a machinal white suit, and wings that give her the ability to fly at times. Together with her white skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair, she makes up quite the stereotypical angelic image. Voice lines are uttered when heroes use their abilities, when they are waiting with their allies for the match to start, or to warn their allies. Some of these voice lines are in the language of the character's country of origin, while other voice lines are in English with a matching accent so that the characters are also bestowed with a specific nationality. Additionally, the character's function as a fictional being is strengthened by the paratexts on the Blizzard Entertainment website. There are hero profiles and videos such as the origin stories, and animated shorts, that focus on the characters as persons and tell players their background stories. For example, in the comic "Uprising" (Chu 2017), Mercy is depicted as the doctor in charge of the training and evaluation facility of the Overwatch headquarters in Switzerland, urging her commander to go to the frontlines in London to save lives. If her status as a medical doctor was not clear enough yet, players can deduct from this short story that she is not afraid to go into battle to save people either.

Through this double perspective, the player is in constant active dialogue with the game, constructing the character through interpretative and configurative practices. Players might for example have a ludic

experience in which Mercy functions more akin to a game piece, important to how they navigate the game during a match, while at other times, they have a narrative experience as she conveys her life as a medical doctor, when they are in the game's waiting room for a match to start or browsing through Blizzard Entertainment's website. Players might understand certain heroes better than others, especially if they play certain heroes more than others and are more skilled at playing them. For instance, I have little affinity with damage heroes such as Genji. In fact, I have a particular dislike for Genji whose speed can quickly take Mercy out of battle. I never use him during a match. My ludic experience of him remains on the level of having to adjust my gameplay when he appears in a match, but from a narrative experience, I understand him as a lonely ninja whose brother Hanzo, also a hero in the game, feels guilty over Genji's supposed death by having watched the animated short "Dragons" (Blizzard Entertainment 2016a). Yet, at the same time we have to acknowledge that although players might wish to deny certain interpretations of the character, as Olli Leino (2007, 116) explains, they can only deny so many meanings before they decrease their possibilities to act in the game. Since interpretation in video games happens on multiple interpretive levels, as is the case with the double perspectives on *Overwatch's* characters, players have to consent with the author's intention to a certain degree no matter how skilled they are. In that sense, the metaphor of readerly and writerly texts does not fully apply, since authorial intention plays a decisive role in how players navigate through the game and make sense of it. So, while I might not like Mercy's overhaul personally and want to throw my controller at the screen with every Genji I meet in a match, I cannot deny their existence as intended by the author if I still wish to play the game.

THE RETURN OF AUTHORIAL INTENTION

Putting together a character would serve as a fine dialogue between text and player if *Overwatch* were a dynamic, writerly text. However, in the rest of this chapter I will argue that the developer's intrusive power over the text turns the game into a fluid text, transforming the dialogue into a monologue from author to player through the game. Part of Blizzard Entertainment's transmedial strategy is that it updates its website with new videos and comics when it announces temporary in-game events or new characters. An example of such an expansion is the limited-time campaign "Mercy's Recall Challenge" that ran from November 12 until

December 2, 2019. The event itself offered players extra in-game bonus content.⁴ Coinciding with the event, Blizzard Entertainment released the short story “Valkyrie” (Chu 2019) on its website. Here players learnt about Mercy’s loss of her parents, her reason to join the task force Overwatch, her irritation over how her inventions during her time in the task force have been misused, and how she, as she had left Overwatch, still felt the need to escape her Overwatch past. The story has two functions: as an advertisement of the game and as the background on which the “Mercy’s Recall Challenge” event takes place so that players receive a narrative reason beyond just collecting the awards from matches they won. This strategy functions as narrative expansion. As players are stimulated to play particularly during temporary in-game events, Blizzard Entertainment expands *Overwatch*’s narrative landscape on which the game operates to promote the game. In this sense, the puzzle players have to piece together expands as every addition adds to the construction of the character as a narrative experience.

Blizzard Entertainment’s strategy does not make the *Overwatch* franchise stand apart from other transmedia franchises. It is quite common for franchises to expand in such a way that it creates multiple worlds and universes to create coherence between stories (Thon 2015). Characters too are swept up in this strive for continuity (see Blom 2020) so that readers or recipients rather look for narrative explanations on the paradoxical appearances of characters than accept the paradox that the same character in one text is not the same person in another (see Thon 2019). Blizzard Entertainment too follows this strive of continuity, as the double perspective between a game piece and a fictional being is the result of Blizzard Entertainment attempting to create a single coherent world, although I have argued elsewhere that it instead created a shared universe between players consisting of multiple worlds (see Blom 2018). In my own work (Blom 2020) I argued that even in games where players have the agency to construct the identity of characters according to how they play, trans-medial strategies imposed on the characters retroactively negate the player’s agency over their construction of the figure. Yet, there too I did not discuss the developer’s intrusive power directly within the text itself. However, since *Overwatch* is an *online* game media franchise, it stands apart from most other transmedia franchises: their intrusive power to adjust the text itself—instead of retroactively through other texts—directly affects players in how they engage with and interpret the heroes as game pieces and as fictional beings together.

About every four months, Blizzard Entertainment introduces a new character, the first being the support hero Ana, introduced in July 2016, and the last—before the release of *Overwatch 2* (Blizzard Entertainment TBA)—being the damage hero, Echo, introduced in April 2020. Blizzard Entertainment's transmedial strategy works so that in the hero introduction videos on its website, the new heroes are introduced as game pieces, showing off their abilities in the game's matches. The origin story videos on its website, on the other hand, introduce the new heroes as fictional beings, showing how they fit the narrative landscape and their role in it. New relationships between pre-existing and new characters are then constructed in the comics, short stories, and animated shorts for players to understand how these new characters relate to the previous heroes. With the introduction of a new hero, the gameplay also slightly changes as Blizzard Entertainment adjusts and updates the matches to fit the abilities of the new character. With the introduction of Sombra, for example, players can prevent opponents from taking any medical kits to heal their avatar, and they can also block opponents from using their heroes' ultimate abilities for some time.

This kind of strategy is mostly one of expansion; both the game and the narrative landscape become larger. However, occasionally, Blizzard Entertainment decides to do what is considered a massive overhaul; changing the move-set of a character to such an extent that it changes how players play in a match. In August 2017, Blizzard Entertainment's game director Jeff Kaplan announced in a 10-minute-long YouTube video an update to Mercy because Blizzard Entertainment had noticed a particular in-game behavior from Mercy players they considered wrong for a main healing character: Mercy players tended to hide when the hero's ultimate ability was ready to be used in order to resurrect the entire team (Kaplan 2017; McWhertor 2017). To counter this behavior, Blizzard Entertainment changed her ultimate ability "Resurrect," which allowed players to bring all team members back at once in a match, to "Valkyrie," that amplified her healing abilities and lets her fly around. Her resurrect ability became a standard ability—unlike an ultimate ability that has to be built up throughout a match—but with the limit that players could only resurrect team members once at a time with a long cooldown time so that Mercy players have to strategically decide which player on their team they could resurrect (Kaplan 2017).

It is at this point that we have to drop the metaphor of readerly and writerly texts. As Hutchinson (2019, 70) explains, the move-set of a

character is one of the peripheral means through which players come to know the character. This grants the player the double perspective to perceive them as both game pieces and fictional beings, but it also means that altering the hero as a game piece alters the fictional being in the narrative landscape. When the move-set changes, so does the player's interpretation of Mercy. Mercy's overhaul from being able to save up to five team members at the same time to one where she can only save one at a time does not only change how players strategically play the game, but also negates her position as the task force's main doctor. It is striking that "Mercy's Recall Challenge" appears two years after the overhaul to explain her problems with the Overwatch force team. After her overhaul in August 2017, Blizzard Entertainment announced in November 2017 a new healer, Moira, who can heal multiple allies simultaneously at a higher rate than Mercy can, who cannot heal multiple allies at the same time. As a fictional being, Moira's origin story portrays her as a risk-taking scientist who was held back by Overwatch's rules. The game's lead writer, Michael Chu, even hinted during BlizzCon 2017, a couple of days after the announcement of Moira, that Moira and Mercy have a backstory where they used each other's technology during their shared time in the task force (Mediavaldragon 2017), although this backstory does not explicitly appear in the official paratexts. In that light, the recall challenge reads like an official rectification to alter Mercy's position in the narrative landscape to match her re-design as a game piece. Players cannot do anything about these changes; although they are able to reject Mercy's overhaul on the level of interpretation, the configurative function has been interrupted by the developer. That is, players cannot reject her overhaul inside the text itself without major consequences, because Blizzard Entertainment has directly changed the game's structure. The player's agency over the text only extends so far that they can choose to either accept Mercy's new design or, as a counteract, face the consequences of not being able to play with Mercy anymore or the game at all. No matter what choice, players have to act upon Blizzard Entertainment's authorial intention, regardless of their play skills, and whether they like it or not.

Reader-response theory was all about how the author was losing their control over the meaning of a text; however, I believe that over the last decades or so, the author—whose work is now online and ready to be changed any day when the business strategy so needs—has gained more authoritative power over their text. As Mercy's massive overhaul demonstrates, Blizzard Entertainment has much better knowledge of how players

directly engage with their text than traditional authors have of their readers' choices in meaning-making from their text. Blizzard Entertainment also has the intrusive power to directly change the structure of the same text based on their knowledge of their players' engagement with it. Blizzard Entertainment might not be able to directly interfere with the players' imagination, but they can surely alter the text. This power enables them to enforce authorial intention upon their players, demanding from their players specific behaviors to traverse the game—regardless of the player's individual skills. Reader-response critics, such as Rosenblatt, Barthes, or Eco did not and could not take the form of authoritative power into consideration that developer-authors have over their text in the current digital age. And, unfortunately, Thomas' description of the author-reader struggle remains on the level of the nonergodic text, not taking phenomena like games into consideration. Therefore, the player's interpretative agency over a text is no more a matter of ignoring the author's influence, but rather a matter that should be addressed in the process of meaning-making of fluid texts in particular.

CONCLUSIONS

In online media, such as *Overwatch*, the author has become an entity that can directly meddle with the work itself, changing the work's shape, erasing the shape it once had, and affecting the players' engagement directly with it. *Overwatch* is not unique in that companies modify their intellectual property (IP), but it is part of a more general trend where companies carefully control and adjust their IP. For example, the developer, Riot Games, completely rewrote the backstory of *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009–present) in 2014 (Plunkett 2014). Or, more recently, for the free-to-play game *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo 2020), the developer adds and modifies content such as new characters, mechanics, and events every couple of weeks to keep players playing and spending money on additional in-game content. Online technology, with more games being connected to the internet, enables developers to erase and modify their product directly at a frequent pace. It is important to keep in mind that *Overwatch* is also an esports game, so Blizzard Entertainment has certain priorities higher in their hierarchy than others, such as making sure the heroes are interesting as fictional beings from a narrative point of view, but also that they are well-balanced as game pieces for esports players. This may result in paradoxical outcomes such as Mercy's overhaul to change players' in-game

behavior, which conflicts with her original narrative backstory. There is much power in the capability of directly changing the structure of a work as it is being engaged with by others, interrupting their agency to traverse the text how they want. There is even more power in being able to modify a text at rapid frequencies, forcing players to have to accept the characters exactly as the developer intended in order to play the game. It is thus perhaps time to acknowledge that the author is back, knocking on your door to come out and play—exactly in the way they want you to.

NOTES

1. Aarseth distinguishes between *scriptons* and *textons*. The former refers to “strings [of signs in a text] as they appear to reader” and the latter to “strings as they exist in the text” (1997, 62). His argument goes to explain that in a cybertext, such as games, depending on how users engage with the cybertext, scriptons as they appear to the player might not always be the same as the textons in the structure of the cybertext. Two players might play the same game product, that is, playing the same game, but do not have to see or experience the same thing, because they each see different scriptons depending on how they traverse that game.
2. During the different competitive matches players go through, they will be matched up with other players making up a team, and battling against a team of other players, each hero representing one of the players. The heroes players choose during a match decide how the player plays. Each hero has a different role in the team—either support, tank, or damage—with different abilities to match that role. While each hero can do some damage, their roles as game pieces determine on what players will focus during gameplay, while support hero Mercy’s abilities emphasizes healing her team members, tank hero D.Va’s abilities draws attention to herself to provide protection to the players’ team mates.
3. Archive missions are a yearly returning ‘Person versus Environment’ (PvE) mode that explore key moments in the *Overwatch* story. Occasionally, special comics on Blizzard Entertainment’s website are released to promote the event and to progress the *Overwatch* story overall, such as the comic *Uprising* (Chu 2017).
4. Winning three games awarded players with a Mercy player icon, winning six games awarded them with a Mercy spray, and with winning nine games in total, players were rewarded with a legendary Mercy *skin*. These items could only be obtained during this event and, until now, no other time.

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Player Reception of Change and Stability in Character Mechanics

Tanja Väiläsallo and Maria Ruotsalainen

I felt as if these changes undermined everything I knew from my favorite hero at her core. Being fair, fun, and balanced.

Change is a constant element of online games, and *Overwatch* as well as its playable characters have been through multiple changes since the launch of the game in 2016. The above quote is from a discussion on the official *Overwatch* forum commenting on the significant changes made to the mechanics of the character Mercy. It expresses the personal significance of *knowing* a game character, emotional engagement with the character, and the affective reaction to changes in that character's mechanics. In this chapter, we examine the relationships players have with the playable characters of *Overwatch* and specifically the role that character mechanics have in these relationships. Changes to game characters are a topic of avid discussion in

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Overwatch communities and evoke articulations of the meaning of game characters for the players. Thus, approaching the player-character relationship through these discussions gives the opportunity to understand how players themselves construct their engagement with characters through character mechanics. Through our analysis we ask: what can change and stability reveal about the relationship between players and characters?

Change in game characters often means changes in game mechanics, as exemplified in the changes to the character Mercy, but it can also mean narrative changes and reveals of new information, such as the reveal of another *Overwatch* character Soldier:76's homosexuality in a short story released in 2019 (Chu 2019). Also, the interpretations made by the players can change over time through different fan discourses and practices. Addition of new characters is a change that can alter the experience of the game as a whole. In our previous research we have demonstrated that *Overwatch* game characters evoke affective engagement in players and fans and that narrative and mimetic (human-like) elements of the characters are intertwined with game mechanics in the reception of these characters (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019). Here we continue further into analyzing the exact nature of this engagement, through the lens of "change". In this chapter we focus on change in relation to game mechanics, whether as alterations in characters or addition of new characters, but we will also include mimetic elements of the characters in how they connect with the mechanics. Analysis of change and stability in game characters is ever more necessary, with the proliferation of transmedial content—*Overwatch* is not merely a game but a center of a transmedial world consisting of an official website containing character biographies, comics, short stories, animated videos, and esports (Koskimaa et al. 2021).

Our interest lies in the study of how audiences engage with game characters. Nevertheless, to study reception we also need to take into consideration the media content. In order to understand the possible modes of engagement with the playable heroes of *Overwatch* we analyze two heroes in more detail, tank hero Reinhardt and support hero Brigitte. Several *Overwatch* heroes could offer unique insights into the reception of game characters; we chose Reinhardt and Brigitte because they are near opposites in terms of change and stability: Reinhardt is a character who has been in the game from its launch in May 2016 and whose mechanics have stayed fairly unchanged. Brigitte was introduced in February 2018 and her mechanics have gone through multiple changes. Reinhardt and Brigitte have similar mechanics, which makes discussing these particular characters together all the more apt. The stories of these two are also heavily

intertwined: Brigitte is Reinhardt's loyal squire but also his goddaughter. Due to *Overwatch* being a transmedia product, our character analysis is necessarily crossmedial and multimodal, since *Overwatch* characters, including Reinhardt and Brigitte, have multiple instances in different media and in different narratives and products across the whole *Overwatch* transmedial world.

THEORY

Digital game characters' most evident difference to fictional characters in other media is their technologically interactive nature, which allows players, depending on the game, to influence them in multiple ways. Fictional characters have been theorized for decades in literary studies (e.g., Forster 1962; Phelan 1989; Smith 1995; Michaels 1998) and film studies (e.g., Eder 2010), but theory on game characters specifically has emerged alongside the proliferation of game studies (e.g., Klevjer 2007; Yee 2014). The relationship between fictional characters and their audiences (readers/viewers/players) across media has been interwoven in character theorization. This relationship has often been discussed as "identification" or "engagement" (Smith 1995). In game studies, the understanding of this player-character or player-avatar relationship has been accompanied and influenced by an understanding of game characters also, or even only, as sets of abilities or tools for simulation (e.g., Newman 2002, 2009). Other studies have in turn reconciled the different aspects of game characters through their character definitions (e.g., Klevjer 2007; Vella 2016) or further presented models for analyzing the player-character relationship (e.g., Bloom, this volume; Lankoski 2011). Felix Schröter and Jan-Noël Thon (2014) have suggested a model for analyzing game characters which combines different modes of character representation (narration, simulation, communication) with modes of player experience (narrative, ludic, social) to form three dimensions of game characters as intersubjective constructs: characters as fictional beings, characters as game pieces, and characters as avatars. For our study, the separation of narration and simulation as modes of representation, and narrative and ludic experience, are particularly useful, since our analysis excludes in-game communication between players.

The emergence and proliferation of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006, 2011), where stories are told through multiple media with each media using its own strengths making a unique contribution to the whole, demands an understanding of characters that are not limited to one media. We understand the transmedial world created through these different

media is an abstract content system existing as a mental construct in the mind of its creators and audiences (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 2014). In these transmedial worlds characters can traverse across media and some transmedial worlds can even be described as character-driven (Tosca and Klastrup 2020), such as *Overwatch*. However, despite the ideal of balanced transmedia, where each part equally contributes to the whole, most transmedial worlds are actually unbalanced, having one “core text” (Mittell 2015, 294). In unbalanced transmedia the core text has most weight meaning that events or elements featured in its transmedial expansions are not necessarily taken into account in the core text which can lead to inconsistencies in the narrative world (Harvey 2015, 91). We are interested in how players negotiate their interpretation of game characters and their mechanics in the transmedial world of *Overwatch*, where the actual game is the evident core text.

In order to grasp the different dimensions of characters across the transmedial world of *Overwatch* we turn to James Phelan’s (1989) theory of fictional characters, which frames characters as combinations of their mimetic, synthetic, and thematic components. The mimetic component describes the ways in which the character is human-like, identifiable as a person. The synthetic component is, in essence, the artificial or constructed nature of the character. The thematic component includes the character traits that have the potential to connect to particular themes through representation. All three components are present in *Overwatch* characters whether they are portrayed in the game, comics, animations, or written texts, but in this chapter we focus on the mimetic and synthetic components as in the reception of narratives, the focus constantly alternates between the mimetic and the synthetic (Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012, 113). While the fictional narrative layer in the actual game is fairly thin, both components are still present, even though the synthetic components of characters may be more pronounced. An important feature of the synthetic component is that it cannot be reduced to game mechanics, but encompasses all the ways a character is artificially created through design, graphics, animation, voice acting, narrative, and so on, be it in the game itself or in the different transmedial expansions around it.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to understand character reception among players of a particular game we must begin with an understanding of the characters themselves. We analyze the characters ReinhardtReinhardt and BrigitteBrigitte through materials both in the game and in the broader transmedial world. In-game materials include all the representations of the characters in the game (heroHero gallery, skins,I voice lines, emotesEmotes, sprays2), character mechanics, and gameplay. This material is gathered through close-playing the game and analyzing the gameplay with these particular characters. Other materials include all relevant information about the characters on the official Blizzard Entertainment website, such as character description, description of mechanics, background story, introductory videos, animated short stories, comics, and short stories. These materials include both narrative and non-narrative content. Even though *Overwatch* gameplay does not replicate or depict events described in the background stories of its characters or other fictional narratives from its transmedial diegetic universe, it does draw from them in multiple ways. The game maps are connected to the lore and often to particular characters. However, in order to win, and also in order to not get reported for bad behavior by other players, each player is expected to follow the main goal of each map, a goal that has no narrative explanation or connection. Different character elements, such as voice lines and skins reference their character's histories. In addition to these, there is an abundance of unofficial player-created material, such as fan fiction and fan art, that were excluded from our analysis, since here we focus on the official content.

We traced the player-character relationship using two types of research data: online discussions and a survey. We collected discussions from *Overwatch* discussion forums on the Blizzard Entertainment website using search terms “favorite” and “favourite” to find and gather relevant discussions (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019). The consequent dataset consisted of forum messages posted between February 21 and June 20, 2018. The dataset consists of 19 discussion threads (175 pages) with a topic related to players' favorite game characters. The forum data was analyzed focusing on reasons for character preferences using open-ended coding with Atlas.ti software resulting in 223 individual codes, which were further grouped into 9 code families to find relevant themes in the data. When analyzing the online discussions on favorite characters the reasons given were categorized as follows: personality traits (80 mentions), mechanics (68), lore

(60), character's function or role in the game (51), voice lines or voice actor (24), appearance (24), other media related to the character (13), broader themes related to the character (13), and player's affective relationship, empathy or sympathy for the character (11). In addition to this dataset from the *Overwatch* forums, we also analyzed an individual discussion thread from the same forum focusing on the hero Brigitte and her changes taking place in July and August 2020. This thread consisted of 93 pages and the analysis was done by using close reading.

Survey data was gathered using an online survey aimed at *Overwatch* players and *Overwatch* esports audiences using opportunistic sampling. The survey link was shared on different social media services. From August 2018 to November 2019 the survey gathered 428 responses (excluding 12 empty survey forms). The majority of survey respondents were male, 22.1%, female, with 2.1% identifying differently, and 2 not answering the question. Quite expectedly, the majority of the respondents were between 15 and 28 years of age (78.7%). The majority of the respondents had also played the game for at least a year (84.1%). The survey was created as part of a larger research project on *Overwatch*, so only some of the questions pertain to characters specifically. These questions also had to be updated while the survey was running, since new characters were added during its run (Wrecking ball, Ashe, Baptiste), one for each role. After the survey data was gathered, two more heroes, Echo (damage hero) and Sigma (tank hero), have been added to the game. In this paper, we focus on responses to three open-ended questions, namely one asking for reasons for choosing a favorite gameplay-based, one asking for reasons for choosing a favorite lore-based character, and "How do you feel about the new heroes added to the game after its launch". The answers of the survey were analyzed using close reading.

REINHARDT: STEADFAST WARRIOR

Reinhardt's background story is told through an animated short story *Honor and Glory* (Blizzard Entertainment 2017). The story is framed through a scene of Reinhardt and his squire Brigitte drinking beer in an empty tavern in a demolished town. Brigitte is telling Reinhardt he does not need to go back to fighting with *Overwatch*, that he has sacrificed enough already. This launches a flashback, where we see Reinhardt as a young member of an elite fighting team, preparing for battle. He scoffs at his commander Balderich von Aldin's decision to join *Overwatch*, a secret

squad, for fighting in a secret society brings no glory, and Reinhardt clearly values glory. In the following battle, we see him recklessly rushing forward against his commander's orders, leaving his team behind. Finally, their troops are forced to retreat. Reinhardt is deep in the enemy lines and in trouble, but Balderich stays on to save him. He then sends Reinhardt to help others while he stays on to hold back the enemy, sacrificing himself in the process. Back in the current day of the story, Reinhardt tells Brigitte: "I have been called. I must answer. Always."

Through this story, young Reinhardt is portrayed as arrogant, overly confident, thirsting for battle, and especially the glory that comes with victory, while old Reinhardt has been changed by the lessons he learned and the guilt over his fallen commander, and has become someone following his duty above all. The battle is a turning point, where he learns to take responsibility for others.¹ Reinhardt is essentially transformed from a glory-seeking warrior to a steadfast soldier, guided by his values. Reinhardt represents a narrative stereotype of an old soldier, once more returning to the battlefield because he is needed—but also just to prove he still can do it. Even though old Reinhardt's portrayal in the animation is somber and steadfast, voice lines in the game create ambivalence as to whether Reinhardt has really learnt his lesson: "Fortune favors the bold", "Honor! Justice! Reinhardt!", and "Honor and glory" seem to portray the side of Reinhardt's personality that takes risks and loves the thrill and glory of battle, while in the narratives those are attributes of his younger self. These kinds of contradictions contribute to the humanness of the character, strengthening their mimetic component (see also Pearson 2007, 47).

Reinhardt (see Image 5.1) is one of the most popular *Overwatch* characters (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019). On the discussion forums, one commentator explains their preference for Reinhardt as follows:

My favorite hero is Reinhardt, because he saved Torbjorn, and he's fun to play with. His lore's pretty hefty, especially since he was part of Uprising. I love his skins so much, Crusader and Lieutenant Wilhelm, along with Wujing being my favorites.

Reinhardt is a character whose history is constantly referenced in the game, also in the form of skins. In the skins menu the historically significant skins are accompanied by a short text imparting information about the characters' past (see Image 5.2). This way, even the players who do not follow any narrative transmedial content are exposed to the characters'



Image 5.1 Reinhardt as an old man, as he appears in the “current” time of *Overwatch*

background stories. However, the historical skins are not necessarily meant to realistically capture a particular moment in the fictional world’s timeline: they are more reminiscent of costumes than actual depictions of the characters in a particular historical moment, further setting the game apart from any narrative progression. “Balderich” skin is the armor worn by Balderich von Alder, Reinhardt’s fallen commander, and “Greifhardt” skin is the same armor after being left behind and deteriorating, both versions seen in *Honor and Glory*. It seems that Reinhardt himself could not really have worn these armors. The third skin seen in the animation is the “Crusader” skin (Image 5.2), the armor worn by Reinhardt as a young man. This is also a skin where Reinhardt’s face can be seen and he is portrayed as a young man. Choosing this skin means playing another, younger version of Reinhardt, which is a deviation from the place in time where *Overwatch* characters mainly exist in the game. This anachronistic or fantastical use of skins creates a conflict in the narrative representation of Reinhardt drawing the player’s attention to the synthetic component of the character: it is evidently the designer’s choice to implement these “costumes” and the player is made aware of that, at least in the case of young Reinhardt.



Image 5.2 Reinhardt’s skin “Crusader” in the skin menu with the accompanying background information

Reinhardt is depicted throughout the Overwatch transmedial world as a hypermasculine character with an exaggeratedly muscular form and wide shoulders, a typical manner of depicting playable game characters who are male (Dill and Thill 2007). His armor is partially responsible for his size but he is depicted as a big man even without it. His weapon, rocket hammer, is massive as well, further underlining hypermasculine stereotypes. Appropriately for his size and age, Reinhardt is fairly slow in his movements and becomes even slower when using his shield-like *barrier field* ability, which he uses to protect his team while they damage the enemy. His slow heavy gait is emphasized with the player’s camera tipping from side to side. When playing the character for the first time, the player’s attention is first drawn to this camera effect as a synthetic component of the character, before growing used to the camera movement. This is a case of simulation that creates an embodied experience as this massive old warrior, thus, affecting the player’s understanding of the character as a fictional being (cf. Schröter and Thon 2014, 56), but also impacting the game mechanics—Reinhardt is slower than many other characters and his slow movements and difficulty to see behind him when holding his shield make him dependent on his team.

The balance between defensive and offensive actions while playing Reinhardt can be challenging. Reinhardt's offensive mechanics are aggressive and showy, luring the player into an aggressive play style, along with his personality as an aggressive and energetic fighter present in voice lines such as "Bring! It! On! I live for this!" or "Again! Again!" A typical non-tactical or less experienced style of playing Reinhardt can be described as "charging with guns blazing" using his *charge* mechanic and abandoning one's team, as young Reinhardt does in *Honor and Glory*. A more prudent play style with Reinhardt is one focusing on protecting and enabling his team; this demands the player to use his aggressive actions sparingly, since they cannot use his offense mechanics, *rocket hammer*, *fire strike*, and *charge* while maintaining his shield. Blocking damage can make it difficult for a Reinhardt player to achieve medals,² even though blocking damage is sometimes shown as a figure at the end of the match, when up to four players are highlighted for their achievements. This does not mean that a Reinhardt player cannot get recognition from their team or other players, but this protective, non-aggressive mode of play does not by default bring glory. Nevertheless, this combination of abilities can also be a pull-in factor as articulated by a respondent in our survey who gave this as a reason for choosing him as a favorite—"The balance between dmg/tanking/frag"—or on the *Overwatch* forum:

Everything about him just suits my play style. I like being a protector, an initiator, in the front line, smashing faces with hammers

Reinhardt's mechanics have experienced relatively few changes since the game's launch. What is noteworthy is that even though Reinhardt is a popular character in *Overwatch*, and was the most popular lore-based character in our survey, there are relatively few discussions and comments about him in comparison to many other characters. One explanation is the stability in his design, which further supports some of the core elements of his personality, being steadfast and dependable, but also uncompromising and resistant to change. When Reinhardt dies in-game and is respawned he never expresses self-doubt or reflection, merely his tireless attitude in voice lines such as "Again! Again!" and "I will not give up the fight".

BRIGITTE: INTRODUCING A NEW PLAYABLE CHARACTER

In the *Overwatch* hero gallery, Brigitte is described (see Image 5.3) as follows: “Brigitte Lindholm, squire to Reinhardt Wilhelm, is a former mechanical engineer who has decided to take up arms and fight on the front lines to protect those in need”. Brigitte is the only character whose hero gallery description directly mentions another character. She is introduced through Reinhardt, making their connection evident, even to players who do not engage with transmedial expansions to the game. In her character story on the *Overwatch* website, Brigitte is described as caretaker to Reinhardt. This role is in the forefront in stories about Reinhardt published before Brigitte was a playable character, the animated short story *Honor and Glory* as well as the web comic *Dragon Slayer* (Burns and Nesskain 2016), where Brigitte attempts to keep Reinhardt away from battle. These stories represent a feminine stereotype where a female character is portrayed as avoiding conflict and preferring security. When Brigitte was introduced as a playable character, she no longer shies away from battle, but fighting is framed as her helping Reinhardt (or “those in need of protection”) and motivated only through that goal. In the first voice line in the video introducing Brigitte, she says: “When my godfather was called back to Overwatch, I tried to convince him not to go. He



Image 5.3 Brigitte in the *Overwatch* hero gallery

wouldn't listen. In the end, I can't let him fight alone." (Blizzard Entertainment 2018a).

Brigitte's background is revealed more thoroughly in the animated short story *Origin Story: Brigitte* (Blizzard Entertainment 2018b). It is revealed she is the daughter of Torbjörn, another Overwatch hero, and that Reinhardt is her father's friend whom she has known all her life. Brigitte's origin story reveals her childhood dream of becoming an engineer, echoing her father's interest toward mechanics, but unlike Torbjörn she focuses on "armor fabrication and defensive systems", in line with her role as a support hero. Her voice lines in the game, "I'm getting good at this" and "This is all part of the learning process", repeatedly emphasize how she is a beginner in combat and is still evolving.

With Reinhardt the player needs to constantly balance the offensive and defensive mechanics and playstyles, whereas with Brigitte these mechanics are intertwined. Brigitte has a *rocket flail* which functions as a dual mechanic with an obvious impact of the action itself (damaging the enemy) and a passive consequence of that action (healing nearby allies). The dual mechanic complements Brigitte's personality in an attempt to soften and smoothen her aggressive abilities through the ultimate goal of healing. Brigitte's versatile mechanics are also seen as defining her role as a healer as in the following comments:

Brigitte. No doubt. I've been waiting for a "Tanky Support" since launch. (...) People have been complaining about her stun, but I think the lock-down part of her kit is what makes her fun, and capable of protecting the backline in a way that no one really can.

Nevertheless, Brigitte's initial reception in the player community was mixed. In our survey, many negative comments focused on her. Brigitte quickly became part of the team composition perceived to have the best winning possibilities. She became a required pick for the optimal composition in professional and high ladder play.³ The complaints were mainly about her abilities: a number of our survey respondents felt Brigitte was "broken" and too powerful while simultaneously not requiring much effort from the players playing her ("Brigitte is too rewarding with how easy she is to play"). One respondent in our survey even said Brigitte made her stop playing for a while, even though they were playing in a semi-professional team. Some of the criticism was targeted at adding two support characters in a row, since Brigitte was introduced only a few months

after another support hero, Moira. Only one of the complaints concerned the fictional elements of the character, while still criticizing her abilities as well:

Brigitte—an awkward addition. Not only does everyone make fun of her backstory with who’s her real dad and no one pronounces her name right, her character is impossible to 1v1 with her heal on attack and shield. Not to mention another character that can stun lock

After Brigitte was established as part of the optimal team composition, negative posts with a hashtag #deletebrig started appearing on multiple platforms, including Twitter, the official *Overwatch* forums, and Reddit subreddits. Players, including some professional players, even started naming their main or alternative game accounts with the name Deletebrig. Those partaking in the #deletebrig movement considered Brigitte to be too powerful, particularly in relation to the amount of skill she required to be played effectively. She was also seen to dictate the pace of the game too much. Brigitte was branded as “low-skill hero”, having very low aim requirements, since aim is often perceived as the hallmark of skill. Simultaneously, other heroes who do not require aiming skills, such as Reinhardt, do not get classified as “low-skill”. There might be several reasons for this: the main tank role, which Reinhardt performs, is generally considered as one of the hardest and most impactful roles in the game, even though many main tanks are not aim-intensive to play. It is often perceived that playing the main tank role requires initiative, leadership, and in-depth understanding of the game, while these considerations are not always extended to the support role. Furthermore, Reinhardt’s classic design as a hypermasculine tank could further influence the positive opinion many players have about him.

While the name of the #deletebrig movement suggests that its supporters wanted the character deleted, the criticism was mainly targeted toward Brigitte’s abilities, rather than the whole character. Nevertheless, those who opposed the movement discussed Brigitte as a character who was more than just her abilities—someone with a background story, personality, and a particular aesthetic. This suggests different ways of engaging with the game and its characters: those who equate the character almost fully with her abilities, character as simulation, and those who focus more strongly on the character’s narrative representation (cf. Schröter and Thon 2014; see also Blamey, this volume). Similar ideas are echoed in Ragnhild

Tronstad's (2008) examination of play and characters in *World of Warcraft*, where she argues that a character's appearance cannot be treated independently from their capacities, as both together create the flow of the play, but in different forms of play one might take preference over other: in role-play the character appearance and background have a more important role, while in what she calls regular play, knowing the character's skill sets and mechanics, is more important.

Even though it appeared the criticism was mainly targeted against Brigitte's abilities, Brigitte's voice actor, Matilda Smedius, also received hate mail for the character even though she was not responsible for designing Brigitte's abilities.⁴ Smedius gained celebrity beyond that of a typical voice actor, not based on her professional work but on character mechanics which are beyond her control. One reason can be the transmedial expansions which promoted the voice actor by making her narration the only dialogue in Brigitte's introductory video and origin story. This intertwining of actress and character in character reception can be understood through parasocial relationships with media figures, where "the user responds as in a typical social relationship" (Giles 2002, 279), but it also emphasizes how the character's synthetic component can become foregrounded in the player's emotional engagement with the character, when we understand the focus on voice acting as focus on the synthetic.

Apparently, as a result of community feedback, Brigitte's abilities have been under constant change since her launch. Her offensive abilities have been weakened and her healing abilities have been changed back and forth. Many of these changes took place during the running of our survey, and this is evident in comments about her being too strong and "being constantly nerfed⁵ for that reason, just bad ability design from Blizzard", thus, focusing on the character as an artifact, their synthetic component, rather than their narrative or simulation. However, players who enjoy playing Brigitte would sometimes see these constant changes as an attack to everything Brigitte is and represents. In a discussion thread in the official *Overwatch* forum one player organized "Brigitte's funeral" after Brigitte received her 19th change since her introduction to the game. The player wrote:

This marks Brigitte's final resting place. Some of us have had memories of joy and happiness with her; some have had disagreements with her. No matter what you believe, I hope you can acknowledge she touched us all in some way or another.

Other players joined the discussion, echoing similar sentiment, for instance by writing:

She's undeniably significantly worse than before the latest changes, but that's completely irrelevant. It's not about her being "good" or "bad", but rather about her having anything left of what made her Brigitte and not interchangeable with some random healer archetype. They can balance characters without gutting what makes them unique and gives them character. Well, apparently they can't, but it'd be perfectly possible.

Thus, for some Brigitte players the constant changes in Brigitte's abilities did not only make playing her less enjoyable, but changed her as a character to an extent they perceived her as "dead".

The criticism and discussion surrounding Brigitte foregrounds the character's synthetic component, but simultaneously, draws our attention to the character's mimetic qualities, particularly her narrative representation as someone who is not quite there yet, who is learning and evolving, which seems to correspond with the state of her mechanics as constantly changing and evolving.

DISCUSSION

Reinhardt and Brigitte as fictional characters have life stories that are heavily intertwined, and they also share similar aesthetics and game mechanics. The differences between them lie in their production and reception. Reinhardt was one of the original game characters, available to the players from the game's launch. His mechanics have stayed unchanged, loyal to his portrayal as the steadfast soldier, and the transmedial content built around him has so far not forced any significant changes to the perception of his personality but has rather emphasized his existing traits. The one major event that changed Reinhardt is far in the past and is depicted as one more reason for his steadfast nature.

Conversely, Brigitte was launched as a game character almost two years later and her mechanics have been repeatedly altered on several occasions. While she existed as a fictional character from early on, her story was heavily built around Reinhardt and has not really been fleshed out from that starting point. In the fictional world of *Overwatch*, she is described as someone who is still learning, and who is constantly undergoing change, but thus far she has been unable to progress, and is, quite contrary, stuck

in the eternal learning phase in the narrative stagnation point where *Overwatch* gameplay is located. Thus, in terms of changes to mechanics as well as narrative development, these characters have been treated quite differently.

Methodologically, the players' relationships with characters like Reinhardt, who do not elicit an abundance of comments or discussion by players, become more visible and understandable by contrasting to the reception of a character like Brigitte. The reception of these characters has been extremely different. For the most part, Reinhardt raised only positive comments in our survey with respondents expressing enjoyment of the familiar mechanics, enjoyable gameplay, and his personality. Analysis of Reinhardt's character shows how both mechanics and narrative can foreground the synthetic component of the character. Conflicts in the narrative representation can draw the player's attention to the character's synthetic component. Player's ludic experience (Schröter and Thon 2014) can also orient their focus toward the synthetic component when they are learning character mechanics and gaining understanding of their part in the construction of the character.

Simultaneously, our survey included multiple negative comments on Brigitte, and the negative reception to introducing Brigitte as a playable character even took the form of a social media campaign. Brigitte represented a change to the balance of gameplay and to the familiar collection of heroes. The constant changes to her mechanics may also make it more difficult to engage with her. Here the synthetic component of the character was foregrounded through reception.

Conversely, in actual gameplay, the experience of playing Reinhardt can be one of the constant struggles between following impulses and making strategic gameplay decisions. Reinhardt's aggressive personality and the corresponding abilities constantly lure the player into charging and abandoning one's team, forcing the player into balancing between the offensive and defensive mechanics and play styles. With Brigitte, this kind of struggle is not present since her offensive and defensive mechanics are intertwined. The perceived ease of playing Brigitte by some players may also derive from this intertwining of the character mechanics.

The different attitudes toward Reinhardt and Brigitte, and, on the other hand, the different attitudes by those liking and disliking Brigitte suggest different ways of engaging with the game characters. While in narratives and media products the focus can fluctuate between the mimetic and the synthetic character components (Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012),

the reception by individual players and player communities can also foreground one over the other. Negative perceptions in one area, in Brigitte's case the mechanics, can draw the focus on the synthetic component of the character, including not just how the mechanics are designed but also other areas of character creation, like voice acting. The criticism directed toward Brigitte's voice actor, Matilda Smedius, is particularly interesting in comparison to how Reinhardt's voice was highlighted in our survey as a reason for liking the character, but without any mentions of his voice actor.

As more and more games are created not as stand-alone products, but as parts of a transmedial world, it is necessary to consider how the relationships between players and characters are affected by this transmedial context. Our analysis shows how in game-centered transmedial worlds such as *Overwatch*, transmedial expansions, while not necessary for understanding the game, can make the design of a particular game mechanic more understandable and as such can affect the experience of playing a character, as in the case of Reinhardt, and deeply affect players' engagement with a particular character, as in Brigitte's case.

Change, whether it is the introduction of new characters or a change in mechanics, or the perceived need for change, reveals the affective relationship the players have with heroes. In the case of characters in transmedial worlds, such as Reinhardt and Brigitte, combining character analysis and different forms of data on player reception has enabled us to show how the relationship between the mimetic and the synthetic component is not fixed, but can change over time in both production and reception of characters and how it can alter from player to player and from a community of players to the next.

NOTES

1. Blizzard has also published a version with the director's commentary, where he explains how Reinhardt becomes a protector in the end of the story and how this is symbolized with him giving his hammer to Balderich who stays behind to fend off the enemy.
2. Unlike many other competitive games, *Overwatch* does not display performance statistics during and after the matches, but rather uses a medal system. A player can thus, for instance, gain a gold medal for damage, which means they have dealt the most damage in their team during a match.

3. Ladder play refers to competitive play that takes place in the game itself rather than in tournaments and in other professional settings.
4. Smedious talks about her experiences in Kotaku article “Players Who Hate Overwatch’s Brigitte Are Harassing Her Voice Actress” (Grayson 2019).
5. “Nerfing” refers to making a game character weaker usually by changing the strength of their abilities.

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PART II

Competing in *Overwatch*



“KKona where’s your sense of patriotism?”: Positioning Nationality in the Spectatorship of Competitive Overwatch Play

Marko Siitonen and Maria Ruotsalainen

This chapter analyzes the discursive construction of nationality and ethnicity in the context of the *Overwatch World Cup 2019* and especially among the discussions of the world cup’s spectators on the live-streaming platform Twitch. Drawing on the positioning theory and the concept of banal nationalism, our study demonstrates how esports fans are active negotiators and co-creators of the esports discourse. The analysis illustrates what kind of role nationality and ethnicity take in this environment, in other words what they come to mean for those participating in the discourses defining them.

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NATIONALISM AND ESPORTS

In this study we follow Billig's (1995) conceptualization of nationalism, which forefronts the banal forms of nationalism alongside so-called hot or heated nationalism. Billig argued that the way nationalism is traditionally understood in research literature is by references to the extraordinary—for example to extreme right-wing movements or the creation processes of new nation states. As a counterpoint to these approaches, Billig introduced the concept of banal nationalism, which refers to the many ways in which nationalism is made into being and upheld through repetitive everyday phenomena. This includes the way nationalism is normalized, and embedded into our everyday life through media, symbols, and texts. In short, it is socially constructed in everyday social interaction. While banal nationalism can appear mundane on the surface, it can become heated or hot nationalism fast (Billig 1995). We furthermore align with Anderson's (2006 [1983]) conceptualization of nations as imagined communities, socially constructed sources of a sense of 'us', and something that keeps on being adapted and transformed by its stakeholders through communication.

Banal nationalism is particularly visible in sports and sports coverage, where national symbols such as flags are constantly displayed in order to enhance and normalize the sense of national belonging (Billig 1995). The relationship between nationalism and sports is a well-studied phenomenon. Several studies have shown how sports has been used as a tool in nation-building and evoking the nationalist sentiment (Bowes and Bairner 2019; Crawford 2004; Hong 2013, King 2006).

In the context of esports and competitive gaming, nationalism and its displays have been less studied, nor has competitive gaming always been understood through the lens of sports. The concept of esports itself was only introduced in around 1999 (Wagner 2006) and debates concerning whether esports is truly a sport continue to this day (cf. Hallmann and Giel 2018; Taylor 2012; Witkowski 2012). Some of the competitive gaming communities also resist the term 'esports' as it is seen to commercialize and 'tame' the activity of competitive gaming (Ferrari 2013). However, some notable esports events like the World Cyber Games, launched in 2000, have framed themselves similarly to traditional sport competitions, and thus aimed to evoke a sense of national belonging from the viewers as well as the players (Taylor 2012; Szablewicz 2016). In more recent years, the first Overwatch World Cup, held in 2016, utilized a similar formula. Turtiainen et al. (2018) note that nationalism was a particularly strong element in the construction of the tournament broadcast. They argue that

the event was *sportified* in many of its aspects, meaning that it drew from the representation of traditional sports (cf. Heere 2018; Jonasson and Thiborg 2010; Thiborg 2011). This was visible for instance in the display of national symbols and the way the event was narrated by the casters (Turtiainen et al. 2018). Similarly, Szablewicz (2016) highlights how in China esports operates as a state mandated spectacle whose primary function is to display nationalism and ideology.

Nationalism in esports has also been studied from the viewpoint of individual actors, such as fans and spectators. For example, Välisalo and Ruotsalainen (2019) point out the importance of nationality of favorite Overwatch esports players for the fans. Zhu (2018, 130) draws attention to the way masculinity, nationality, and ethnicity intersect in esports, paying particular attention to how ‘Asian’ players are constructed as both feminine and physically inferior to ‘Western’ players in discussion boards. Given these previous studies, it is clear that nationalist sentiment can be present in esports, but more studies are needed on the topic in order to understand the ways esports operates to reproduce the mechanisms of banal nationalism. In this study, we address this question by examining the way nationalism and its intersections with ethnicity are discursively constructed by esports viewers in the context of a large, international tournament.

POSITIONING THEORY

Concepts such as nationality or ethnicity should not be understood as something abstract located within individuals’ minds, but rather as being progressively negotiated by actors who engage in discursive practices. Here, we focus our analysis on so-called *positioning* (Davies and Harré 1990), which may be understood as a conceptual tool for facilitating linguistically oriented analysis of social episodes. At its heart, positioning is a process wherein people negotiate ‘rights’ and ‘duties’. These are defined as “shorthand terms for clusters of moral (normative) presuppositions which people believe or are told or slip into and to which they are momentarily bound in what they say and do” (Harré et al. 2009, 9). Both nationality and ethnicity are examples of such ‘clusters’. We may position ourselves as well as others, and any so-called first-order positioning may be contested (second order positioning). Overall, positioning can be seen as being constructed as layers upon layers, where ongoing positioning may be related to positioning that occurred before, in a wholly other discursive practice (Harré and Van Langenhove 2010).

Positioning theory utilizes the concept of jointly produced storylines or unfolding narratives as something through which we make sense of who

we and the others surrounding us are. It is through these stories that we learn to separate ourselves and others into social categories, and further allocate meanings to those categories. Social encounters may develop along multiple, interlinking storylines, and actions people take may carry multiple meanings and tie into multiple storylines simultaneously (Harré et al. 2009). For example, in the context of this chapter, the grand storylines could be those of (e)sports, media events, nationality, and ethnicity, all intersecting with one another.

Positioning theory has also been used to understand the issue of cultural stereotyping (Van Langenhove and Harré 1994). Instead of seeing cultural stereotypes as relatively stable cognitive models, a positioning viewpoint shifts the focus on stereotypes as social constructs. By making stereotypes public within a conversation, actors use them as rhetorical devices in the process of positioning. In the realm of discourse online, for example, Devlin (2016) illustrated how participants on Russian online political message boards used national or ethnic insults drawing on stereotypes as a way to construct the cultural other and to demarcate boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

In this study, we use the tenets of positioning theory as a kind of analytical lens that helps us understand the construction of banal nationalism in the context of esports. The premise of our study is that concepts such as nationality and ethnicity are ultimately mental constructs that need to be not only imagined, but also ‘modelled’ into being (Anderson, 2006 [1983]). Often, this is done via communication acts that appear mundane or ordinary (Billig 1995). These premises fit well with the idea of jointly produced storylines inherent to positioning theory. As a discursive approach, positioning theory instructs us to focus our attention to those instances, where the self, others, and relationships with other people are made visible (constructed) in actual social interaction.

Our study contributes to the emerging work on how nationality and ethnicity are made visible and relevant (discursively constructed) in online contexts, here specifically within the realm of esports. More specifically, our analysis focuses on the *Overwatch World Cup 2019* and the live discussions of the world cup’s spectators on Twitch. We chose this particular event for our analysis since earlier research has demonstrated both the national elements in the broadcast (Turtiainen et al. 2018) as well as the importance of nationality for the fans of Overwatch esports (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019). Our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How are nationality and ethnicity constructed in the production of the 2019 Overwatch World Cup?

RQ2: How do Twitch audience members discursively co-construct storyline(s) related to nationality and ethnicity?

Over the next paragraphs, we briefly introduce Twitch as a context of social interaction. Then, we present our method and describe our analytical approach, before moving on to the findings.

TWITCH AS A PLATFORM

Twitch (www.twitch.tv) has been a forerunner in shaping the so-called live-streaming culture. As Johnson and Woodcock (2018) point out, Twitch has had a marked impact on the video game industry on the whole, enabling new marketing strategies as well as new forms of digital economy. In early 2021, Twitch had reached an average of nearly three million concurrent viewers, with close to ten million monthly streamers (<https://twitchtracker.com/statistics>). While most of the content of Twitch comes from individual players or streamers, the platform has also been a major actor in helping live-streaming esports scale up to the kind of media entertainment it is today (Taylor, 2018).

An integral part of the way Twitch spectators interact among themselves as well as with streamers is its chat function. The Twitch chat combines text with graphical icons called emotes (also: emoticons or emojis). Emotes have a textual label, but the way they normally are presented in the chat are as small images (Image 6.1). Some emotes are only visible in other than text format with a browser extension such as *Better Twitch TV* (BTTV).

Many of the emotes used on Twitch, such as generic smileys, are similar to the ones used across other digital communication platforms. However, some of them are either specific to Twitch, or have originated there, and can be considered to be internet *memes*. Internet memes are here understood as units or building blocks of culture (Shifman 2013), which are collectively negotiated, remixed, and recirculated in social media discourse (Milner 2016).

Gillespie (2010) argues that platforms such as Google and YouTube are the “the primary keepers of cultural discussions as it moves to the internet” (p. 348) which means they also face questions of responsibility on how these discussions evolve. Gillespie further asserts that by branding

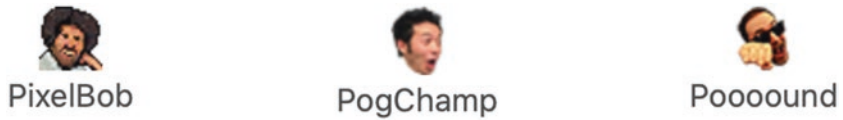


Image 6.1 Examples of Twitch emotes in their graphical and textual format. (Source: <https://www.twitchemotes.com>)

their service as ‘platform’, a term that suggests technical neutrality and progressive openness, these companies seek to diminish this responsibility. Following Gillespie’s framework of platform politics, Ask et al. (2019) note that initially Twitch was committed to this neutrality in their approach to the user-created content, but once they were acquired by [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) in 2014, more strict guidelines started to appear. Amazon has shown signs of taking responsibility for what kind of discussion happens in twitch. For example, the popular ‘pogchamp’ emote was changed once the person it previously displayed became associated with opinions furthering violence (Kelly 2021).

Nevertheless, most of the responsibility of what kind of discussions take place in individual Twitch channels is still left in the hands of channel moderators. Since it is well-known that Twitch chat may include harassment such as sexism (Nakandala et al. 2017), and racism (Gray 2016), tournament broadcasters of the *Overwatch World Cup 2019* included chat moderation. Twitch moderation typically includes both human moderators and automated algorithms. Algorithms for example time-out or ban users using words that have been black-listed and delete messages containing these words (Cai and Wohn 2019). Moderators and the moderating guidelines hold considerable power on what can and cannot be said in the chat and this also influences who gets to participate in the discussion and who is excluded (Grimmelmann 2015).

OVERWATCH WORLD CUP 2019 AS A SETTING

Overwatch World Cup 2019 was the fourth of its kind. A total of 28 national teams participated in the tournament, which was organized between October 31 and November 2 as part of Blizzcon in Los Angeles, USA. Blizzcon is an annual convention of the game publisher Blizzard Entertainment that centers around the publisher’s games. While all World Cup matches were played in the Blizzcon or its vicinity, the preliminary

qualifiers and the group stages were not played in front of a live audience. Throughout the tournament all the matches were broadcast live on Twitch. During the first days there were five overlapping streams (cf. channels) due to a number of games being played simultaneously. Due to the way spectatorship is split among multiple channels, it is impossible to accurately tell how many viewers the 2019 World Cup had. Still, one indication of the popularity of the tournament is that the semi-final that we analyze later on in this chapter gathered approximately 146,000 viewers on the official stream.¹

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Studies drawing on positioning theory usually follow a social constructionist epistemology, and can be grouped under the broad umbrella of discourse analytical research interested in ‘locally’ negotiated meanings (Harré et al. 2009). Our study, which is interested in the discursive co-construction of nationality and ethnicity in the context of esports, adopts a similar analytical stance.

The data of our study consists of the public Overwatch World Cup 2019 Twitch broadcasts and the live chats connected to them. Both authors of this chapter as well as one research assistant followed the tournament live, and recorded matches and their chats as they were being played. In the end, we had 11 recordings totaling 500 minutes of video footage. We also gathered the chat logs of each recording in text format with the help of an automated tool *Chatty* (<https://chatty.github.io/>), which is freely available online.

As a first step of the analysis we engaged in a round of so-called data reduction (Guest et al. 2012). After deliberation we chose to focus on two matches. First, we chose the USA versus South Korea semifinals match for the reason that it had the highest number of viewers in the entire tournament, and featured a team from the country where the tournament was organized (USA). Another reason for including this match was that both USA and South Korea have a long history or rivalry in the context of the Overwatch World Cup. Second, we chose the Finland versus The Netherlands group stage match. Since most of the tournament games came from the group stage, this match represented a ‘standard’ match. It was played between two teams that did not rank high in the overall predictions, had fewer viewers, and therefore represented a less ‘heated’ match-up in the tournament. As an added benefit, the authors could understand

both countries' languages and cultural context well enough to catch up on the more subtle meanings possibly hidden in the chat.

The USA versus South Korea match recording was 127 minutes long. The log file of the chat for this match was 206,312 words long. The Finland versus The Netherlands match recording was 48 minutes long. The log file was 30,794 words long.

The analysis was conducted by both authors. We began the analysis by watching and re-watching the matches, as well as closely inspecting the log files. During this initial critical reading, we engaged in continuous discussions on the types of positioning we could identify in the data. We took a multimodal approach (Kress 2010) to our analysis. In the case of Twitch, there are several modes, such as writing, images, speech, and moving image, that together act as the building blocks of the social event. For the purpose of our analysis, the way different semiotic modalities interact or are combined is of importance. For example, we concentrated on how text and images join together to create new meanings. This kind of interaction is called inter-modality, or intersemiosis (O'Halloran 2011).

As Gee (2010, 117) argues, no discourse analysis is ever based on all the features present in a text, but rather aims to focus on the aspects of data that are relevant in the context and for the given task. Of course, the choice of what to include as relevant is ultimately a matter of theoretically informed qualitative interpretation. Due to the vast scope of the data, it was not feasible to 'code' every single line of chat or emote posted by the tournament viewers. Instead, based on our initial reading, we focused on those passages that included discursive positioning of the self or the other, and where this positioning was linked to nationality or ethnicity. After a further round of critical reading and discussions, we settled on four themes that pervaded the data and through which we can explore the discursive construction of nationality and ethnicity in the context of esports viewership. Over the next section we will explore these themes further. First, we will show how the visual and symbolic environment of the tournament sets the stage for the discursive construction of nationality. Second, we discuss the use of ethnically loaded memes as focal points, around which positioning occurs. Third, we explore how 'the other' and, therefore, the self are explicitly constructed. And fourth, we show how national languages may be used as a tool for in-group positioning.

FINDINGS

Visual and Symbolic Positioning of Nationality

In line with an earlier study of the Overwatch World Cup 2016 (Turtiainen et al. 2018), our analysis shows that nationality was constructed through a variety of means during the tournament. These include the use of national flags in the visualization of the matches, using standardized jerseys with flags, as well as narrative means, such as the way the teams or players are presented in video highlights. The broadcast, especially after moving from online-only matches to those played in a physical setting, used similar tropes as traditional sports in setting the stage. An example of this comes from the beginning of the match between the USA and South Korea that was played in front of a live audience. After the Korean players were already seated, team USA entered the stage with the audience waving US flags and chanting “USA, USA”. Simultaneously, the chat reacted to the scene, as if echoing the live audience’s chanting. On top of loud, pompous music, the caster was shouting: “Put your hands together for ... the Unites States of America!”. Finally, the US team was seen entering the arena with their captain carrying a large flag over his shoulders (Image 6.2).

During tournament gameplay, nationality was continuously being enforced by presenting national flags on the screen both beside the team names as well as underneath the battle tag (nickname) of individual players (Image 6.3). In addition, in-game characters of playing teams were dressed in special ‘skins’ (cf. player uniform), allowing the whole team to be uniformly colored. This kind of extra layer of positioning by the tournament broadcasters is made even more relevant when one imagines the event without them—for example, most players’ battle tags are not easily retractable to their nationality, and the in-game characters are also otherwise identical on both sides. Without such cues, a random viewer entering the match would certainly not be able to make out who is playing whom.

Throughout the tournament, spectators also made use of the possibility of including national flags into the Twitch chat. Combined with specifically highlighting nationality in messages such as “go USA from FRANCE”, this allowed spectators to reflexively position themselves while simultaneously positioning others. Put together, this type of banal nationalism (Billig 1995) contributes to the jointly produced storyline of nations battling each other.



Image 6.2 Team USA entering the arena







Image 6.3 Visual cues constructing nationality during the gameplay broadcast

While the broadcast clearly utilized national tropes and symbolic means similar to other established sports, most of the audience involvement was not as straightforward to decipher. Instead of a uniform, non-contested

storyline, the audience could be seen as fluctuating between affirmative and ironic or counter discourses concerning nationality and related concepts such as ethnicity. Over the next section, we will explore a key example of such a discourse—the construction of ‘Kkona’.

The Ambivalence of Ethnically Loaded Memes

In addition to nationality, also ethnicity was a relevant theme in the data. An interesting example of multimodal discursive construction of ethnicity comes from the way the meme known as ‘Kkona’ was used by the spectators (see examples below for the graphical representation of Kkona). ‘Kkona’ was a recurrent message/emote in the chat during the USA versus South Korea match, featuring over 4000 times in the chat log. The origin of the emote is a picture of a US American long-time streamer whose on-screen nickname is Kkona. The emote itself was removed from Twitch in 2018, but its use in textual format continued, and at the time of the tournament, the emote was included in the browser extension *Better Twitch TV*. Kkona is generally understood to refer to a stereotypical American “hillbilly” or “redneck” (Urbandictionary.com 2020; Levvel.com 2020). Throughout the chat, Kkona was used both for reflective first-person positioning of the self, and interactive positioning of the other. The positioning of the self is visible in chat lines such as:

- “Let’s go brothers, In God we trust  ”
- “  MAKING TRUMP PROUD ”
- “  7 THATS MY BOYS  ”

The use of ‘brothers’ and ‘my boys’ suggests that the speakers align themselves in the same in-group as the US players, and use Kkona as a tool of self-positioning. In the first quote the use of the sentence “in God we trust”, the official motto of the USA, further strengthens this. The second quote demonstrates the use of Kkona in relation to Donald Trump, who

was the president of the USA at the time of the tournament. In the chat, Kkona was also often used with proverbs and punch lines widely connected to Trump (such as “Make America great again”).

The third quote above has the number ‘7’ following the text Kkona, which adds a possible racialized dimension to the use of the meme. Number seven, which can be seen as a graphical representation of an arm doing a military salute, can also be read as referring to a banned emote, ‘Trihard7’ (Image 6.4). This emote became notorious after it was spammed in the Twitch chat during a *Hearthstone* competition every time an African-American player Terrence “TerrenceM” Miller was shown in the camera (see, e.g., Fletcher 2020). Utilizing the number seven with the emoji Kkona can be read as a form of defiance for the ban of Trihard7. Unlike Trihard7 in the case of TerrenceM, Kkona in our data was not spammed for any particular player but rather in connection with anything related to the USA. In effect, Kkona constructs and refers to a particular kind of (white) American identity, thus being both ethnically and nationally loaded.

Throughout the chat, Kkona was also used in a sense that can be interpreted as ironic. For example, when the live audience was shown in the stream, and some members of the audience were seen holding flags of South Korea, the chat erupted with comments such as:

- “why are all these Americans waving Korean flags”



- “ where’s your sense of patriotism?”



- “those Korean fans look suspiciously American ”

There appears to be a sense of ridiculing the idea of national belonging here and perhaps even the way the event itself is constructed to evoke national belonging. The third quote includes the ‘Kappa’ emote. The Kappa emote generally stands for indication of irony or sarcasm (Dictionary.com 2020). Its inclusion here suggests that while there clearly is

Image

6.4 Trihard7 emoji



nation-building at work among spectators, there are also levels of irony or sarcasm related to this.

The ambivalent meaning of Kkona was further visible in the way it was utilized as a tool for building counter discourse to that offered by the official stream. An example of this comes from the US versus South Korea match, where between games the Twitch stream displayed advertisements. Among the advertisements of technology, game, and phone companies commonly seen in similar broadcasts, there was also a recruitment video by the United States Air Force. The video states that today “planes are piloted from the other side of the world” while showing video footage of a soldier sitting in front of two screens in an army base, almost as if playing a video game. Overall, the video uses glorifying language in describing members of the US air force, including statements such as: “We are not just pilots and engineers, we are pioneers”, and “Join us and be the future”. While audience reactions to most ads in the chat data was rare, or simply signaled boredom, the comments to the recruitment video showed a different level of attention, including comments such as:

- “SOME OIL NEEDS TO LIBERATED  ”
- “MAKE LOVE NOT WAR! THIS IS PROPAGANDA FOR USA”
- “Killing children  ”
- “Join us and you too can bomb innocent civilians  ”
- “HELP US COMMIT WAR CRIMES  ”

Here, Kkona continues to be associated with the USA, but takes on a much more condemning tone. While during the gameplay Kkona was often added to chants of “USA, USA” when team USA was performing

well in the game, here it becomes connotated with practices of “liberating oil”, “bombing innocent civilians”, and “committing war crimes”. While it is clear that it is a particular kind of US Americans who are being positioned here, it is not clear who is doing the positioning—the use of Kkona in this context could be seen as either interactive or reflexive positioning. When looking at the way chat participants use Kkona throughout the match, multiple ways of using the emote are revealed: In some cases those who in other instances use Kkona in a positive way turn it around in this particular situation; in some cases those who in other instances cheer for USA (without Kkona) use Kkona here negatively, perhaps to signify a kind of ‘American’ they do not want to identify with; and some of the cases remain highly ambivalent, allowing multiple interpretations of the use of Kkona.

Positioning the Other


The context of the World Cup, where teams representing nationalities were in competition with each other, provided a clear framework for conceptualizing ‘the other’. This basic setup was also reflected and reinforced in the chat. For example, in the US versus South Korea match, messages positioning Koreans included such as:

- Haksal looks cute
- haksal is my waifu
- KOREA OP OP OP
- lol carpe is op



In the above excerpts, both ‘haksal’ and ‘carpe’ refer to the player tags of players in the Korean team. This kind of positioning of the Koreans is akin to the way Zhu’s (2018) description of how Asians are often perceived within ‘Western’ esports communities. According to Zu, Asians are othered through both feminization and roboticization (2018). This was visible in the chat through physical description of Asian players (“tiny Asians” “cute”) and framing them as ‘OP’ (Overpowered), a term used to describe powerful videogame characters, strategies, and so on. Another

theme that was visible in this type of positioning was the so-called fetishization of Korean players and South Korea as the promised dreamland of esports (Taylor 2012). In the chat the skill of the Korean players was often the focal point of how they were positioned.


In addition to positioning Koreans as players, the chat included messages positioning their fans. Again, this kind of positioning often evoked certain existing stereotypes and concepts, such as referring to kpop (Korean pop-music) fandom or the concept of ‘weabu’ or ‘weeb’, which is often used to describe a Western person obsessed with Japanese culture or Asian popular culture at large:

- “KOREAN WEEBS  ”
- “kpop fans”
- “tiny asian fanboys in chat”

At the same time, the chat also positioned the American fans as a distinct group. This kind of positioning was, again, done mostly with the help of negatively loaded descriptions, such as the stereotype connecting US Americans with junk food and obesity:

“KR is so ba ...  wait let me take a breath  KR is s ... i need to take
another one give me another burger  ”

In the Finland versus The Netherlands match, there was an interesting case of positioning Finns as the ‘exotic’ other by both the casters and the chat participants. The casters began the segment by speaking about Finns and wondering what Finnish people do in their spare time: “I believe they fish. They fish and they complain about the cold”. They then moved on to discuss a particular Finnish player, ‘Taimou’, spending time in his home country, roaming the countryside, and going “Full on Kkona, the Finnish version”. The chat then picked up on the discussion, including messages such as:

- “they ski and sit in saunas ”
- “we drink and complain:”
- “The Finnish Summer is the best day of the year!”

- “turpa kiinni  ” [translation: shut up ]
- “finnish are not vikings”
- “Finland is its own thing, apparently they’re more closely related to Asian cultures”

This kind of discourse can be seen as including both interactive and reflexive positioning, which together outline the storyline of ‘Finnishness’. It resonates with the widely circulated myth of Finns being distinct from other (West) European national groups, as well as the myth of their taciturn and reserved communication style (for a critical review of the myth, see Olbertz-Siitonen and Siitonen [2015](#)).

In-Group Positioning by Using National Languages in an International Chat

While the official streams were broadcasted in English, and the vast majority of the messages posted in the chat used this language, there were also occasional messages in other languages present. This was especially apparent in the Finland versus The Netherlands match, where both teams came from countries where English is not an official language. In this match, the chat included a number of messages such as “Min hart kan dit niet aan” (“My heart cannot take this”), and “hyvä pojat hyvä meno” (“good job boys, good going”). It is perhaps noteworthy to add here that moderators allowed the use of national languages in the chat. This is not to be taken

for granted on channels that are aimed at an international audience, and where, for example, English is used as a lingua franca.

Using a playing team’s national language can be seen as a prime example of first-order positioning in this context. Even though the posters may be aware of the likelihood of the majority of the international audience not understanding what is being said, using the national language of one of the playing teams effectively positions them as a member of the same in-group as the players.

Some of this kind of first-order performative positioning (Harré and van Langenhove 2010) where spectators used languages of the playing teams utilized memes. Spectators evoking memes in playing teams’ national languages could be seen as engaging in a kind of double in-group positioning. Not only does one need to understand the language in question to participate in the construction of the meme, but one also has to be versed in a specific subculture. For example, in parts of the match where the opposing team was dominating, some apparently Finnish spectators posted “FIRST WE GIVE THEM SIIMA, THEN WE _PULL_ MATTO ALTA”. This combination of English and Finnish could be roughly translated as “First we cut them some slack, then we pull the rug from under them”. While the idiom “to pull the rug from under (someone)” can be used in both Finnish and English, this particular version of the meme deliberately combines both languages. It originates from the context of another popular game, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*, and specifically the Finnish team ENCE.

Positioning theory argues that whenever someone positions themselves, they inevitably imply a positioning of ‘the other’ as well. At times, this parallel nature of positioning was even clearer than normally, a kind of challenge or gauntlet thrown down at the perceived adversary. For example, at the point in the match between Finland and The Netherlands where The Netherlands was leading 2–0 on a best of five match, the theme of colonization started appearing in the chat:

- “Kolonisatie 66% compleet ”

- “ Colonised ”

- “GEKOLONISEERD ”

Messages such as these utilize both the national language as well as the history of the nation in question to intentionally position participants into in- and out-groups. These messages are also connected to a meme playing with the colonial history of The Netherlands. We can see a similarity to how *Kkona* is used, where in-group members formulate an ambivalent message concerning their own group or position.

Overall, while not abundant in the data set, the use of national languages in an international (English language) chat was a consistent discursive tool that participants used to engage in intentional and deliberate positioning. Here, a parallel may be drawn to other contexts such as international business, where there is often a shared (third) language, but people may still opt to use their mother tongue in certain situations as a symbolic tool with which identification and community may be strategically constructed (e.g., Lauring 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to our understanding of how esports producers and viewers discursively construct nationality and ethnicity in the context of esports. From the visual presentation to the way the audience reacts, the whole production may be seen as following familiar tropes related to constructing nationality in the context of sports (Billig 1995; Bowes and Bairner 2019). However, the analysis also shows that this construction was not uni-dimensional, nor uncontested. Often, the contents of the chat could only be interpreted as being ironic and even producing a satiric counter discourse to that offered by the tournament organizers, similar to what has been witnessed in the field of contemporary politics and activism (Day 2011). For example, the pompousness often related to emphasizing nationality was ridiculed in many ways by the spectators. Also the case of ‘*Kkona*’, and the way the colonial history of The Netherlands was used by chat participants, illustrate how the same messages may be used both for reflexive and interactive positioning, and to simultaneously affirm and undermine existing storylines related to nationality and ethnicity. In several instances the audience could be interpreted as occupying a position of first and foremost belonging to player culture(s), and only secondarily

belonging to a national or ethnic group. We argue that this kind of behavior is connected to a broader tradition of ‘trolling’ prevalent in-game cultures (Cook et al. 2018). Here, provocative messages can be seen as a kind of ‘bait’ or challenge to other participants. The ability to understand and use memes signifies the boundary of the in-group, with those who become offended or do not understand their use being left on the outside (Manivannan 2013). This also functions as a way of constructing a normative order amongst spectators which is furthermore strengthened by practices such as spamming the chat with memes, thus possibly hiding the individual messages which do not follow the established use of memes.

While the setting of the World Cup emphasizes nationality as a key category for grouping participants, our analysis shows how ethnicity may also become relevant. From the way the South Korean players and fans were characterized to the way Finnish players and Finns in general were discussed by the casters and the chat, our analysis shows that when positioning nationality, the question of ethnicity is never far behind (Bairner 2015; Rowe et al. 1998).

Finally, our analysis highlights how national languages were used as a tool for first-order self-positioning. In an international environment where English is used as lingua franca, the use of other languages carries a message in and of itself. As Brubaker (2013) argues, language may serve as a kind of central category in establishing societal inclusion and exclusion, inherently intertwined with ethnicity and nationhood. This finding works as a reminder of the importance of language for nation-building (Anderson 2006 [1983]).

Our analysis of language in use contributes to the literature on how online contexts such as Twitch allow people to locally negotiate new social practices, or what one could call digital literacy in its broad, action-oriented meaning (see, e.g., Barton and Hamilton 1998). Understanding, let alone participating in, the discourse surrounding the World Cup requires a certain level of digital and game literacy (cf. Milner 2016 on literacy required to participate in memetic discourse).

Our study also serves as a reminder of the kind of challenges that interpreting memes represent. Since memes are constantly evolving and being negotiated also from situation to situation, the interpretation relies heavily on contextual cues and knowledge. We also witnessed how memes that were originally constructed to operate in a visual mode may continue to exist in another modality (text), once they have become established enough.

As always, our study has its limitations. When large competitions such as the Overwatch World Cup are streamed to the public, there are always several unofficial streams that accompany the main one, often with multiple languages. It would have been interesting to follow the Korean, Finnish, and Dutch streams of the event in addition to the mainstream where the official language was English. This could have opened the door to other kinds of analyses, such as comparing the positioning done in the ‘national’ streams against the main channel. However, due to practical reasons such as language proficiency, and the way smaller streams are easily lost in the multitude of Twitch programming, we ended up focusing on the official streams only. Future studies could explore the way smaller, linguistically or nationally oriented streams may interact, or whether there are apparent differences in their discourse.

NOTE

1. It must be mentioned here that the Overwatch World Cup 2019 was played under the influence of a public debate related to Blizzard Entertainment as a publisher. The debate began in October 2019 in another one of Blizzard Entertainment’s games, *Hearthstone*, where a tournament winner and two hosts were suspended from the esports scene for voicing out support for the then ongoing demonstrations in Hong Kong. This caused a public backlash against Blizzard Entertainment. Most of the chats we recorded included messages related to the situation in Hong Kong. These ranged from the simple “Free Hong Kong” message to a variety of often humorous alterations similar to what have been observed in other contexts such as Reddit (Dynel and Poppi 2020). Since this event and the related messages represent rather ‘heated’ nationalism instead of the everyday positioning we wanted to focus on in our study, we decided to leave them out of the focus of this study.

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A Region of Contenders: Overwatch in Brazil

Mayara Caetano

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In February 2021, Blizzard Entertainment decided to close the South American branch of its professional *Overwatch*. For the majority of the game’s global audiences, this came as a surprise—why were the owners removing one of the largest and most active populations from professional competition? This chapter provides possible explanations for the above by analyzing perceptions of *Overwatch* in Brazil via its public media materials before the close-down. It explains how PC-based play in particular has had difficulty thriving in this cultural context, suggesting that some arguments propagated within esports practices might not translate to reality or having a misinterpretation about how and why structures matter if the aim is broadening and diversifying esports scenario.

Since infrastructural, socioeconomic, and cultural aspects influence the agency of individuals, a critical examination is needed to evaluate public reports on the country as well as data from the official regulating committees, which measure technology, accessibility, and digital inclusion in the nationwide context. It should be noted that, following Blizzard Entertainment’s decision, when referring to the “region” or South

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America (SA), this most commonly means Brazil and does not reflect other countries or their players' experiences.

Marketing and media reports tend to promote Brazil as a promising land for esports, with masses of highly engaged people. According to Statista reports published in January 2021, the Brazilian gaming and esports markets generated 31 million Brazilian reals (US \$5.4 million) in revenue in 2018 (Statista 2021) and this is expected to reach US \$1.17 billion by 2023 (Statista 2021). Esport Charts, (Esport Charts 2021) in turn, presented the country as an attractive opportunity for teams operating on both the local and global scales because it has an engaged audience, professional players, and online performers across gaming platforms¹ and segments.

Beyond the above data, Brazilians exhibit communitarian patterns of behavior such as extensive support toward intense backlashes. Despite Brazilian Portuguese being the dominant language, people also consume English content and manage to find ways to understand what is being said. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, the Brazilian gaming community started breaking records. In 2020, Gaules, (Esport Charts 2020a) a variety streamer in Twitch, was the second most-watched channel in the world with 133.6M hours watched (Esport Charts 2020c). LOUD, a gaming organization, reached the billion mark on their YouTube channel and when it transitioned to Twitch, maintained an outstanding performance (Esport Charts 2020b).

The picture drawn by financial success tells little about the structural context for the country, however. The local player archetype that has been the basis of decision-making and investments is usually developed using data from only one city, Sao Paulo.² This can overlook the full picture of what is being played, who is engaging, and how.

As Penix-Tadsen (2019) pointed out, games are being appropriated around the world in the most peculiar and unexpected ways. At the same time, however, play is also restricted due to various practical realities such as lacking infrastructure (e.g., Messias et al. 2019). According to ICT Households (2018), during the past decade, Brazil has gone through an accelerated process of Internet access and is gradually drawing closer to the numbers found in more developed countries.³ Within this period, Internet access has climbed from 18% to 67%. On the other hand, inequalities have remained critical (ibid., p. 250). For example, socioeconomic indicators such as formal education, age, area of residence, and class strongly predict the quality of service and its use (ibid., pp. 222–228).

The analysis aims to better understand how some of the Brazilian infra-structural inequalities combined with decisions made by *Overwatch* stakeholders resulted in the perishing of the game's Brazilian competitive scene.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology applied here is content analysis combined with an experimental sentiment coding of materials related to Brazilian *Overwatch*. Five keywords—*Overwatch*, Brazil, Contenders SA, Team Brazil, and *Overwatch Cup*—were combined and used to collect the data which form the corpus of analysis. The words were inserted into the search engines of YouTube and multiple local media outlets: ESPN Brazil (esports), e-SportTV (Globo, esports), +MaisEsports, Vice Brazil (technology), DotEsports, The Enemy Brazil, and MGG Brazil (former Versus Esports). Spanish results were not included, as Spanish is not an official language of the country, and therefore these results would likely not represent the Brazilian sentiment.

From YouTube, a sample of 57 videos from 16 channels in Brazilian Portuguese, plus seven videos in English, was selected based on the quality of their content as sources for the discussion. A podcast in Brazilian Portuguese was included because it captured perceptions of the game during its release and the expectations for the *Overwatch League*.

The background materials (not included in the content analysis or sentiment coding) include official statements by Blizzard Entertainment on their site, blog, YouTube, and Twitter. Media coverage includes sites and blogs from both established and independent media venues and the Wiki registering the composition of the teams and tournaments. Governmental reports and *Overwatch* Regulation were also consulted. They provided a general view of the competitive *Overwatch* scene on the international and local levels, which often lack proper documentation for future knowledge.

All the sample data were initially read, listened to, and watched in order to familiarize with the content (see, e.g., Braun and Clarke 2006). Videos and podcasts were not transcribed but notes were taken from their arguments and discussion. From them it was possible to distinguish the main categories by frequency (Table 7.1).

All the videos (57) and the podcast episode (1) were then coded with the six thematic categories. Each time one of the six instances surfaced, a note was made manually (see, e.g., Basit 2003). The complete table of sources and codes are openly accessible via [https://osf.io/kh9ue/?view_only=51cf0573cc0c42ecb93da4afd4ac3941].

Table 7.1 Thematic categories and its description

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Description</i>
Infrastructure	Infrastructure described or discussed (computers, servers, etc.)
Working conditions and professionals	Professional players and their conditions (e.g., contracts, payments, benefits, training)
Competitive non-professional play	Players' experiences related to online play
Community	The fan base, regular players, and other individuals who are part of the local <i>Overwatch</i> community
Business	The economics of <i>Overwatch</i> internationally and in the Brazilian context

Overwatch Categorization Overview

After the categorization of the videos and podcast, the data provided insights about perceptions of *Overwatch* as a game in general and in four competitive domains: *Overwatch Contenders*, Contenders SA, *Overwatch World Cup*, and *Overwatch League* (Table 7.2). The former was produced only by Brazilian channels, typically based on the players' personal experiences from ranked play.

Looking at competitive tournaments, the *Overwatch League* was mentioned only three times in the Brazilian materials, one of them being sponsored coverage. However, the tournament received extensive coverage by the English media. Although the *Overwatch World Cup* is an international event, it was a subject covered exclusively by Brazilians, generally about the Brazilian national team. This can be related to a desire for validation and to attract investment to the local scene. Nevertheless, the *Overwatch Contenders* and Contenders SA were poorly covered despite being announced as important local venues for competitive talents. The English-speaking sources briefly mentioned them, and the Brazilian sources had mainly general explanations of the tournament format and player interviews.

Two videos were related to *Overwatch* but did not fit into any category. They addressed vulnerable working conditions in the esports ecosystem and the fact that being in “emerging regions” increases those circumstances.

Table 7.2 Summary analysis for the coverage of *Overwatch*

<i>Overwatch</i>	<i>Infrastructure</i>	<i>Working conditions and professionals</i>	<i>Competitive non-professional play</i>	<i>Community</i>	<i>Business</i>
<i>Overwatch</i> as a game (23)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent infrastructural problems in SA give a sense of abandonment to the region No plan to mitigate the problem Players migrate to NA server 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No endorsement to pursue a professional career in SA SA players can assume other functions to maximize their gains and influence The few people working have been in their positions since the game announcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitive drive and investment to improve is uneven Few high-ranking players in SA Negative player behavior Doubts about the efficacy of reporting system Individualistic approach Systems included in the game were not adopted by the players or have no significant impact on their experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to establish a cooperative community Fan labor without recognition Missing in-game novelties The game might not be accessible to be played Streamers were the target of online provocation Reduced creation of content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No plans or lack of proactivity to solve ongoing problems in infrastructure, game (balancing), and negative behavior of players Sensation of abandonment and miscommunication Some decisions (price and lack of tournaments) affected the expansion of the game in less privileged regions

(continued)

Table 7.2 (continued)

<i>Overmatch</i>	<i>Infrastructure</i>	<i>Working conditions and professionals</i>	<i>Competitive non-professional play</i>	<i>Community</i>	<i>Business</i>
<i>Overmatch league</i> (19)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English broadcast left • COVID-19 and needs to modify the structure • Online matches • Modification of streaming platform (from Twitch to YouTube) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players pursuing other esports opportunities • Mental health issues associated with work and competition • Retirements, longer breaks, demotivation • Need for new players and investment in lower tiers and amateur division 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of balance in the game, and the temporary measures are not pleasing • Patch modifications in the middle of the season making it hard to adapt • Erosion of competitive basis related to boosting accounts and player behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online matches did not reflect an increase in viewership • Bad spectator experience • Dedicated fans • Different interest groups • Universe related to the game is a way to consume without playing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The company struggles to transform <i>Overmatch</i> into an export that justifies the initial investment • Organizations and stakeholders are dissatisfied with the results • Riot launched a direct competitor in the market in 2020 and managed to be more appealing to organizations and professional players
<i>Overmatch World Cup</i> (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional structure can impair practices, but the tournament is in NA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over the years the representatives were from the same and most successful team of the country. Therefore, only a small group of people had international visibility and experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disparity of abilities between countries • The aim was to learn and improve, but there were limited winning expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal conflicts between communities of players • Brazilian fans were not always supportive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The region attended the event until 2019 when financial support was offered • Regional representatives had to support an adverse event among the Committee of 2018

<i>Overwatch</i> <i>Contenders</i> (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tournament explanation • Lack of investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan for aspiring players to be seen on the international stage • Doubts about the efficacy of the project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive driven people • South Korea perceived as an example of quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doubts about the interest of the audience in the matches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement of low tier, regional expansion • Little to no effort to make Contenders happen • Lack of knowledge beyond KR and NA
Contenders SA (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No English broadcast • SA matches online and pre-recorded • Ongoing server problem in the region • Structural problems on the individual level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of teams and investment • Players cannot “play for a living” • Between amateur and semi-professional • No tournament besides Contenders • No relation to the League • Fragility, insecurity, and vulnerability of working relations • Legal action is not feasible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good mechanic skill but limited strategic thinking • Individualistic mind-set is predominant • People do not communicate while playing • Consuming content from other players and teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casual players do not have interest • Constant changes in teams and players make it difficult to support • Small network of supporters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of plans and actions to promote the competition in the media • Limited coverage in the esports and independent media • Prize offered is one of the smallest among the regions
Others (2)	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distrust in organization’ attitude toward social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication, financial, and management problems • Organizations with this conduct should not be allowed to be part of the esports system, and should be held accountable 	

Abbreviations: KR (South Korea), NA (North America as US), SA (South America), and N/A (nothing to add)

Sentiment Coding

After the content categorization, a sentiment analysis was carried out. This approach allows an evaluation of the emotional valences presented in the language, words chosen, and people's expressivity by their tone of voice—for example, modifying the intonation to stress some argument or opinion—and body, such as facial expressions.

Expressive emotional communication⁴ cues have been investigated and measured, for example, in the fields of psychology and computer science (Barrett et al. 2019; Saberi and Saad 2017). They can be helpful for accessing nuances while using scales and quantitative parameters. In this chapter, however, sentiment coding was applied in an experimental qualitative setting.

Automated sentiment coding was applied to the dataset using NVIVO 12.⁵ However, while evaluating the results it was noticeable that passages were incorrectly classified, even when unambiguous.⁶ Because of these limitations, the automated results were discarded, and the sentiment codification was reperformed manually paragraph by paragraph.

The emotional range adopted was based on the standard of the software NVIVO, which has the degrees (very and mostly) positive and negative, along with neutral and mixed. The latter was used in passages that could have multiple interpretations. For example, the company showed interest in the SA region during their press talks (positive); however, the lack of planning in 2018 received criticism (negative). Player-viewers identified with the heroes of the game (positive) but lacked identification with the professional players (negative).

The result was 475 nodes which helped to create a nuanced perception about *Overwatch* in Brazil using media coverage produced by professional established media, independent creators, and official coverage (Images 7.1 and 7.2).

The highest combined positive values were attributed to Community (38), which supports the previously cited beliefs of the active Brazilian esports community. The lowest values were attributed to Business (66), which mainly relates to Blizzard Entertainment's organization, strategies, management, and accountability.

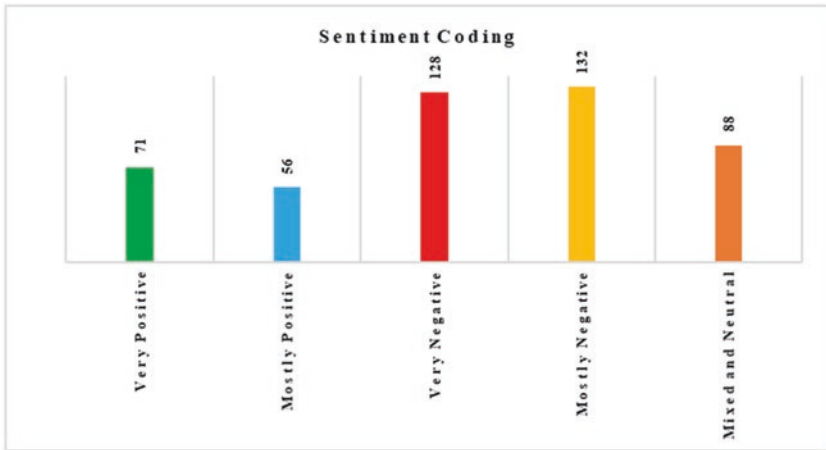


Image 7.1 Distribution of sentiment coding. Mixed codes were combined with the neutral ones, neither of which had report value in this study

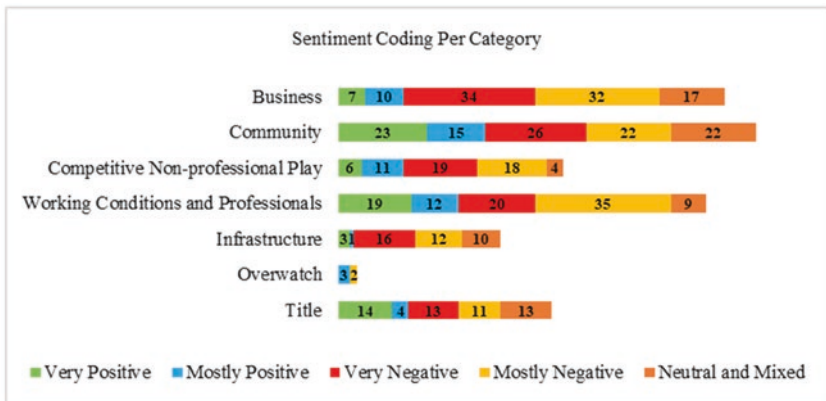


Image 7.2 Distribution of sentiment coding per category

RESULTS

In this section, the outcomes of the thematic and sentiment coding are presented via a narrative analytical report with a focus on two selected areas: players (including the “Competitive Non-professional Play” and

“Working Conditions and Professionals” themes) and the community (including the “Community” and “Infrastructure” themes). The idea is not to comprehensively examine all themes and their sentiments, but rather to illustrate with examples why the Brazilian *Overwatch* scene did not take off as expected. At specific points, direct references are provided in footnotes.

The “Path to Pro” in an “Emerging Region”

The technical structure of the SA server was generally considered weak, with constant disconnection and instability issues (Blizzard Forum 2018). Competitive players felt that it was hard to find people on the same level to have balanced matches. Match outcomes thus felt random, causing frustration and a sense of stagnation. A new grouping system, in turn, was considered promising, but in the SA, this also meant long queues to play.

Playing with friends or groups of acquaintances was considered the best option for playing *Overwatch*. Many streamers, in turn, gave up performing live because there was an increase of *smurfing*⁷ accounts created to *gank*⁸ streams by annoying and provoking adverse reactions, which would be clipped and spread to *strike*⁹ a streaming channel. The streaming platforms and game owners did not respond to such events, which made many streamers frustrated.

Despite the above difficulties, enough players were ready to play in Brazil to form a competitive community. They are mainly driven to win and master the game mechanically, ranking top in their countries and influencing the decisions of the representatives in the *Overwatch World Cup*. This commitment sometimes transformed high-level players into analysts and coaches.

Teams in Contenders SA mostly consist of Brazilians, but also include Argentinians, Uruguayans, Chileans, Colombians, and Mexicans. Other nationalities are under or not represented. Although SA is generally perceived as *Latin*, internally, there was fragmentation and few joint efforts. Brazilians tend to care a lot about how NA perceives them.¹⁰ They were considered the “inspirational region,” with players frequently endorsing them in terms of skill. Brazilian players in Contenders SA trained mainly on the NA server because to them there was not much to be learned in the SA.

Going over-server, however, brought issues of connectivity and language. Negative experiences on the NA servers were toned down even if

explicit xenophobic (Viana 2019) behavior was reported as anger toward players on the SA servers. Offensive behavior was nevertheless also interpreted as a learning process, which would make them better players. This perception might have been fueled by unsatisfactory playing experiences, and the assumption that excelling involves pain, sacrifice, and will be eventually rewarded by fulfillment.

Neus et al. (2019) have suggested that esports audiences online pursue complete knowledge gain. However, the Brazilian professional play data, such as those of the *Overwatch World Cup*, did not yield evidence for any such motivations. In general, the professional scenes were discussed as entertaining, and the enjoyment was derived from social and aesthetic aspects.

A former Director of the local *Overwatch League*, Nate Nanzer, said in an interview in 2017 (Falcão 2017) that the product was inspired by the Football World Cup (FIFA) where qualified delegations attend an event at the international level for a broad and enthusiastic audience. Perhaps the event that better corresponds to this is the *Overwatch World Cup*, as reported by Turtiainen et al. (2020). Team Brazil attended the event from 2016 to 2018 but never passed the first stage. Many expressed this underperformance to be related to the low-level working practices¹¹ and the competitive potential of the SA.

According to the Brazilian *Overwatch Contenders* Regulation document,¹² teams “may enter into services agreements with Players in connection with Player participation on the team. Any such contracts must comply with applicable laws.” Viana (2018b) found that the average Brazilian Contender player did not have a formal work contract, salary, or other benefits. The local regulation also favors *Overwatch League* teams in conflicts, as they can buy out any player from a Contenders team with 25% of the upcoming *Overwatch League* player’s salary (Chui 2018a, b). The uncertainty and fragility of labor conditions produced by the above naturally impact the team’s competitive focus as they are at risk of their players being bought out. Notably, there were also no compulsory or planned practice schedules in the “professional” teams. Organizations with written contracts keep a percentage of the prize earnings, however.¹³

An open letter¹⁴ signed by all the teams officially included in the first SA tournament made it clear that they were all amateurs and students, and none of the players in the SA plays for a living, which made it difficult for them to play in the tournament. The matches were scheduled to take place during the day, which for many players collided with their work or study

schedule. The local tournament organizers did not consider this a problem: “We appreciate your suggestions regarding the schedule for the upcoming *Overwatch Contenders* South America, and we will definitely take it into consideration for future seasons.” The response attracted the attention of the esports media, however, and the organizers agreed that matches would be pre-recorded in the SA to make it possible for all of them to participate from their own homes.¹⁵ No public comments were allowed (to prevent the results from leaking) (Viana 2018a).

Such events relate to the labor difficulties discussed in Peuter and Young (2019). According to them, digital gaming labor can be “a formidable source of financial value generation in contemporary capitalism” (p. 748), particularly in a country where the level of youth unemployment (18–24) reached a worrying 27.1% in the first term of 2020 (Fraga 2020), becoming one of the worst years in historical records.¹⁶ Likewise, according to Woodcock and Johnson (2019), gaming opportunities (despite their problems) have been “an important element of contemporary youth employment dynamics, especially for those disaffected by, or unsuccessful in, traditional education or career paths” (p. 814). Playing is an unregulated labor activity in Brazil, but people are willing to pursue their professional aspirations presented by *Contenders* as a “path to pro”—or, as jokily referred to as in the data, “path to poverty.”

The Brazilian Overwatch Community Around the Competitive Scene

According to the findings of Freeman and Wohn (2018), players start teams with friends because they have already proven to be trustworthy. This pattern was followed when *Overwatch* was launched in Brazil. Here, *soft skills*, which are related to personality and nationality, are more important than competitive abilities (pp. 107–108, 110). Players thus benefit from their existing social connections, creating an endogenous environment that may dissuade people outside the founding groups.

According to the data analyzed in this chapter, and in line with the above, already-popular players acted as gatekeepers, joined the most stable teams, had better working and playing conditions compared to their peers, performed on the international stage, and did not suffer the consequences of misconduct (Rigon 2017) while playing professionally. In the sentiment coding, the “very positive” attributions were related to this ambience of

camaraderie and support, which can balance the eventual burden, stress, and uncertainties of their working position. Social capital was closely related to their longevity and influence.

The sources referenced this group as one that was established and had become popular in other games, from which they moved to *Overwatch*. This allowed them to make use of their existing personalities and national fame, thus granting them media attention before competitive success. Accordingly, a common explanation that was given for the group's survival was their popularity on wide-ranging online platforms. Social media presence is an asset, and Blizzard Entertainment, with other related stakeholders, understood the group's market potential.

The community around the Brazilian competitive scene is also an institution with influence and power (see Chee and Karhulahti 2020). Systematic engagement in online communities can also be a laborious activity with high emotional demands, however (Guarriello 2019). In 2018, the elected Community Leader of the Brazilian *Overwatch* claimed to have been harassed by members of the Team Brazil delegation in the *Overwatch World Cup*.¹⁷ Allegations also arose from the community, as the people allied with the competitive scene (Team Brazil) and did not think the leader was credible enough to fulfill the position. These events reflect the overall instability and conflicting opinions within the community, which was reported as an element that made “liking” *Overwatch* difficult.

Blom (2018) proposed that *Overwatch* consists of a universe that is shared in the community: everyone can consume and interact with *Overwatch* media, and this may connect them to the community. This shared, connected, but not codependent universe finds support in the Brazilian context, with the caveat that accessibility plays an important role. In the podcast (*Poligonal*, Vice-Brazil, 2017), the hosts and guests discussed the price of the game in the country; one of the guests mentioned that people often engage with the *Overwatch* universe not by playing, but through comics and animations. While this may have sometimes led them to start playing and participating in other game events, it was often too expensive for the regular Brazilian player. The price of the game was reduced eventually,¹⁸ but the free weekends remained as the only moment when financially disadvantaged players could participate. In Brazil, the price of global media versus local income is part of a complex historical problem.

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this chapter was to better understand the Brazilian *Overwatch* and its competitive scene. I applied systematic content analysis and experimental sentiment analysis on Brazilian Portuguese and English qualitative materials specifically to map out the reasons for the game's local competitive shutdown.

The findings indicate Brazilian *Overwatch* to have suffered from poor working conditions, infrastructural issues, and conflicts in the community. The first can be illustrated by the “path to pro” project, launched by the company to strengthen emerging regions like Brazil. The initiative did not achieve its aims, and the reasons behind its failure are mostly related to Blizzard Entertainment's decisions and lack thereof. An example of the second point is that there were no improvements on the local infrastructures: people had significant and permanent negative playing experiences due to various technical issues and the simple lack of equipment. Third, the community—that was also addressed in many positive terms—had numerous problems of internal validation (who belongs and has the opportunities to belong) with symptoms of polarization due to the local power dynamics, which produced conflicts of interest. This made commitment to *Overwatch* difficult for larger audiences. Finally, I should add that the country also has its own structural adversities, which can impact the player base.

Although this work presented a perspective on Brazil, its reality and struggles are connected to other esports markets too (see Woodcock and Johnson 2018). Nevertheless, I argue that the vulnerabilities of participation in Brazil are (or were) more severe. The currently dominant esports business models like those listed by Scholz (2020) and Scholz and Stein (2019) do not seem to work equally in peripheral regions such as Brazil, as *Overwatch* demonstrates. Thus, regardless of those discourses, and even persuasive marketing reports, elements such as place and structure cannot overcome in fragile structures.

While writing this text in 2020, the final paragraph included uncertainties about the future of the Contenders SA project and *Overwatch* in Brazil more generally. Before this final version, an announcement was made in Reddit in February 2021¹⁹ about the closure of the regional division. The reaction in the comments and social media accounts of former professional players, casters, and audience was a mixture of disappointment and resignation. The sensations of these Brazilian *Overwatch* players can be characterized by the game's opening cinematics: “*Everyone knows Overwatch got shut down.*”

NOTES

1. Gaming platforms here means the diversity of devices used to play, for example PCs, emulators in web navigators, consoles, mobile and gaming devices, virtual reality, and so forth.
2. The city of Sao Paulo is usually the base for global companies, being even considered the financial capital of Latin America. This centralization implies that other cities will most likely not be appropriately portrayed and included.
3. The methodology of this study follows “the measuring guidelines created by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to ensure comparison with international data and with the survey’s own historical series” (ICT Households 2018, p. 222).
4. The American Psychological Association defines as “emotional expression” (a) an outward manifestation of an intrapsychic state. For example, a high-pitched voice is a sign of arousal, blushing is a sign of embarrassment, and so on; (b) an emotional response in which the individual attempts to influence their relation to the world through the intermediacy of others, rather than directly, for example, a sad face and slumped posture elicit nurturing from others. Expressions differ from action tendencies, which influence the world directly, and from feelings, which are intrapsychic experiences of the significance of a transaction (APA Dictionary of Psychology).
5. NVIVO is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software developed by QSR International. The version used for this work was 12th.
6. See limitation to auto-coding sentiment in NVIVO.
7. Smurfing is Internet and gaming slang used to refer to alternative accounts of people used to mislead others. The intentionality and consequences of this action depend on the context. However, it is a term with negative association (Blizzard Forum 2019a, b; Paez 2020).
8. Ganking is informal gaming slang used to refer to an attack. In the passage the meaning is a sudden invasion or increase of viewers which is unusual. For more information related to the activity in games (Malaby 2019).
9. Strike is used in Internet and gaming slang to refer to an attack, an action to cancel, interrupt, and deny. Thus, it is close to the original meaning of the word.
10. As the work is delimited to the Brazilian context, the perceptions of others in SA are not reflected. Nevertheless, it would be valuable to see them circulating in the field.
11. Viana (2018b) collected information from the players and according to them, they could not dedicate or commit themselves to a competitive routine because they were studying or working. Playing, then, was a secondary but desired activity of their lives. Without the possibility to work as a player, or at least include playing in a regular daily demand, forming a

- team, planning strategies, training, coaching, and other competitive competences could not be developed.
12. Version 3.0.1 of the Official Regulation was the most recent found, although there is no date on the document. Furthermore, according to Clause 1.2 (Changes to and Enforcement of these Rules) of this document: “*The field of professional esports competitions is still relatively new and changing rapidly, and these Official Rules will evolve in real time to keep pace with those changes. Accordingly, in its sole discretion, Blizzard (a) may update, amend or supplement these Official Rules from time to time.*” The reasons alleged are not reasonable. However, it is a common practice of lack of transparency from companies.
 13. The Official Regulation v.3.0.1 point 10.1 “Distribution of Prize Awards” says: “Team Owners and Players may agree to an alternative distribution of prizing in any applicable services agreement that is entered between a Player and Team Owner. Substitutes must play in a match in order to be eligible for payment.”
 14. The open letter is available in English (Duduzeraow 2018).
 15. Over GG published the news in English and pointed out that Oceania (Australia) was facing similar problems. Nevertheless, the resolution in this region is unknown (Tamagao 2018; Razgriz 2018).
 16. The English version of the site is incomplete, but the graphic with the historical marks of unemployment per age is the third one. Statistical measurement started in the first term of 2012 and the latest report is the last term of 2020 (IBGE 2021).
 17. The author has decided not to reference the videos related to the incident so as not to give visibility to the content producer and its channel because the discourse perpetuated there is inclined to foment hate speech, harassment, false allegations and doxing, for example. Nevertheless, the coding of the content is available in the supplementary material.
 18. The basic edition of the game for the PC in 2019 was R\$69 compared to the original price of R\$159 (approx. US \$13 and US \$29 respectively) (Romer 2019).
 19. Dan McHugh representing the Overwatch Path to Pro Team shared on Reddit (r/Competitiveoverwatch) on February 5, 2021, the plans for the upcoming year (McHugh 2021).

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Gender and Toxic Meritocracy in Competitive Overwatch: Case “Ellie”

Usva Friman and Maria Ruotsalainen

INTRODUCTION

Case “Ellie”

When we originally contacted Ellie, there was nothing that would spark suspicion. They seemed to be very genuine and willing to work with us on calls and within private messages. Due to the fact that we do not have any physical contact with our players, we wanted to verify their identity but also wanted to respect their privacy as well. We genuinely had no idea of what was to come, and at the time we underestimated how important it would be to set an example as the first team to take on a female player for Contenders. (Second Wind 2019b)

On December 21, 2018, a North American Overwatch Contenders league team Second Wind announced via Twitter that they had signed a

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new DPS player to their roster. The newcomer went by the handle Ellie, and was—it seemed at the time—a prominent woman player, who had reached the fourth rank on the North American competitive ladder. As it is extremely rare to witness a previously unknown player to reach that kind of a placing in such a short amount of playtime, this gathered considerable attention from both esports media and the competitive *Overwatch* community.

Overwatch Contenders is a part of the *Overwatch* esports ecosystem. At its top lies the *Overwatch* League, a multimillion franchised global league owned and operated by the game’s publisher Blizzard Entertainment. Similarly operated Contenders is a second-tier league, divided into multiple regions. For the players, whose ultimate goal is often to be signed by an *Overwatch* League team, North America is one of the more notable ones in terms of visibility and career prospects. In principle, both are mixed gender leagues, as they have no gender regulations for players. The reality, however, is quite different. In the *Overwatch* League, there has so far been only one woman: Kim “Geguri” Se-yeon from South Korea, representing Shanghai Dragons from February 2018 until the end of the 2020 season. The Contenders players too are overwhelmingly men, and at the time Ellie appeared, there were no women in the North American Contenders teams. This is another reason why Ellie suddenly showing up on the leaderboard and being recruited by Second Wind drew much attention.

There was an instant reaction to the recruitment announcement from both the competitive *Overwatch* community and game media. Reactions varied from cheers to suspicion and hostility, including threats of “doxxing” and open disbelief about Ellie’s identity and existence. Attempting to prove the doubters wrong, Ellie started a Twitch channel and streamed some of their gameplay. The community, however, judged Ellie’s gameplay as highly inconsistent, further fueling the arguments against their legitimacy as a player. A number of well-known community figures suggested that Ellie’s account was played by multiple people, proposing a number of men players who they suspected could be hiding behind the handle.

On January 2, 2019, only twelve days after the recruitment announcement, Second Wind (2019a) announced that “due to some unforeseen reactions, Ellie has opted to step down from the team”. The same day, team owner Justin Hughes (2019) posted a Twitter statement reprimanding the community of their reactions toward Ellie, claiming that while the team had “wanted a player, [...] it seemed like the public wanted

something else”. According to Hughes, Ellie had been treated as “a symbol of empowerment” and “their Messiah”, while “on one side, we had people questioning her legitimacy, issuing threats, etc.” At this point, it appeared yet another woman had stepped down from competitive *Overwatch* due to misogynistic harassment and threats. This again quickly drew the attention of both game and mainstream media, and the community discussions rekindled a new flame.

Ellie had stepped down, but the story was far from over. Two days later, on January 4, at the time Cloud9 team *Overwatch* player Becca “Aspen” Rukavina announced on her Twitch stream that “Ellie” did in fact not exist, but was a “social experiment” devised by a man player called Punisher. After this, the story of Ellie started to unravel and was again a target of lively discussion and speculation both in the media and among the community. The following commotion also led to yet another statement from Second Wind (2019b) on January 5, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, further explaining their reasons for recruiting Ellie and their reactions to the community response.

GENDER AND TOXIC MERITOCRACY IN OVERWATCH AND COMPETITIVE GAMING

There exists a great amount of earlier research on the role of gender in game cultures and competitive gaming (on the latter, see, e.g., Maric 2011; Groen 2013, 2016; Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Voorhees and Orlando 2018; Witkowski 2018; Zhu 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019; Hayday and Collison 2020; Taylor and Stout 2020). A large part of this work is focused on women (e.g., Groen 2013, 2016; Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Witkowski 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019; Hayday and Collison 2020), as they are perhaps the most visible and largest group of marginalized gamers. The GamerGate movement, initiated in August 2014, signified an extreme harassment campaign targeted particularly against women and non-binary game creators, journalists, critics, and researchers, and affecting everyone identifying with gender identities marginalized within hegemonic game culture (Braithwaite 2016; Mortensen 2018). Although research on gender and gaming has been conducted from at least the 1980s (Richard 2013), since GamerGate, the various issues women face in gaming have received increasing attention in game and mainstream media, player communities, game companies, and institutions, as well as in research. While

the public attention and extensive discussions have led to some improvements, such as esports leagues and gaming events creating and enforcing codes of conduct to tackle gender-based harassment, many of the problems persist—as can be seen from Ellie’s case.

Overwatch was developed and also marketed as an inclusive multiplayer first person shooter (Cullen et al. 2018; Hayday and Collison 2020; Hawreliak and Lemieux 2020), including a wide roster of playable heroes representing a variety of genders, ages, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, and reaching audiences who do not usually engage with shooter games (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019). According to Emily Jane Hayday and Holly Collison (2020), the diversity of representation in *Overwatch* exemplifies how developers can attempt to increase social justice in games and esports by moving away from highly sexualized representations of women and instead creating role models within the game, thus encouraging more women to participate. Amanda Cullen et al. (2018) point out how *Overwatch* also includes characters representing disabilities, further illustrating how major developers can create popular titles with diverse characters.

Despite the diversity of playable characters in *Overwatch*, the game’s playerbase, and its professional esports scene in particular, remain largely dominated by men. In the *Overwatch* League, there has only been one woman player, and women’s participation is also rare on the lower competitive tiers. In a previous study (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018), we found that the community had noted the lack of women in the *Overwatch* League. Potential reasons for this were discussed being structural and cultural, such as the fact that FPS games in general have been a genre dominated by men, meaning there are less women gamers who have spent enough time developing their skills up to the required level, and also the culture being hostile toward women (for similar findings from other games, see also Siutila and Havaste 2019).

While women are actively playing digital games, their opportunities for participation in competitive gaming, particularly esports, is still extremely limited, both in terms of presence and in terms of ways of participation. In a previous study (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018), we analyzed how women who play digital games negotiated their own participation (or, more commonly, the lack thereof) in competitive gaming, and how women participants in competitive *Overwatch* were discussed within its community. In the study, women’s reasons for not participating in esports were not only directly related to the nature of games played and competitive play. Women also chose not to participate because of reasons related

to gender and the toxic nature of the community: they did not consider esports to be a field accommodating to women, but rather misogynistic and hostile.

The cultures and communities surrounding esports and competitive gaming are defined by a combination of hegemonic, geek, and athletic masculinities (e.g., Taylor 2012; Witkowski 2012, 2018). In the context of *Overwatch* esports, one can also find traces of “kawaii masculinity” which centers around juvenility and cuteness of the men players (Ruotsalainen and Välisalo 2020; for kawaii masculinity, see Jung 2011). For women competitors, this environment is challenging to navigate, as they are constantly placed at the crossroads of the contradictory requirements to simultaneously perform the role of a competitive gamer, embracing the hegemonic masculinity, and that of an “other”, the one marked as an outsider of the scene because of their gender. As Emma Witkowski (2018) describes it, “for women engaging in such expert gaming endeavors, their gender performances (while varied) are made alongside productions of hegemonic sporting masculinity as a gender performance that is locally dominant, associated to traditional sports, and aligned to male body skill superiority, antagonistic competitiveness, and heterosexual virility”. Women competitors’ gender is often overly emphasized (e.g., Cullen 2018; Witkowski 2018) and their presence is interpreted through problematic gender-based stereotypes (e.g., Siutila and Havaste 2019). When competing, women are seen not only representing their team, but their gender, whether they succeed or fail (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018). Women entering the scene as gamers, streamers, and competitors also face gender-based harassment and discrimination (e.g., Fox and Tang 2017; Uszkoreit 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Richard and Gray 2018).

Opportunities for participation in esports should be, in theory, equal to all genders. Indeed, there are strong beliefs upheld within esports communities that there is nothing stopping women from participating—if only they are good enough players to make it. Christopher A. Paul (2018) calls this assumption the “toxic meritocracy in gaming”: a system which excludes women and other marginalized player groups by not acknowledging the specific circumstances negatively affecting their opportunities, and leading those who thrive to falsely believe their success is solely due to their effort and capability. In competitive *Overwatch*, women do not only have to play well enough to proceed through the ranks and get noticed by potential teams through their skill and achievements, but they are also met with hostile community members every step along the way, from team

members harassing them on voice chat throughout the match—or even throwing the game entirely after realizing there is a woman in the team—to having to publicly and humiliatingly prove they are a real person playing their own account (e.g., Choi et al. 2019). Because of the misogynistic and hostile culture, many do not deem it worth the effort in the first place, which further decreases the number of women as competitors.

In this chapter, we discuss the confluences between toxic meritocracy and gender in the public discussions related to competitive *Overwatch*. Asking how the player’s assumed gender is seen to affect their opportunities for engagement in this scene, we analyze online news stories and community discussions concerning “Ellie”—an imaginary competitive gamer woman created as a “social experiment” by a man player. Our analysis will show how the idea of meritocracy is strongly upheld within the community—all the while the entire question of Ellie’s legitimacy as a player is being reduced to their gender.

READING CASE “ELLIE”

Data and Method

Considering how the whole “Ellie” situation was created and then already over within a timeframe of two weeks (from December 21, 2018, to January 4, 2019), there was a surprisingly large amount of material related to the case available for this study. Our primary research material consists of online news articles and Reddit discussions, both collected between January 10 and March 11, 2019. In the current hybrid media system (cf. Chadwick 2013), these kinds of discussions are rarely limited to one platform. The news stories and community discussions were often formed around or linked to other (social) media content, such as Twitter posts or Twitch clips. We used these as our secondary research material to contextualize our reading of the case.

The news material consists of 86 articles written in English and published between January 3 and February 8, 2019, on international online media platforms. They were collected by an online search using search phrases “Ellie” + “Second wind” and “Ellie” + “Overwatch”. The range of the material was further expanded by the method of snowballing, in practice by following the path of links within the articles to find new ones. The news material mostly contains publications focused on gaming and esports such as *Kotaku*, *Game Informer*, and *Dot Esports*, but also includes

mainstream media outlets such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Forbes*. It is worth noting that because the material was collected afterward, many of the stories had been updated to reflect the new information on Ellie’s identity, affecting the way Ellie and the events were described in this material—and our reading of the case. In the analysis section, we will refer to the news story material by the publication name and date.

We chose the subreddit *r/Competitive overwatch* as our source for the community discussions on the topic due to it being the most active discussion platform for *Overwatch* esports. The material was collected using the search function within the subreddit to find the discussions containing the word “Ellie” in their title. In total, we collected 21 discussion threads. In the analysis section, the discussion posts will be referred to by the thread identifier (D1–D21 in chronological order) and the post number (at the time we collected the material).

We analyzed the primary research material using reflexive thematic analysis, a method emphasizing the active and reflexive role of the researchers throughout the analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019). The analysis was conducted in stages. We began the process by reading and coding the material to find the most relevant themes from the perspective of gender and meritocracy. In reflexive thematic analysis, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke 2006). We did not only look for explicit themes, but also aimed to identify latent ones—the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations, and ideologies beyond what was explicitly expressed. In this process, we defined three central themes across the two material types: (1) Ellie’s character, (2) agency, and (3) women players. After defining the main themes based on the initial coding, we further explored the data within each theme, identifying and coding relevant sub-themes, that is, the various nuances in the discussion, which we will describe in the following sections.

GENDER, PERFORMANCE, AND SUSPICIOUSNESS: (DE) CONSTRUCTING “ELLIE” AS A (FAKE) WOMAN GAMER

It is common for women esports players to be seen as representatives of their gender rather than gamers and individuals (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018; Cullen 2018). In the news material, Ellie was most commonly

described through their performed gender, often simply as “a female gamer”. Occasionally, Ellie’s reduction to their presented gender was taken to an extreme level in these descriptions: “Late last year, tier two professional Overwatch team Second Wind announced that they’d signed a female player” (*Rock Paper Shotgun* 1/5/2019) and “An Overwatch team has found their female player was an imposter” (*Eurogamer* 1/8/2019). In these examples, Ellie is objectified, reduced to “the team’s female”, dismantling them of any personality or agency.

Ellie was also often described through their performance. Ellie’s competitive rank was commonly mentioned, and they were described as an extremely skilled player: “Ellie first appeared on the Overwatch scene in early December, quickly shooting up the ranked ladder to Grandmaster and eventually Top 500. Her skill was incredible, and she managed to play high DPS and tanks extremely well” (*Newsweek* 1/4/2019). Ellie’s rank and skill level were discussed as the reason why they were noticed and picked up for the Contenders league: “No other information on the player was available at the time other than she was a teenage girl on North American Overwatch leaderboards ranked #4. Her rank, and impressions of her skills after Second Wind’s team members played with her online, were enough for the Contenders team to sign Ellie” (*USGamer* 1/7/2019). The same reason was also used to describe why Ellie was noticed—and deemed as a suspicious character—by the community: “Doubters pointed to Ellie’s account age—relatively low-experience for having a high rank—as grounds for suspicion” (*Dot Esports* 1/3/2019). For the most part, being a skilled and high-ranking player was not used as a praise, but rather as a basis for justifiable suspicion. This happened especially when Ellie’s gender was added into the equation, as high-performance play and related expertise are not usually considered areas available to women (Witkowski 2018).

As soon as Second Wind announced Ellie’s signing, a discussion thread was created in the Competitive Overwatch subreddit (D1). The community members’ reactions to the announcement varied from excitement to suspicion. While some discussants expressed their happiness for a new and prominent woman player being signed, many were doubtful about Ellie and their identity. Multiple commentators argued that it was suspicious for Ellie to appear out of nowhere, be totally unknown to most, and to be playing on a new account with such high win rates. Some commentators explicitly denied that their suspicions had anything to do with Ellie’s gender and argued that they would be doubtful of any new player coming out

of nowhere and performing particularly well, bringing up examples of famous (men) players who had at some point been suspected of cheating. The crucial difference was, as pointed out by some discussants, that Ellie was not suspected of cheating, but for either faking their identity or having someone else, for example a boyfriend, play their account. This shows how Ellie's perceived suspiciousness was tied to their gender rather than their actions. Geguri, too, had to go through a humiliating process of proving herself against misogynistic suspicions and accusations when first appearing in the competitive scene. Two professional men players even promised to quit their careers if Geguri would be able to prove her skills to be true—and so they did (Choi et al. 2019).

In the community discussions, Ellie's suspiciousness was further increased through their choice of a team role: DPS. Some discussants stated that while top-ranking women players are as rare as it is, women playing damage-dealers are almost nonexistent, like something out of a fairytale: "The fact that she also is a top DPS player would also draw people's attention since great female DPS players seem to be actual unicorns in *Overwatch*" (D1/82). Among *Overwatch* players, women are constantly suggested they should play the support role, as DPS is considered too difficult for them (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018). This prevalent sexist prejudice seemed to be one of the factors making Ellie seem dubious in the community's eyes.

Suspiciousness was a general trait in the news stories' descriptions of Ellie, too. Remarkably, there too it was closely tied to the fact that Ellie presented herself as a woman. The question of Ellie's credibility centered around their gender: "Some fans believed the mystery about Ellie's name called her entire identity into question, including her gender. Ellie is one of very few women in Blizzard Entertainment's *Overwatch* Contenders league, and some fans speculated that she could be any number of notable male players impersonating a woman" (*Kotaku* 1/4/2019). As seen here, it was seen as entirely possible that this fourth-ranking new gamer could be "any number of notable male players", yet it was simply not seen as possible that they could be a woman. Gender seemed to be the main factor making Ellie suspicious both in the community discussions and in the news stories.

Although presented as such in the news stories and community discussions, the real question unanswered was not if Ellie was a real player, but if they were a real woman. This can be seen in the news story descriptions such as "After a few days of online rumbling on Reddit, what seemed like

yet another case of toxicity and misogyny in gaming turned into something far stranger, and problematic. Ellie was revealed as a fraud, a fake account operated by a male player posing as a female” (*The Washington Post* 1/6/2019). Ellie’s whole story and character described in the news stories were mostly constructed around their gender. In their January 5 statement, even Second Wind (2019b) confessed that they had “underestimated how important it would be to set an example as the first team to take on a female player for Contenders”, further underlining the significance of Ellie’s gender. Both the community discussions and the media stories were, in their essence, about (de)constructing Ellie as a (fake) woman gamer.

GENDERED AGENCY, BLAME, AND CONSEQUENCES: DISCUSSING THE “EXPERIMENT”

Although the events were often referred to, in both the news stories and the community discussions, as a “social experiment”, what is interesting in this case is not the “experiment” itself. The discussion on the experiment is, essentially, discussion about women in competitive *Overwatch*. To understand the dynamics of toxic meritocracy at play in the case, it is important to pay attention to the distribution of power and agency within this discussion: whose voices are allowed to participate, who are getting listened to, who are getting blamed—and who, in the end, will be carrying the consequences?

The whole situation was described to unravel when Aspen revealed that behind “Ellie” was actually Punisher who had created the handle as “a social experiment”. The description of the events as a social experiment gone awry was often repeated in the news stories without any further critical approach: “According to Cloud 9 *Overwatch* streamer, Aspen, Ellie was just a social experiment created by *overwatch* player PunisherOW to expose sexism in esports” (*Main Menu Games* 1/5/2019). It was taken for granted that Punisher had wanted to prove a point of some kind, apparently somehow related to women in esports.

Several news stories did, however, point out the questionable nature of this setting—a man gamer posing as a woman to, allegedly, bring attention to how women are being treated in competitive gaming:

Women have been telling stories of harassment for years. There are new clips continuing to come out, of female Overwatch streamers experiencing multiple levels of harassment and this has happened since the game’s launch in 2016.

Many prominent female streamers have even stopped playing the game entirely due to toxicity they faced in ladder games. Why did it take a man pretending to be a teenage girl for people to take these stories seriously? (The Game Haus 1/5/2019)

Some women in the community took the discussion to Twitter, like Liz Richardson (2019), at the time the managing editor of an Overwatch League news site OverwatchScore.com, who was also quoted in several stories. Richardson (2019) expressed her anger over Punisher performing his so-called experiment at the expense of women and non-binary players: “People involved aside, this ‘stunt’ will have lasting ramifications for ANY woman/nb person trying to get into Contenders. They will ALL now be subject to ‘lol are you real??’ harassment”. She further called for the men in the community to use their position of power to make a change. This discussion brought forth the gendered nature of agency and power in gaming, and how men are able to use their privileged position to either help or hinder women and others in marginalized positions.

Some men in the community confessed that the hostile reactions toward Ellie led them to realize, for the first time, the number of barriers in front of women competitors’ success. Houston Outlaw’s general manager, Matt “Flame” Rodriguez (2019) tweeted about his personal experience: “Some girl started talking and people literally abandoned my [r]anked game ... I’m realizing the female player base might have significantly higher SR if they didn’t have to deal with morons throwing their games for existing”. The comment was mentioned in some of the news stories—as was the irony of the fact that “The Outlaws, notably, were one of the teams that once used another barrier to entry, single-gender team houses, to explain why they couldn’t pick up Geguri” (*Rock Paper Shotgun* 1/5/2019).

In the news stories, most of the agency in the case, which is supposedly about a woman gamer—or, alternatively, about an experiment designed to provoke attention into issues surrounding competitive women players—was given to men. In the community discussions too, several notable community figures—competitive men players and streamers—were actively voicing their opinions on Ellie and were often referred to by others. They were also given space to do so in the news stories: “Atlanta Reigns DPS player Daniel ‘Dafran’ Francesca of the Overwatch League suggested that Ellie was just providing a voice for someone else who was actually playing. Some were skeptical about Dafran’s assessment [...] but if eSports insider Rod Breslau is to be believed, Dafran was right on the money” (*Game*

Rant 1/4/2019). Putting the spotlight on men's voices when writing a story like this further emphasizes men's position of authority within competitive gaming. Instead of focusing on Ellie, the focus is put on the men gamers' opinions of them.

Describing the events, there was a lot of blame being thrown around. One of the news stories summarized the situation:

It's just ... a disaster all around. For who is to 'blame' here, it's just a tornado of finger pointing. Second Wind for not vetting enough. Punisher for organizing this madness. Journalists for jumping the gun. The toxic climate in these communities for creating a situation where this kind of 'experiment' would happen in the first place. Just a total mess. (Forbes 1/6/2019)

Punisher was obviously being blamed for causing the whole situation, Second Wind for recruiting a new team member without a proper identity check, and Blizzard Entertainment for making this possible (despite Ellie never being an officially registered Contenders league player). Media outlets were also blamed for rushing on with the story without proper research and critical approach (ironically, this became a question about ethics in game journalism; cf. Braithwaite 2016).

In the community discussions, the players and community members participating in Ellie's harassment were disclosed and condemned (although their actions were also in part excused due to the assumption that Ellie must not be "real"). Surprisingly, a part of the blame was also placed on those who chose to take Ellie's side from the beginning—some of them women who were eager to see another woman take a turn in breaking the *Overwatch* esports glass ceiling. When Second Wind's owner Justin Hughes (2019) posted his statement regarding Ellie after they had been revealed to be a fabricated person, he too placed the blame on "both sides".

After all the blame game, who, then, was seen to be carrying the consequences of this "experiment"? Ironically, it seems that Punisher has not and will not be punished—his identity is not known, he is not a professional gamer whose livelihood could be affected by potential sanctions, and, after all, it has not even been officially confirmed that he was behind Ellie. Instead, many of the news stories described the dire consequences this case will have on women trying to enter the competitive gaming scene, both in *Overwatch* and more extensively:

This situation continues to be a huge mess, and I don't see a winning side here. Blizzard is likely none too happy with how this might damage the reputation of their Contenders league, Second Wind can't be happy with having its legitimacy as a team thrown into question, and every woman who dreams of becoming a professional Overwatch player will now have more hurdles in their way whenever they decide to take their leap of faith in to a pro league. The people behind this 'social experiment', whatever its purpose might have been, should have known better, or were actively trying to impede any woman making their way into competitive play. Neither version of the story makes the situation any less frustrating. (Game Informer 1/6/2019)

It is intriguing how much power was given to Punisher in these narratives. While countless women gamers sharing their experiences did not seem to have made much difference in making things better, a man pretending to be one apparently managed to severely hinder the opportunities of all the potential women competitors to come. This too reflects the way power and agency over this case were usually given to men.

It is worth noting that the expected consequences of the events described in the news stories were not all negative. There seemed to exist an air of hope that the great failures witnessed in recruiting a new player into a Contenders team, in dealing with harassment targeted at a team member, and in writing in media about cases with sensitive aspects, will be better dealt with in the future after learning from what happened. Some members of the community also took the opportunity to highlight the many women already part of the Overwatch League in various roles, and a Twitter thread was created aiming to list all the current women Contenders players (*Overbuff* 1/7/2019).

BEING A WOMAN IN COMPETITIVE OVERWATCH: SIGNIFICANT, CHALLENGING, AND IRRELEVANT

The news stories on Ellie extended toward the topic of being a woman in competitive *Overwatch*, described as being both significant and challenging. As noted earlier regarding the descriptions of Ellie, being a woman was commonly seen as the primary feature of women competitors, and their whole character and even the question of if they are “real” or not seemed to be reduced to their gender.

In the community discussions, too, gender was always present. Sometimes in the form of denial that gender had anything to do with the skepticism toward Ellie, sometimes in directly addressing the issues

concerning women in esports. Regardless, the discussants were continuously “doing” gender and defining women in relation to games and esports (see also Witkowski 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019). Assumptions that women do not succeed in esports because of assumed fundamental differences between women and men, such as women being less competitive by nature, were rather rare (cf. Siutila and Havaste 2019; Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018). However, an underlying conviction that esports is a meritocracy and hence women—if they just are skilled enough and possess a skin thick enough—will have equal chances to succeed than men, emerged often. The fact that the current League teams consist almost solely of White and Asian men (Blizzard Entertainment 2021) alone proves that the path to success is not purely meritocratic. As Paul (2018) puts it, “a lack of diversity in the player community already demonstrates the fact that the game is not a perfect meritocracy and, therefore, simply adding more players to a structurally imbalanced system will not fix the problem”.

Nevertheless, some discussants speculated that women’s chances may actually be even higher than men’s due to their alleged “better marketability”:

wouldn't being a woman in pro gaming be more significantly more beneficial than detrimental? I can't imagine how much most players would give to have the marketing power that literally any female pro player would have simply because of her gender. They actually have to play at a pro level- but assuming they can- being female would skyrocket your marketing power as a player for essentially no effort. (D7/589)

Similar assumptions related to the “novelty value” of women esports players were found in Siutila’s and Havaste’s (2019) study on *League of Legends* and *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*. In some esports contexts, women players have indeed been used as marketing tools, sometimes in ways that threaten their position as professional e-athletes (Maric 2011).

The misogynistic nature of (competitive) gaming and esports, evident from the many forms of discrimination, harassment, and threats of violence women face in this environment (Fox and Tang 2017; Uszkoreit 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Richard and Gray 2018), was often brought up in the news stories, using both general and well-known individual examples: “The Overwatch League’s only female player, Kim ‘Geguri’ Seyeon, was forced to prove that she wasn’t cheating after receiving

harassment for her performance, including another pro player threatening: ‘I may visit Geguri’s house with a knife in hand. I am not joking’” (*Rock Paper Shotgun* 1/5/2019). Geguri’s story, particularly the community’s suspicions against her and their similarities with those against Ellie, was frequently mentioned in the news stories and community discussions as an example of the misogynistic attitudes hindering women’s progress in esports.

In the community discussions, some women also brought up their personal experiences, particularly in relation to comments addressing Ellie’s lack of voice communication while playing, explaining how they too rarely use voice chat due to harassment. This is known to be a common coping strategy among women gamers and players of color (Fox and Tang 2017; Richard and Gray 2018). Some commentators shared how they or someone close to them had eventually stopped playing the game altogether because of harassment, but there were also some women commentators who insisted they had never, or had very rarely, experienced or witnessed any harassment.

From the news story descriptions, it became clear that before a woman can become an esports player, her skill as well as her identity and gender are placed under hostile scrutiny. To be accepted, she does not only need to prove herself as a player, but also as a “real” woman. Within the community discussions, there was also a continuous attempt to define a “good woman” and the type of acceptable femininity in the sphere of *Overwatch* esports. This was done by referring to notable women players and streamers and discussing their positively perceived qualities, presented as preventing them from receiving negative community responses. These qualities usually included friendliness and wholesomeness, being good at the game—and not complaining. In their study on how women esports athletes were discussed on Reddit, Siutila and Havaste (2019) too found that “ultimately, getting to visibly exist as a woman in the scene was a reward for compliance in the esports meritocracy: exhibiting skill, playing in mixed teams, and tolerating harassment”.

Meritocracy was a constant underlying ideology in the community discussions, and occasionally, it was discussed explicitly. Some expressed discomfort that external factors should determine a player’s success (especially the allegedly higher “marketability” of women). Others argued that *Overwatch* esports had never been a meritocracy but plagued with nepotism and gatekeeping: “A meritocracy necessitates everyone being on a level playing field. Women deal with way more shit in OW by virtue of

their gender from the very beginning, in every tier and environment. There is no way to have a ‘meritocracy’ when certain groups are disadvantaged from the very beginning” (D5–154). Some discussants adamantly held onto the idea of *Overwatch* esports as a meritocracy—despite the gender-focused reactions toward Ellie and the countless examples of misogyny women players face within the game and its community. In both the news stories and the community discussions, women players’ gender was simultaneously made the focus of the story and presented as irrelevant due to the alleged meritocracy.

WHY YOU CANNOT TRUST THE LEADERBOARD: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

What is clear from the news stories and community discussions surrounding Ellie’s case is that it was always, in the end, about gender. The question being argued was never if Ellie was a real player, but if they were a real woman. Ellie’s skill or rank was never under suspicion, their gender was. When it was revealed that there was indeed a man behind the account, both the media and the community seemed to let out a huge sigh of relief and get back to their lives, considering the case Ellie closed. Ellie’s performed gender, or the suspicions concerning it, were a topic of discussion in all the news stories and community discussion threads, without an exception. This alone shows that gender is considered a significant matter with various effects in competitive *Overwatch*.

The news stories and community discussions showed how much of the power and agency in the culture of competitive *Overwatch* is given to men. Not only did Punisher feel entitled, as a man, to pose as a woman to prove some kind of a point about being a woman in *Overwatch* esports, but the men in the competitive *Overwatch* community were taking—and given the power to take—over Ellie’s narrative, too. Key community figures, who just so happened to be men, were given the floor to speculate on the realness of Ellie’s womanhood. In other words, men are still offered the position of gatekeepers into (competitive) gaming.

In their statement regarding the recruitment of Ellie, released after Ellie’s resignation and the Punisher disclosure, Second Wind (2019b) justified their decision by saying that “As a team, we have always had faith in the leaderboard when it comes to scouting for players”. What we can learn from this situation, however, is that you cannot trust the leaderboard alone. Ellie, an imaginary character or not, faced many of the issues that

are all too real to women players in competitive *Overwatch*: doubts about their identity and demands to prove it, threats of doxxing, team members who bully and purposefully lose or abandon games, and many other forms of misogynistic hostility. Similarly to other forms of esports and competitive gaming (see, e.g., Taylor 2012; Witkowski 2012, 2018; Zhu 2018), the culture of competitive *Overwatch* is defined by the structures of hegemonic masculinity, marking women as “others” and aggressively trying to exclude them from the space. For a woman, climbing the rank ladder is not a simple task, and their capability cannot be judged based on that alone.

Belief in meritocracy was both implicitly and explicitly present in the descriptions and discussions of Ellie’s case. It became visible when Ellie’s rank and skill level were brought up—especially when they were presented as the sole reason for Ellie getting picked up for Contenders. It could also be seen when the suspicion and hostility against Ellie was presented as objectively justified and having nothing to do with their performed gender. In these narratives, Ellie swiftly climbed the rank ladder and got noticed and recruited merely based on their performance and exceptional skill. Ellie’s identity was then placed under scrutiny because of legitimate suspicions that could and would have been directed at any player in a similar situation. It is clear, however, that Ellie’s performed gender affected both their recruitment and the following negative community responses. This is the toxic meritocracy of gaming (Paul 2018): ignoring how the player’s gender, among other things, affects their opportunities for participation and progression, which then enforces the existing discriminatory structures and further marginalizes these players.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Overwatch* is a game known for its aspiration for inclusive and diverse design. It is clear, however, that the culture surrounding competitive *Overwatch* is still far from these ideals. For the women entering competitive *Overwatch* still need to prove not only their skill, but also their gender, to be considered legitimate players. In future research, it would be worthwhile to investigate the wider variety of barriers and demands players of different marginalized identities face when trying to enter the sphere of competitive gaming. Players of color, disabled players, and trans women players are some of the marginalized player groups known to be having to deal with specific forms of discrimination and harassment as well as questions of legitimacy as esports players. More research should also be conducted to find good practices and to develop guidelines to create more inclusive and equal esports environments.

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PART III

Playing with *Overwatch*



Overwatch Fandom and the Range of Corporate Responses

Hanna Wirman and Rhys Jones

INTRODUCTION

With over 40 million players across the globe, *Overwatch* is not only a colossus of online gaming but also a notable object of game fandom. The game has attracted an enthusiastic and productive fan base that produces derivative as well as transformative works largely building on the game's ever-expanding roster of diverse characters. As a common corporate response to the works created by fans, some aspects of this fandom are openly endorsed by the game's developer-publisher Blizzard Entertainment.¹ It has, among others, hired cosplayers as official 'representatives' of new characters during launch events (Carpenter 2018) and regularly shared fan art on official social media accounts as forms of endorsement. Other areas of fandom, such as erotic parodies and other

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sexually explicit materials, are typically not acknowledged despite the game's creative director's note about pornographic fanart as 'an inevitable reality of the internet' (Grayson 2016b, cf. Bohunicky and Youngblood 2019). Instead, such controversial and transgressive (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020) fanworks that make up a significant amount of fan labour are actively disavowed via legal action. Many fan creators operate in a legal grey area profiting from their works on platforms like *Patreon* (Kretzschmar and Stanfill 2019, cf. Banks 2013).

This chapter looks at a variety of *Overwatch* fanworks, such as fan art and cosplay, and the ways in which Blizzard Entertainment has officially or publicly recognised them. Earlier research on productive game fandom has widely discussed the value provided by fans to individual games utilising concepts like 'playbour' (Kücklich 2005; Sotamaa 2007; Wirman 2013) or 'gift economy' (Hellekson 2009; Turk 2014) and often refers to fans' influence on game longevity and increased profit (e.g., Jenkins 2006; Peuter and Young 2019). Other research has explored how the simultaneously exploited and enjoyed co-creative labour (Terranova 2000, cf. Postigo 2003, Kücklich 2005), as a type of networked production, has become "an 'innovation agency' that engineers transformations of business and consumer practices towards open innovation networks" (Banks and Humphreys 2008, 403).

While fan creators reinterpret, reimagine, and expand official game characters through fanworks, our particular interest lies in how fans and official corporate entities negotiate the meanings and status of fanworks. In this chapter we will, whenever relevant, address the fanworks' proximity to the official brand and canon of the game. Our work here does not cover 'behind the scenes' community management, gameplay analytics, or other player and game insights that the company collects that arguably inform design decisions made at Blizzard Entertainment. We focus on fandom that largely takes place and becomes shared and discussed on open online platforms and fora. This chapter's novel contribution to game fan studies is to offer a comprehensive account of fan productivity around a single game linking related activities together with official views surrounding them.

Wirman (2009) introduces two types of fanworks: instrumental and expressive. The fanworks that fall under instrumental productivity—such as wikis and databases—aid the player in their play making it easier, faster, and more efficient to advance in the game. Such fanworks focus on the game as a system that is there to be 'figured out' and the purpose of

community exchange is to help each other to ‘play better’ as well as to experience every corner of the game. If instrumental productivity is *for* play, expressive productivity falls somewhat *beyond* playing the base game. Expressive fanworks—such as cosplay and fan drawings—are more concerned with the storyworld and characters of a game and add to the fantasy in and around the game. Interestingly, unlike instrumental fanworks, expressive fanworks may appeal to people who are not players of the game by themselves as they typically involve new story elements, visuals, intertextual references, or critical commentary (Wirman 2009). Typically, instrumental fanworks exist in the domain of ‘affirmative’ (Hellekson and Busse 2014)—they adopt the game’s original ideological position and accept its ways of operating—while it is more likely for expressive fanworks to appear transformative and as such “take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own” (Ibid., 4). It follows that even though this chapter operates using the term ‘fanwork’ that bears the connotations of ‘secondary’ and ‘additional’, it is important to highlight that in players’ engagement with the base game and related texts, a shift in importance, relevance, and even authenticity often takes place. Some players “play by doing” where modding, for example, can be their primary way of playing a game (Wirman 2013, 61). Here ‘paratexts’ turn into primary texts as they “become the central core of the experience itself” (Consalvo 2017, 179).

In this chapter, we focus on Wirman’s category for expressive productivity to engage with one of the game’s most prominent features: carefully crafted hero characters. Among interpretations of such characters are some of the most prominent examples of how fans and Blizzard Entertainment negotiate ownership and authority over different elements of the game. This approach has also allowed us to select a manageable branch of fanworks for analysis. It brings us to examine both official stories in the canon of the game and fan-originated storylines, often known as ‘fanon’.

As we introduce different ways in which Blizzard Entertainment has responded to fanworks and, in some cases, officially endorsed them, we build on a review of *Overwatch* fanworks and online platforms used by the players. Several *Overwatch*-related platforms that allow creation, sharing, and/or discussion of expressive fanworks were identified. Among them, *Pinterest*, *Tumblr*, *Reddit*, *Deviantart*, *Pornhub*, and *rule34.xxx* were searched for available *Overwatch* content in September and October, 2020.² While written fanfiction is a popular form of *Overwatch* fandom (having 35,000+ tagged entries on the popular fanfiction website *Archive*

of Our Own), we did not identify instances of Blizzard Entertainment engaging with such stories. Nevertheless, fanfiction often informs fanon interpretations and has therefore potentially influenced the fanworks introduced in this chapter. To understand and identify official responses to these fanworks, journalistic writing on games news websites *Kotaku*, *Polygon*, and *PC Gamer* were systematically searched and followed for *Overwatch*-related articles and several other news sites were read on occasion for little over than one year in 2020 and 2021. Other related materials such as official statements and content on Blizzard Entertainment's official social media accounts were included in the material as necessary. Additionally, *Overwatch Workshop* was identified as a platform that facilitates creation and sharing of expressive fanworks alongside instrumental ones and included in the analysis.

The following five sections will each introduce one example of expressive fandom together with Blizzard Entertainment's official response to it. The cases are all prominent examples of *Overwatch* co-creativity. In some cases, the introduced official perspective covers an entire form of fan labour while in other cases we examine individual fanworks. Our analysis does not exhaustively suggest that certain types of fanworks would be either accepted or disapproved by the developer and publisher. Instead, the chapter provides a range of examples to illustrate that around a single game, there exist different types of expressive fanworks that vary in terms of what kind of an official response they have gathered from Blizzard Entertainment.

MODDING ON *OVERWATCH* WORKSHOP

Fan art across the media has always existed in a legal grey zone as corporations, to a large extent, tolerate fans' use of copyrighted material (cf. Tushnet 2009). While not only developers and publishers but also lawmakers around the world these days express strong interest to abolish the distribution of unofficial mods³; *Overwatch* mods are primarily distributed through an official *Overwatch* side product, a platform called *Overwatch Workshop*. *Overwatch Workshop* was provided four years after the game's initial release and allows players to create and share new 'game modes' that alter game elements such as weapons, abilities, gravity, speed, or time scaling essentially creating new versions of the game itself.

Before *Overwatch Workshop*, the inclusion of player-created functional mods was strongly discouraged and hampered by player bans due to

anti-cheat software included in the game. For a live online game like *Overwatch*, it was always already complicated to create and share mods that could follow the constant updates and technical restrictions of the game. Even a simple cosmetic mod could be detected as a cheat under this software resulting in a player ban. Tellingly, a major modder website *ModDB* does not cover a single *Overwatch* mod (Mod 2015). The introduction of *Overwatch Workshop* is not a unique case, but very much in line with how *The Sims*, for example, provided extensive retexturing tools ('Create a Pattern' editor) in the third game of the series, *The Sims 3* (Maxis 2009). Such platforms help the companies both monitor and control the content produced by fans. They tie players directly into the company's own technology ecosystem and bring the player community closer to the official innovation processes (cf. Banks and Humphreys 2008; Nieborg and Poell 2018).

Fan creativity expressed through *Overwatch Workshop* is implicitly endorsed via the inclusion on a Blizzard Entertainment provided platform. Similar examples exist in other games where user generated content is spotlighted by the developers such as the *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule 2008) franchise. Blizzard Entertainment controls the tools as well as distribution of the fanworks where they can also monetise them (cf. Partin 2020). Certain workshop maps are further acknowledged through *Overwatch League* teams' use of them (NYXL 2020). However, the inclusion of an official *Overwatch Workshop* has not stopped fans from creating their own workshop-related fan-sites, for example <https://workshop.codes/> which organises a curated list of codes based on popularity and recency. Other mods and hacks of the game distributed outside of the official workshop however are not tolerated or endorsed. For example, Blizzard Entertainment has sued a company that produced the *Watchover Tyrant* mod for the game in the past, for example (Kamen 2016).

OFFICIAL COSPLAY BATTLES

Similarly, to hosting modders and modding activities through official channels, Blizzard Entertainment has openly welcomed cosplay⁴ as a form of fan productivity through *Cosplay Battle* competitions (Overwatch 2019b). *Overwatch Cosplay Battles* are official cosplay contests run by Blizzard Entertainment where teams from different regions are picked to compete against each other in making the best cosplay of an *Overwatch* character, creating extremely detailed and high-quality costumes based on

existing character skins. Each battle features two winners: a winner picked by a jury and one picked by the community. Winners receive prizes such as cash, a 3-D printer, trip to *Blizzcon*,⁵ and artwork signed by the *Overwatch* development team.

Cosplay Battle contests show great synergy between the developers and fans, as the judging panel consists of two *Overwatch* developers and two community cosplayers. Not only is the contest a celebration of cosplayers' designs and performance on stage but cosplayers have been included on the judging panel as well. The inclusion of a community winner in addition to a jury chosen gives the fans a sense of inclusion as they are being asked to give one of the cosplayers their own official endorsement as well. Furthermore, the inclusion of developer signed artwork as a part of the prize shows Blizzard Entertainment acknowledging the value and legitimacy of cosplay.

While not all *Overwatch* cosplay takes place in dedicated official events, Blizzard Entertainment supports cosplayers' work by providing hero character sheets with a detailed breakdown of the character's costume, clothing logos, and even the specific hex colour code for each individual element (Chalk 2016). Cosplaying consumes extreme amount of fan labour as fans may put hundreds of hours of time into creating a single cosplay (Karacorus 2017) and into sustaining a career as a professional cosplayer (Huddleston 2018). For Blizzard Entertainment, cosplayers are, of course, free marketing. In the case of *Overwatch*, cosplay is particularly welcome as it highlights the characters that are already one of the games core business assets in their elaborate designs and backstories. A well-made cosplay costume highlights the work that has gone into designing the hero characters in the game as they vividly showcase the bright colours and fine details of the originals designs.

Blizzard Entertainment has on several occasions hired professional cosplayers to debut new characters at official character reveal events (Carpenter 2018). This signals about significant trust in the individual cosplayers who are asked to create a costume and to dress as a character *Overwatch* fans have never seen before. In selecting a fan to represent the character during an official event, Blizzard Entertainment legitimises these fans' work and gives them an endorsement within the fan and wider gaming community. This results in games media, too, referring to them as "official cosplayers". The naming of official cosplay results in a hierarchy of legitimacy within cosplay fanworks, with those being explicitly endorsed or commissioned by the developer being perceived more valuable. For the

fans, an official endorsement is a welcome reward for often years of hard work. This can be read from their enthusiastic social media posts for being selected to cosplay in official character reveal events. Official recognition goes beyond individual players, too, as the community at large can experience ‘one of us’ being chosen.⁶ An official endorsement of one fan is then an official recognition of the entire cosplayer community.

CHARACTER FANON

Very little of *Overwatch* characters’ backstory can be learned through gameplay. Some of the game’s canon is delivered through minor exchanges between characters before round starts, while most of the lore and story are shared through promotional videos, comics, and social media postings. This leaves a lot of room for creative interpretation on the part of fans who often came up with their own stories and ‘head-canons’ or ‘fan-canons’ (‘fanons’) while waiting for official lore drops from Blizzard Entertainment. These headcanons (cf. Kim 2016) permeate through the *Overwatch* fandom through shared fanfiction, artwork, memes, and other easily shareable fanworks on social media. Widespread fan-canons snowball in popularity sometimes going viral when shared by notable members of the fan community. Fan-originated interpretations of characters have been explicitly acknowledged by the game’s director Jeff Kaplan who was documented stating: “*We see you taking different takes on them. You’ve turned 76 into a dad. You’ve turned D.Va into some sort of Mountain Dew chugging gremlin. We think it’s awesome. If that’s what makes the game cool to you guys, it makes you love the characters even more, go for it, is what we say*” (WIRED 2017).

Different stakeholders within the fan-developer ecosystem have differing levels of authority and therefore legitimacy when it comes to giving official endorsements of fanons. Developers and other Blizzard Entertainment staff have significant authority because they can actually change the game canon as part of their work. Within the developer ecosystem the lead writer for *Overwatch* ultimately has the final say on what is canon or not. On occasions, fans have been successful in using social media to gain answers to related questions. For example, after the canon short story *Bastet* revealed that ‘Soldier 76’ had previously been in a relationship with a man, fans were intrigued to know if Soldier 76 was indeed gay or bisexual. The then-lead writer Michael Chu clarified on *Twitter* that Soldier 76 identifies as gay (Chu 2019). Similarly, with the launch of

Overwatch League, the game's official esports branch, fans would be frequently seen holding up signs asking for characters to be given specific, new abilities ranging from serious suggestions to silly ideas like "LET TORB WALLRUN". On this specific occasion, the official *Overwatch Twitter* account replied with a video showing the sign and then a clip of the character Torbjörn using the character Genji's ability to run and climb across walls. Such a joke demonstrates the level of day-to-day community engagement Blizzard Entertainment has with the game's fans as well as their willingness to humour even the silly fan requests.

While interested in the official character background, fans find themselves compelled to fill in the gaps in the canon with fanart (re)interpretations of the characters. Fan art including character skins, drawings, videos, and Photoshop mashups are actively shared through *Pinterest*, *Tumblr*, *Reddit*, and *Deviantart* which are the primary platforms for such visual outputs of *Overwatch* fandom. Our research includes a review of such works and an analysis of which interpretations and representations the fan community has widely adopted and what interpretations have been included in the official game.

In some cases we identified, fan interpretations of game characters have become so widespread that Blizzard Entertainment has ended up canonising them via inclusion in official game materials such as in-game voice lines, skins, and character interactions or out-of-game texts such as comics, cinematics and merchandise, and thus rewarded fan contributions with an official inclusion and endorsement. One example of a widespread fanon being accepted by Blizzard Entertainment into *Overwatch* canon, early in the lifecycle of the game, is how fan artists interpreted the professional esports character 'D.Va' (Hana Song 송하나) as a more stereotypical 'gamer', lovingly dubbed 'gremlin D.Va'. Initially, *Overwatch* canon introduced D.Va as a mech⁸ pilot and ex-professional gamer. Fanworks elaborated this notion imagining D.Va to exhibit negative behaviours and stereotypical behaviours of a hardcore gamer such as trash talking, unhealthy eating habits, and compulsive play.

Early fan art of "gremlin D.Va" spread through *Tumblr* in early June of 2016 before spreading into other social media sites such as *Twitter* and *Deviantart* (Knowyourmeme 2016). Two months later, in August 2016, Blizzard Entertainment released a new legendary tier emote for D.Va called "Game On", where D.Va boots up and plays a game in between shoving chips into her mouth and her drinking from a can. Fans saw this as a legitimisation of the "gremlin D.Va" fan canon and there was a

generally positive reception to Blizzard Entertainment's perceived official endorsement in this manner (Grayson 2016a). Later, an official *Overwatch* short video "Shooting Star" focusing on D.Va showed her enjoying unhealthy snacks and portrayed a contrast between the glamorous image she maintains in the public eye versus the mundane and grimy life she has maintaining her Mech. The short video also focused on the story lore of D.Va as an active member of the South Korean military fighting the robotic Omnic forces, and that these battles have resulted in her having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anxiety. Fans were quick to comment on how Blizzard Entertainment had used the fanon of "gremlin D.Va" to make her a more sympathetic or tragic character within the canon. One popular comment on the short video suggests community influence over D.Va's character: "*Fans: DVA is a hot gamer girl who is such a meme! Waifu! Blizzard: gives Hana PTSD and anxiety*" (PlayOverwatch 2018). This quote goes to show that fans can recognise the interplay between their own fanon interpretations of the character and how Blizzard Entertainment is able to subvert existing fanon expectations when introducing new canon. The case of gremlin D.Va shows the symbiotic relationship between fans and Blizzard Entertainment in terms of character canon. While fans have their own interpretation and ideas of how a character should and should not be, Blizzard Entertainment can canonise them.

Similarly, to official cosplay competitions, Blizzard Entertainment also organises fan art showcases such as *Overwatch Fan Art Contest: Hero Skin Design*.⁹ These competitions give the company direct access and control over the results of fan imagination. And by participating in such competitions, fans explicitly agree to let go of their rights to fanworks allowing Blizzard Entertainment to commercially utilise them worldwide and in any way they see fit. While fans often feel proud or honoured to have works selected in an official capacity it does not negate the appropriation of fan labour Blizzard Entertainment acquires. Fanworks honoured in an official capacity like that adds to the authority previously mentioned regarding endorsements within the fan-developer ecosystem. Cosplayers may not receive financial compensation for their fan labour but they receive social capital among the fan community having been endorsed by Blizzard Entertainment.

Fan adoption of a character's personality has also resulted in perceived ownership issues, whereby fans sometimes prefer their own interpretations over official ones. D.Va, for instance, was adopted as a mascot and

namesake for the South Korean feminist group “The National D.Va Association” (later renamed to “FAMERZ”) that raises awareness about gender-related and LGBTQ+ issues. D.Va was chosen because her character proposes a strong and successful gamer who is equal to men (Frank 2017). However, this very interpretation of D.Va led the group to express criticism over a later official skin that, according to them, sexualised and undermined her status as a strong female icon (Deyo 2020).

The contested Academy D.Va skin combined imagery of school girl fetishism with the stereotypical Western tendency to sexualise Asian women and resulted in a plethora of D.Va fanart that took the sexualisation even further. Video game website *Kotaku*’s article that addressed FAMERZ’ concern over misogynist content was, meanwhile, attacked by gamers who considered feminism a threat to their favourite game (cf. ‘gamergate’). Such a sexualised interpretation of D.Va stands firmly side by side with gremlin D.Va who fans portrayed as a stereotypical gamer nerd. It is as if D.Va’s many skins, official and unofficial, embody the existing dichotomies and frictions that relate to women players as the character gets pulled from one extreme to another.

For another D.Va skin, Black Cat, fans’ concern was in her assumed cultural background. As D.Va is officially South Korean, a Gothic Lolita costume that carries a direct link to a Japanese youth subculture challenged D.Va’s national cultural origins (Lee 2018). *Overwatch* is known for its heroes that follow and respect specific cultural traditions (Frank 2019) whereas D.Va Black Cat seemed like “an unresearched kick to the face” (Lee 2018). The examples here suggest that character fanon as well as player interpretations of characters in general can easily be overruled by an official take as quick as simple as an addition of a new skin that signals interest in wide popularity over the wishes of individual fans no matter how dedicated or well-articulated.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Blizzard Entertainment experienced a massive backlash from their player community in October of 2019, when *Hearthstone* (2014) player Ng Wai Chung (known as Blitzchung) voiced his support towards the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democracy demonstrations in a post-match interview livestream at a *Hearthstone Grandmasters* event in Taiwan. In response to the statement, Blizzard Entertainment banned Blitzchung from the tournament, made him forfeit any prize money, and banned him from any *Grandmaster*

Tournaments for one year. In addition, Blizzard Entertainment also terminated the employment contacts of the two stream casters who were conducting the interview. In what followed soon after, the public response to the controversy was far and wide-reaching, with fans starting a #boycott-blizzard hashtag on social media to raise awareness and to share their displeasure towards the said corporate actions. Bipartisan members of the United States congress even weighed in on the incident sending a joint letter to Blizzard Entertainment urging them to reverse the ban as their decision “could have a chilling effect on gamers who seek to use their platform to promote human rights and basic freedoms” (Chalk 2019).

The Blitzchung controversy was so large that while it occurred in an event related to another Blizzard Entertainment game, the *Overwatch* community took action as well. Angry *Overwatch* fans adopted the Chinese character Mei as a symbol of support towards Hong Kong pro-democracy demonstrations with an aim to get the game banned in China as a ‘punishment’ to Blizzard Entertainment. Such a fan activity unveils how players interpret game characters “in light of previous texts and their own experiences” (Lamerichs 2018, 32). The movement unified under the social media hashtag #MeisupportsHongKong where fans shared artworks of the character supporting Hong Kong in various ways such as by equipping her with protest signs and other symbols of Hong Kong protests. Fans also turned many Blizzard Entertainment and *Overwatch* slogans and values against the company. Among others, an image was shared of a cosplayer dressed as Soldier 76 holding a sign with the text “*Overwatch stands for and defends the oppressed, will you Blizzard?*” while protesting at the *Blizzcon* event in Anaheim, California in the US (FreedomHKG 2019).

One Mei cosplayer posted photos online of herself in the cosplay with additional elements from the Hong Kong protests such as an umbrella, gas mask, and free Hong Kong sign with the caption “was gonna burn this cosplay, but this is a much better use of it. #MeisupportsHongKong” (Zephronica 2019). The same fan also showed up wearing the mentioned cosplay to the protest outside of *Blizzcon* itself, giving an air of officiality to the protest from the fan side in the sense that she was a fan who had invested many hours of labour into her fanworks, showing even a hardcore fan was willing to protest the event for Blizzard Entertainment’s transgression. *Overwatch* also experienced a direct consequence as a result of pressure from the controversy, with Blizzard Entertainment cancelling the Nintendo Switch edition release launch event planned at the New York Nintendo store originally planned to take place one week after the

Blitzchung incident occurred (Carpenter 2019). While no official reason was given for the cancellation fans speculated it was because they feared protests taking place at the event.

Some disgruntled employees at Blizzard Entertainment, too, joined in sharing their displeasure at the controversy by covering up the “Think Globally” and “Every Voice Matters” values (Hovdestad 2019) of a notable Orc Statue placed in the courtyard of Blizzard Entertainment’s Irvine campus (Nebu 2020). This act of an employee gave more legitimacy to the grievances from the fans point of view who saw it as employees joining their side. Former Blizzard Entertainment employee and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) team lead Mark Kern also made many posts expressing his disappointment in Blizzard Entertainment for the decision (Huang and Hunter 2019). While these do not count towards an official endorsement from Blizzard Entertainment as a whole, the words and actions of Blizzard Entertainment employees had an effect on public opinion and the fans.

Eventually, an official apology was offered by Blizzard Entertainment CEO regardless of what the fans thought of its genuineness (Lisco 2019). Later, the CEO’s statement, however, was undermined on the official *Hearthstone Weibo* account by a separate apology targeted exclusively for the Chinese market: “We are very angered and disappointed at what happened at the event last weekend and highly object to the expression of personal political beliefs in any of our events. As always, we will defend the pride and dignity of China at all cost” (Kern 2019). Company’s internal dilemma aside, it is clear that Blizzard Entertainment would prefer players to refrain from political activism that utilises game assets.

OVERWATCH PORNOGRAPHY

Tens of thousands of images and videos including *Overwatch* characters are distributed through *Pornhub*, *rule34.xxx*, and *Overwatch* subreddits for porn (cf. Apperley in this volume). Years after its initial release, *Overwatch* continues to be the most searched for videogame franchise on the pornography website pornhub.com, for example, with searches actually increasing 8% in 2019 over 2018 and five of the top ten individual videogame characters searched for on the site being from *Overwatch* (D.Va, Mercy, Mei, Ashe, Brigitte) (Pornhub 2019). The dedicated adult fan art website *rule34.xxx* was found to have over 40,000 images tagged “Overwatch”.¹⁰ On *Reddit*, meanwhile, the most popular

Overwatch-related adult content subreddit “/r/overwatch_porn” has over 318,000 members (Reddit 2015).

While thousands of hours of fan labour go into *Overwatch* pornography there is no room for endorsement through official channels by Blizzard Entertainment. The only acknowledgement of *Overwatch* pornography comes from the game’s creative director who notes that it as ‘an inevitable reality of the internet’. In the same breath, he states that because of his creative responsibility over the franchise, he wants to make sure *Overwatch* is a safe and inclusive space for kids who play (Grayson 2016b; cf. Bohunicky and Youngblood 2019). This is also in line from a business perspective given that in Europe the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) board gave *Overwatch* the rating of PEGI 12 for “depictions of non-realistic looking violence towards human-like characters”¹¹ and in America the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rated it Teen (13+) for “Blood, use of tobacco and violence”.¹² In light of these ratings, it is understandable that Blizzard Entertainment wants to maintain a type of response that ensures the fan content is still suitable for the entire intended target group.

Reactions to *Overwatch* pornography range from public disavowal to active hostility in the form of legal action such as cease-and-desist orders.¹³ Reportedly, fans who have created and shared pornographic material have received copyright claims on their works resulting in the infringing material being removed from respective sites causing them to give up any future pornographic *Overwatch* fanwork projects (McKeand 2017).

DISCUSSION

While Blizzard Entertainment as a company has a reputation for taking firm action against EULA¹⁴ and TOU¹⁵ violations (Sheldon 2007; Shikowitz 2009), this chapter demonstrates that there is also plenty of space for fans to expand and reinterpret *Overwatch* characters and stories in fanworks. The range of official responses to expressive *Overwatch* fandom spans from the company providing full means and access for fans to create new content to legal actions and public disavowal (see Image 9.1). As discussed, in rare cases fans’ contribution finds its way to the canon of the game and into the actual game software. Among the reasons why the company is so careful with expressive productivity might be because of its potential appeal beyond the game’s players. Bringing reworked game content farther from the official player communities makes it harder to

<p>INCLUSION IN THE GAME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modding: Mods created using Overwatch Workshop • Fan fiction: Interpretations of D.Va and Soldier 76 characters
<p>VISIBILITY AND OFFICIAL ENDORSEMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fan art: Retweeting fan-created character skins
<p>PROVIDING DEVELOPMENT TOOLS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modding: Overwatch Workshop
<p>EVENT ORGANISING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cosplay: Overwatch Cosplay Battles
<p>ONLINE COMPETITIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fan art and fan fiction: Fan art and fan perceptions of D.Va, Soldier 76 and Torbjörn
<p>STATEMENTS ON WEBSITES AND SOCIAL MEDIA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political activism: Mei and Soldier 76 in Hong Kong pro-democracy demonstrations
<p>LEGAL ACTION AGAINST, PUBLIC DISAVOWAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pornographic character fanon: Game characters featured on Pornhub, rule34.xxx, Reddit

Image 9.1 The range of Blizzard Entertainment’s official responses to *Overwatch* fanworks with examples

manage and control. A study on the different forms of instrumental, instead of expressive, productivity could potentially reveal significantly different corporate responses.

Välisalo and Ruotsalainen (2019) suggest that *Overwatch* fandom combines elements of media and sports fandom which highlights, among others, character nationality in addition to more commonly observed character features like gender and sexuality that in *Overwatch*, according to Shur (2017), are implemented with exceptional diversity. Characteristics of sports fandom are foregrounded during live events such as when players cosplay during tournaments. Our analysis concurs in that characters are indeed of great importance for co-creative *Overwatch* fans. The used example of the Black Cat D.Va skin demonstrated the importance of character nationality for fans too. We believe that this chapter has, however, illustrated how *Overwatch* fandom profoundly follows existing forms and outlets of video game fandom from fan fiction to mods and character eroticisation. Fans’ interest in character backstories, sexual fantasies around characters, and cosplaying favourite characters, among others, are all examples of game fandom that is common to other game genres as well.

We hope this chapter has also demonstrated that not all fandom is equal from the perspective of the corporate entity. Looking into specific examples has given a glimpse into how the line between acceptable and

renounced, even illegal, gets drawn. From the point of view of individual fan creators, it is notable that they therefore receive different treatment based on the type of co-creative practice they are engaged in. This brings some fans closer to the company and alienates others. This may also mean that same individual's creativity is endorsed in one domain and faces legal action in another. Yet, as suggested, official endorsement of one fan can also be seen as official recognition of the entire community. Interestingly, moreover, the venue that facilitates the creation of a fanwork is often of great importance as official company supported events offer immediate acceptance for fan creativity that could otherwise be discouraged. The conditions under which fanworks are created and the related agreements and IP transfers are therefore meaningful and call for closer scrutiny.

Some of the productive fandom types mentioned are systematically supported through official online platforms or community fora. Others become endorsed on a case-by-case basis instead of gaining general support and facilitation from Blizzard Entertainment. It is therefore clear that any generalising claims about the ways in which corporations exploit and utilise fan labour are unsustainable. Both different forms of fan co-creativity and individual works of such labour should be addressed separately when their legitimacy and related corporate response are scrutinised. However, while fanworks do not exist in a vacuum but as parts of wider collections of fanworks instead, each fanwork is simultaneously a contribution towards the very existence of a specific type of fan co-creativity as a whole keeping it alive and available for others to contribute to.

Finally, it goes without saying that only a small percentage of the hundreds of thousands of *Overwatch* fanworks become notable enough to be recognised let alone endorsed by Blizzard Entertainment. It is characteristic of the works we use as cases to have a community effort behind them. For example, if a reinterpretation of a game character finds its place in the official canon, it has first been elaborated and accepted by a very large player community unofficially. It is, therefore, important to understand that the fanworks used here are rarely fully invented by individual players but are more likely developed within a community over an extended period and generally collaborative efforts.

NOTES

1. Endorsement in this context means an acknowledgement from developer-publisher Blizzard Entertainment or their staff. It should not be confused with the Endorsement System within the game of *Overwatch* used by players to commend other players.
2. Technically, the search term ‘Overwatch’ was used on all platforms except on Reddit where Overwatch subreddits were used and therefore already filtered for relevant content. Pinterest searches typically pointed to an external source, but no additional notable platforms were identified as significant among those external sources.
3. Mods- modifying the game features by changing the code.
4. Cosplay is a portmanteau of the words costume and play, a type of performance art where fans dress up to represent a specific character.
5. Blizzcon is Blizzard Entertainment’s annual convention to promote its major franchises.
6. Regardless of such a potential route to a professional career, most fans participate in cosplay for pure fun instead of an interest to professionalise fan labour (Scott 2015).
7. Shorthand for the character Soldier 76.
8. Mechs are a type of bi-pedal walker character.
9. Overwatch. 2019. Overwatch Fan Art Contest: Hero Skin Design. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/678558549439761/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
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14. End User License Agreement.
15. Terms of Use.

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Overwatch to Oversnatch: The Mutually Reinforcing Gendered Power Relations of Pornography, Streaming, and Esports

Thomas Apperley

This chapter discusses misogyny in gaming cultures by examining the misogynistic themes in mainstream pornography featuring *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016). Both mainstream pornography and gaming cultures, of which *Overwatch* is a part, have widely identified misogynistic elements (Consalvo 2012; Tranchese and Sugiura 2021). In the case of *Overwatch* pornography, several misogynistic themes from pornography re-surface, but in a manner that is demonstratively peculiar to the sensibilities of the game. The problematic pornographic themes reinforce the notion that *Overwatch*—and by extension esports, and gaming cultures more broadly—are predominantly masculine and do not welcome women. As such, it encapsulates the contemporary zeitgeist of the intersection of pornography and esports. In January 2017, only a little over half a year since the game’s release, Pornhub announced that “Overwatch” was the 11th most common search term for 2016 in their annual “Year in

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Review” (Pornhub’s 2016 Year in Review 2017). While *Overwatch* attracted this quality of attention from many, not all of those interested in “Overwatch” pornography may consider themselves players, nor do all players necessarily make use of these pornographic materials.

Overwatch pornography is made in many formats, from professional pornographic digital films available only to subscribers, and repurposed footage of online sex workers from webcam modeling sites, to high-quality erotic photography available through OnlyFans or Patreon subscriptions to streaming or cosplay microcelebrities. It also prominently features in animated pornography made with 3D game engines and various other forms of fan-made art, which for reasons of space will not be discussed in this chapter.¹ While this material often takes deliberate artistic license with their depiction of the *Overwatch* heroes, in the processes of reproducing the characters into a sexualized context the artists and performers involved carefully convey a sense of their official aesthetic and backstory. This backstory is especially relevant in the erotic portrayal of D.Va—who according to Blizzard Entertainment’s official lore is a former esports champion. The examples of *Overwatch* and esports porn discussed in this chapter have been selected because of their prominent circulation on pornography tube sites like Pornhub and XVideos. The erotic imagery that is discussed in the final section is selected from the cosplay of Meg Turney and Raychul Moore, who are both high-profile early adopters and prominent contributors in this cultural sector.

This chapter will focus on how mainstream pornographic themes appear to embed the notion that women gamers and esports players are “attention seeking.” While there is widely reported hostility and ambivalence toward the presence and participation of women in esports (Loebenberg 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019), the notion of “attention seeking” is widely used to dismiss women in esports and gaming (Ruberg et al. 2019). Labeling women as “attention seeking” often extends to “slut-shaming,” as misogynist elements of esports and gaming cultures use “attention-seeking” to refer to the presentation and use of the body to get that attention (Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Zolides 2020). In pornographic reinterpretations of esports women players are depicted doing this deliberately to “unfairly” wield power over men players. Much of the fantasy world depicted in mainstream heterosexual *Overwatch* porn portrays the subversion of this “power” by men, as women’s desire for attention leads to them losing control of the game and their bodies.

The chapter begins by situating *Overwatch* within gaming culture's long history of everyday misogyny, then highlights how some of the issues impacting on women's participation are exacerbated by the role that social media and streaming has in esports. Then, in the following sections the chapter examines the ways that the theme of attention highlights the misogyny in esports themed pornography, parody porn, and lewd cosplay. The esports themed pornography discussed in this chapter normalizes the masculinity of esports and the harassment of women, while the selected high-profile parody porn further embeds the "natural" connection between attention and harassment. Finally, the erotic or "lewd" cosplay tends to reinterpret heroes through the aesthetics of glamor and soft-core pornography, and to create imagery with more potential for diverse, non-binary readings of the relationships between gender, sexuality, and esports.

OVERWATCH, ESPORTS, AND POPULAR MISOGYNY

Overwatch is carefully designed to appeal to Blizzard Entertainment's diverse fan base and a wide range of potential players. One consequence is that the game has a variety of "heroes" (playable avatars) each with a carefully crafted back story that establishes them as a unique individual with a detailed history, cultural background, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and race. There are roughly even numbers of the traditional binary genders among the available avatars, and the roles taken by the avatars are not divided along gender lines. This means, for example, that both men and women avatars are assigned the healer role, a role which is stereotypically assigned to women characters and players (Butt 2016). However, the game also presents playable avatars with Arabic, Asian, European, African, African American, South Asian, and Indigenous backgrounds. Furthermore, two heroes—Soldier 76 and Tracer—are homosexual according to the official lore published by Blizzard Entertainment (Tassi 2019).

Blizzard Entertainment has gone to some lengths to avoid the conspicuous eroticization of the characters within the context of the game itself. This is illustrated by the careful revision of Tracer's victory animations during the development process of the game to avoid criticism from fans who believed her victory pose in the beta version of the game was objectifying (Good 2016). Even so, parallels between the revised victory pose and pinup art were noted on Reddit (Good 2016). The care which is taken to avoid presenting the characters as overtly sexualized is not

typically extended to extensive policing of how the fan community reinterprets *Overwatch* heroes. However, one of the cases where Blizzard Entertainment did act to enforce their intellectual property was to shut down the online magazine *Playwatch* which “mashed up” the aesthetics of *Overwatch* with that of glamor photography and pinup art (Grayson 2017). I suggest that this is because artwork and other fan creations, which work within the pinup/glamor aesthetic, are much more likely to be considered “official” content than that which contains nudity or explicit material. By presenting the heroes as “playmates” and “centerfolds” in ways that referenced their official fictional backstories, *Playwatch* blurred the lines of official and unofficial lore.

The inclusion of prominent and powerful women as characters in esports by Blizzard Entertainment has attracted negative attention from some esports players. This backlash from men within the esports community fits the pattern of “popular misogyny” (Banet-Weiser 2018). Banet-Weiser (2018) introduces the concept to describe the elements in networked culture which amplify and connect various misogynistic formations and coalesce around issues where male interests are perceived as being threatened. The representations of women that are found in *Overwatch* are hardly radical. However, they do challenge the once dominant perception that videogames were for boys and men and demonstrates a willingness to understand the audience and players of esports in a more inclusive manner. Popular misogyny is characterized by a sense of toxic masculinity (Banet-Weiser 2018, 118). Toxic masculinity often manifests itself in geek cultures where it “attempts to maintain a dominant, though always precarious, masculinity” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 169). The “concessions” toward inclusion made by *Overwatch* are illustrative of the qualities of activities which are targeted by popular misogyny because they are perceived as an unwelcome inroad made by feminism into esports and gaming more generally (see: Hayday and Collison 2020, 204). For some men who are invested in the notion that esports are a masculine pursuit the presence of powerful women heroes threatens the status quo by tacitly affirming the presence of women in esports.

The *Overwatch* pornography discussed below illustrates key inflections of everyday, networked misogyny which is threatened by the—albeit limited—visibility that women have obtained through their representation in the game and participation in esports. As Susanna Paasonen points out, in pornography the “female body becomes a distorted mirror onto which male vulnerability and mortality can be projected” (2011, 216). Thus, the

pornography discussed offers a “reassuring” continuance of the normative masculine heterosexual dominance in esports by suggesting that while women’s sexual availability is a condition of their inclusion, their desire for the sexual attention of men ultimately limits women’s successful performance. In this respect the limited narrative of the pornography recasts diversity in a peculiarly misogynist manner.

Professional esports players are predominantly male. While there have been considerable efforts from some professional leagues to address this imbalance (through initiatives such as the Frag Dolls, a Ubisoft sponsored all-women esports team active 2004–2015), esports is still quite palpably male dominated and many of the toxic and deliberately exclusionary behaviors, which have been previously pinpointed in gaming cultures, are also found in esports. Many women have reported facing hostile and condescending treatment in esports communities (Loebenberg 2018; Ruberg et al. 2019), and there have been several high-profile incidents which involved gender-based harassment. An enduring theme in this harassment and dismissal of women in esports is that they are exploiting their gender to get attention (Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019). This perception is formed in relation to the esports players putting their gender first, they are believed to present themselves as “girl gamers,” and this is understood as asking for a particular kind of treatment where skill and performance are devalued in relation to style and appearance.

The hostility toward women among some esports players reflects the industry’s historic composition. Early developments in videogames and videogame cultures in Europe and North America reflected a predominantly white, masculine, heterosexual audience. While several niche publishers focused on producing games for women and girls, most developments within the industry were primarily promoted to a masculine audience. When women were portrayed or included, they were ancillary figures that affirmed the dominant masculinity and heterosexuality of gaming (Kocurek 2015). Digital gaming became strongly associated with subordinated or “geek masculinity” (Braithwaite 2016; Massanari 2017; Taylor 2012), particularly because gaming was seen as an indoor and sedentary pastime in clear contrast to activities perceived as being more traditionally masculine activities such as sports and hunting (Consalvo 2003). Those who identify with geek masculinity often still feel like they are outsiders in the dominant culture (Braithwaite 2016; Massanari 2015), making them vulnerable to recruitment into organized misogyny (Salter 2018) and potentially the “alt-right” (Bezio 2018).

While women have made various inroads into gaming and esports in the past decades, they often still struggle to be included in gaming cultures on equal footing. Salter and Blodgett (2012) describe this situation as the formation of a “new gaming public,” this gaming public includes women and other minorities, but only conditionally. Women and other minorities must accept game cultures as they are without seeking to reform or change to the masculine status quo (Salter and Blodgett 2012). In opposition to the positive diversity which is “imposed” by Blizzard Entertainment, this chapter illustrates how selected mainstream heterosexual *Overwatch* pornography allows some males to continue to idealize game cultures and esports as a masculine domain by making explicit some of the misogynistic attitudes within game cultures and esports.

ESPORTS PUBLIC PERSONA

Esports players are tracked and surveilled by esports platforms as part of their public performance. This has uneven consequences for women esports players, who can no longer use anonymity to conceal personal attributes—like their gender—which might single them out for attention and harassment. Whereas previously women and girls may have successfully hidden their gender in multiplayer games, for example through the oft-mentioned tactic of playing without a microphone (see: Gray 2012), the public aspects of esports enforce many players to maintain a consistent visible identity when competing. By extension, for many elite esports players, a part of their labor is maintaining a well-managed multiplatform social media presence to engage with their followers (Johnson 2021). This practice is crucial for maintaining visibility and profile and is also a potential source of revenue. The labor of maintaining social media networks is described as “visibility labor” (Abidin 2016) and “relational labor” (Baym 2020). Given the ambiguous elements of esports labor the social presence of esports players may lack a clear line between public, work-based and private or personal information, an issue often described as “context collapse” (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Gender and sexuality have key roles in self-representation on social media (Burgess et al. 2016), although its role may be more apparent in the profiles of those from outside the hegemonic norm of male, heterosexual esports players. The norm of having a social media and streaming presence weighs unevenly on women in esports who additionally face everyday misogyny and even

criminal harassment through the exposure that their social media profile creates (see Friman and Ruotsalainen, this volume).

The importance of public social media, along with public streaming, is more laborious for women as they will face a higher level of scrutiny than men (Catá 2019; Ruberg et al. 2019). In game-streaming platforms like Twitch and in public-facing social media like Instagram how bodies are presented is highly regulated, and this unevenly impacts on women who face being banned or otherwise disciplined by the platform (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020, 53). There is also the possibility of having their social media or streaming content edited, curated, and reshared in voyeuristic contexts. The regulation of social media platforms often reinforces the default masculine culture of gaming by emphasizing that women's bodies require extra scrutiny and discipline, supporting the misogynist notion that women use their bodies to get attention. This surveillance is extended by elements of esports culture that examine the streams and social media and engage in the decontextualization and republishing of images and film clips through various sites which specialize in sharing "leaked" content from internet microcelebrities such as Reddit (r/TwitchGoneWild, r/YoutubersGoneWild and r/StreamersGoneWild) and content aggregators such as "famousinternetgirls" and the now defunct "Thothub" (Cole 2020). These forums often gather opportunistic voyeuristic material, curated from everyday streams and social media to present women unsympathetically as "attention seeking" highlighting their clothes and bodies as signifiers that they are somehow not "real" gamers. These forums may also present "leaked" material—from phone hacks or even copyrighted material from an OnlyFans profile—with the intention of additionally shaming the women involved (see: Marwick 2017). This undercurrent suggests that the thematization of attention, exposure, and vulnerability in *Overwatch* pornography taps into a more general hostility toward the "visibility labor" (Abidin 2016) of women esports players.

ESPORTS PLAYERS IN PORNOGRAPHY

The notion that women use their bodies to attract attention while playing esports is used misogynistically in narratives of mainstream heterosexual pornography featuring esports. Of course, this theme is well established in the representation of women in pornography and has been for many years. Yet a concerning thematic undercurrent of the pornography films

discussed in this section—“Two Can Play At That Game!” which depicts an esports competitive event, and “The Space Invader Hers”—is that in the context of esports competition and training, sexual harassment is a legitimate and “natural” response from men toward women that conform to this so-called attention seeking behavior.

“Two Can Play That Game!” was released in 2016 on the website *Teens Like It Big* for the Brazzers Network. The vignette follows a high-stakes competitive game between a man and woman. The film is described on the *Teens Like It Big* website as follows:

Kimber Lee and Sean Lawless are the finalists in a video game competition. The stakes are high and neither player can afford to get distracted! So, when Kimber finds herself behind, she decides to seduce Sean by flashing her tits and ass! When Sean starts to slip, he begins fucking her with his dick! Will Ms. Lee win the tournament, or will she succumb to her desire to suck and fuck the big dick she craves.²

Competing for attention is the focus of the written description of the vignette. First, Kimber Lee uses her body to distract her opponent when she begins to lose. Her opponent, Sean Lawless, responds by “fucking her with his dick.” The described dynamic points to a complex interplay of attention and vulnerability: by using her body to gain attention, she makes herself sexually available. She is made further vulnerable to failure as her sexual desire (“the big dick she craves”) may distract her from peak performance in the game. Using her body to distract her opponent thus highlights that she has the wrong kind of body to fit in the masculine sphere of esports. The film makes sexual the disciplining of the bodies of female esports players and streamers, through a narrative centered on Kimber Lee using her body to give herself an “unfair” advantage and explicitly illustrating through the subsequent responses of Sean how this leads to verbal harassment, non-consensual sexual touching, and the initiation of penetrative sexual intercourse without explicit consent. The film thus follows a logic of victim blaming and reinforces the notion that women are only conditionally welcome in the spaces of esports.

“The Space Invader Hers” was published in 2018 on the *DaughterSwap* website. The narrative elements of the vignette particularly reinforce the notion that sexual harassment is a part of the unofficial cultures of esports. While training for an esports competition, two younger college-aged women (*DaughterSwap* exclusively pairs young women performers with

older men performers) played by Lala Ivey and Layla Love have ensconced themselves in a dorm room, while their “fathers” (uncredited) offer them advice and encouragement. Concerned that their “daughters” are not ready to compete in front of a live audience, the “fathers” concoct a series of distractions which they believe will prepare them for the “high pressure environment” they will encounter in a professional esports tournament. First, they request that their “daughters” practice naked; they explain: “you’ve gotta be able to perform in intense situations.” They then briefly attempt to distract them with noises, then begin to attempt to physically distract the women, who must continue to play without regard to the disturbance, when one “daughter” recoils, her “father” chides her: “focus—see a little distraction got you off your game.” The “fathers” physical hindrances begin with massaging, and quickly proceed to sexual touching, the performance of cunnilingus and fellatio, and finally, quasi-incestuous sexual intercourse, all justified as “just part of the game.” The vignette narrates accepting and not responding negatively to sexual harassment as an unofficial part of esports training and professionalization. The vignette thus both suggests that women who are “serious” about competing in esports should focus on playing and ignore harassment (cf.: Salter and Blodgett 2012), and that by being in esports, women implicitly consent to harassment. As in “Two Can Play That Game!,” “The Space Invader Hers” also suggests that women will need to “accept” that sexual harassment of women is a part of esports culture, maintaining the misogynistic subtext that it is a male and heterosexual domain.

OVERWATCH PARODY PORN

After the release of *Overwatch* in May 2016, two porn parodies from large porn studios rapidly followed. Both featured relatively well-known performers, utilized game-like aesthetics, made reference to the experience of playing *Overwatch*, and clearly referenced the official Blizzard Entertainment heroes. The films—“Oversnatch A XXX Parody” and “Overcrotch—A XXX Threesome Cosplay”—capitalized on the considerable interest in *Overwatch*-related material that Pornhub had already registered among porn users. “Oversnatch” continues to explore the problematic theme of attention already identified, while “Overcrotch” further embeds the notion that esports are a male domain through the use of point-of-view camerawork from the perspective of the male performer.

The Brazzers-produced “Oversnatch A XXX Parody” was published on the *Pornstars Like It Big* website in September 2016. The video stars Aletta Ocean in garments which closely reference the character design of the *Overwatch* hero Widowmaker, and Danny D, who wears a costume that similarly references Reaper. They are introduced in the opening credits as “Aletta ‘One cumshot, one kill.’ Role: Cock Sniper” and “Danny ‘If It Lives, I Can Fuck It.’ Role: Cum Blaster.” These details in the opening sequence both distance the material from the original and parody both the taglines of the individual characters and the highly defined roles that characters have in *Overwatch* (e.g., healer, tank, and sniper). In the paradigm of gaming as a male domain, roles within multiplayer FPS (first-person shooter) games are strongly gendered. Support roles such as healer/medic are considered “feminine,” and by extension players holding such assumptions believe that women, if they do play, will play a support role (Butt 2016). *Overwatch* carefully works against this stereotype by offering both male and female avatars in all potential roles. “Oversnatch” reinscribes these stereotypes with the gender assumptions favored by those that fantasize that gaming is a space where males are naturally dominant.

The Widowmaker character is presented as a manipulative femme fatale who seeks to “restore” her “health and stamina” through “fucking his cock.” Elements of gameplay parody are starkly contrasted with the typical hyperbolic language used in porn descriptions. The film is framed:

Aletta wants to take down powerful Danny by fucking his cock until he comes from her sweet, tight pussy. This will restore the femme-fatale’s health and stamina, giving her enough energy to continue down the game-fap. Will Danny D’s massive Dick withstand her aching pussy? Or will he give her what she wants fucking her hard with his huge dick until it covers her face with his hot, white cum?³

The hyperbolic language (“massive dick,” “fucking her hard,” “hot, white cum”) makes it clear that “Oversnatch” is a standard heterosexual pornographic text, while simultaneously embedding references to a game-like structure for the events that are portrayed. The connection to *Overwatch* is signaled generically through references to “energy,” “health,” and “stamina,” which could also be used to evoke many other games which shared these generic features. By drawing on the language of pornography and gaming the description of the film further sexualizes gender relations within the characters of the game and among the players.

The finale of “Oversnatch” reinforces the role of the Widowmaker character as a femme fatale. This is evident in the two post-cumshot sequences which feature game-like sequences. In the first, immediately after the “money-shot” Widowmaker stands and blows a kiss at the Reaper character, while words appear superimposed on the screen in the style of game “trophy” or “achievement” announcing: “Slut Kiss Activated.” Then a short sequence of black-and-white highlights from the film is replayed featuring Widowmaker prominently with “Victory” superimposed over the sequence in a large *Overwatch*-inspired font. This infers that Widowmaker has “won” the encounter by activating her special abilities and has drained Reaper of his energy and taken it for herself. In the second sequence—which is the final sequence of the video and begins immediately after the sequence described above—“Oversnatch” parodies the process of leveling up. Widowmaker stands in an avatar-like pose while the experience points for the game are calculated according to “cum intake,” “vaginal wetness,” and “pornstar ranking.” Widowmaker and by extension women players of *Overwatch* are portrayed as relying on using their bodies and sexuality to distract men in order to succeed in competition against men. “Oversnatch” also suggests that intercourse is a suitable compensation for the male player disadvantaged by attention-seeking women gamers.

“Overcrotch—A XXX Threesome Cosplay” was published in December 2016 on the *VR Cosplay X* website and features pornographic performers Alexa Tomas as Widowmaker and Zoe Doll as Tracer. “Overcrotch” shares many similarities with “Oversnatch,” particularly the language play with the game terms “choke point” and “sticky mine.” However, “Overcrotch” is also closer to an accurate cosplay of specific characters, rather than a stylistic reference. It is also shot in a VR point-of-view style and is calibrated for use with VR headsets. This perspective “forces the viewer into the subject position of a straight, white male” (Evans 2020, 4) and thus further entrenches the notion that esports is a hierarchical domain in which women must submit to the sexual desires of men. The portrayal of Tracer in “Overcrotch” reframes her homosexuality in an “acceptable” manner that does not exclude men as the point-of-view VR explicitly locates the viewer in the body of man, and when Tracer and Widowmaker have sex, it is for “his” entertainment.

“Overcrotch,” contrary to “Oversnatch,” uses the game’s waiting room as the setting. “Overcrotch” thereby explores the affective structure of *Overwatch* gameplay, by imagining what the heroes do while they are

waiting to play in-between the intense action-filled periods of play. The film suggests a sexual undercurrent to these periods of inaction, rest, and even boredom:

Even in between rounds, Volskaya Industries is a bleak map—especially when a cold-blooded assassin is waiting in the wings to surprise you. But the sexy Widowmaker has different plans to kill all this character-selection time: She’s put her sniper rifle down and instead is looking for yours inside your pants. ... Initially she seems upset by you fraternizing with the enemy, but looking at your dick, she doesn’t blink and would rather join you.⁴

Sexualizing the character-selection phase of the game suggests the process of looking through and examining the avatars of the various heroes is not solely driven by gaming concerns, but also a fantasy of extended control over the women heroes which facilitates a fantasy of male domination over women. Again, this emphasizes the default masculinity of esports spaces, and how by entering them women make themselves vulnerable to harassment.

OVERWATCH COSPLAY

The D.Va and Tracer, as well as many other *Overwatch* heroes, have become popular cosplay subjects for online sex workers that use live camera streaming to perform, and popular cosplay performers who create “NSFW” content. Online sex workers such as Miss Banana and Purple Bitch have risen to prominence on Pornhub, in part because of their D.Va cosplay performances, both were nominated in the 2019 Pornhub awards, Miss Banana for top blowjob performer and Purple Bitch for Top Cosplay performer. Operating at the boundaries of online sex work are a number of prominent streamers and professional cosplayers that use sites like OnlyFans to distribute subscription-based content often described as “lewd cosplay.” Typically, such material only features implied nudity, and the content creators emphasize their own creative contribution to their portrayal of characters. Often, creators working in the lewd cosplay space are able to work within the highly restrictive platform regulations of Patreon, which explicitly bans sex work in its regulations. Even so, lewd cosplay has a prominent role in the pornification of *Overwatch* heroes through the creation of safe-for-work, but “sexy” images that can be spread on social media. Two prominent cosplayers who are widely

acknowledged for their lewd content that reinterprets *Overwatch* heroes through cosplay are Raychul Moore and Meg Turney.

Raychul Moore is a Twitch partner who describes herself as a “gamer and cosplayer.”⁵ She is most famous for her reinterpretations of Cammi from Capcom’s *Street Fighter* (1987–) franchise but has also made several lewd cosplay shoots as the *Overwatch* hero D.Va. These themed photo-shoots range from reinterpreting D.Va as a contemporary “sexy gamer girl” wearing underwear, American Apparel thigh high socks and a hoodie, to a mashup of D.Va and a Playboy bunny. These reinterpretations reproduce the iconography and costume of the character into a new context, relying on make-up and costume to establish the reference to the original character. The Playboy bunny reference used by Moore is common for D.Va cosplay as her symbol is a pink rabbit head which has a palpable connection with the well-known Playboy rabbit head or bunny symbol. Cosplay artists, Moore among them, have extended this small connection by drawing on elements of the iconic Playboy bunny costume. Moore has also created a sequence of photographs which attempt to directly recreate D.Va’s look and costume authentically. However, during the sequence Moore incrementally strips off D.Va’s body suit until she is playing *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981) in her underwear. By portraying D.Va in the act of videogame play in this sequence of photos and in the “sexy gamer girl” photos, Moore references D.Va’s official history from the *Overwatch* canon where she is a pro gamer recruited to the military.⁶

Meg Turney is a well-known Twitch streamer, YouTuber, and cosplayer,⁷ who makes and distributes lewd cosplay content through her Patreon and has previously partnered with content producers like *Esquire* and *Playboy* to produce widely available non-nude content. Turney is noted for her cosplay of the *Overwatch* hero Tracer. She has created several variations of Tracer which prominently include a lewd re-imagination of the character in her “boudoir.” In this cosplay Turney replaces the original orange leggings with black webbing with a black garter belt with orange stockings, while retaining the iconic orange goggles and spiked hair from Tracer’s original character art. Turney’s interpretation develops and extends Tracer’s sexuality through the exploration of the hero’s private and intimate spaces. Thus, while Turney’s images replicate a common theme of mainstream pinup and glamor photography which opens the private and feminine space of the boudoir, this is done to round out the sexual life of the hero and explore and express Turney’s own sexuality.

Many other cosplayers work alongside Moore and Turney to reinterpret *Overwatch* heroes in many different contexts. While these artistic interpretations may extend the portrayal of heroes to include “lewd” or more explicitly sexual elements, it is crucial to distinguish these practices from the mainstream pornography industry discussed above. Cosplay artists may “play” with *Overwatch* lore by exploring the private, erotic, and sexual dimensions of fictional heroes in a manner that has superficial similarities with the pornography made by Brazzers and VR Cosplay X. However, cosplay artists represent the fictional heroes using their own aesthetic sensibilities, and crucially they enact this interpretation through their own bodies. The area of “lewd cosplay” palpably opens the erotic reimagining of videogames to a significantly more diverse perspective than the mainstream pornography discussed earlier in this chapter. Not simply because these practices allow the sexuality of women heroes to be explored and represented by women artists, but also because it creates a space for diverse interpretations of the heroes and for queer artists like Turney to explore portrayals of the queer sexuality of officially queer characters like Tracer.

D.Va’s official backstory as a former competitive gamer makes her a particularly ambiguous subject for lewd reinterpretation. The hero’s popularity among cosplayers speaks to the deep affection that women players, and the cosplayers themselves have for D.Va. But erotic explorations of D.Va may be interpreted in a wider scope where D.Va stands in as a representation of women in esports and gaming more broadly. Thus, for misogynist gamers an exploration or depiction of her sexuality in the area of lewd cosplay may be used to further justify misogynist and exclusionary behaviors. The pinup aesthetic favored by Moore and Turney utilizes sexist clichés from the twentieth century like the Playboy bunny, the French maid and the sexy nurse may exacerbate this ambiguity as it is not conspicuously at odds with the dominant framework of mainstream heterosexual pornography. Some of the subtleties of how these artists build on and play with decades-old practices of representing the female body is potentially missed. However, their extensive use of the emerging lewd aesthetic in their artistic re-portrayals of fictional characters forcibly distances the material from mainstream pornography and reasserts women’s self-determination over the presentation of their own bodies and sexuality.

CONCLUSION

Overwatch porn discussed in this chapter is likely to reinforce the culture of everyday misogyny in esports. Existing work (Loebenberg 2018; Ruberg et al. 2019; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Siutila and Havaste 2019) has pinpointed that everyday misogyny is exemplified by the everyday disciplining of women's bodies on esports and streaming platforms. This chapter argues that a key theme in heterosexual mainstream *Overwatch* pornography is the desire to discipline "attention seeking" women. The pornography indulges a fantasy that gaming and esports are securely masculine, and men are dominant over women to the extent that sexual harassment and control over women's bodies are normalized.

Pornography that features generic esports themes addresses the disciplining of women's "attention seeking behavior," and even suggests that women esports players expect and sometimes want to be sexually harassed. This porn which deals with women esports players is thematically similar to the parody porn which sexualized the woman heroes of *Overwatch*. However, the parody porn suggests that the structure of the esports platforms also contributes to the everyday misogyny of esports culture through the sexualized reinterpretation of game mechanics to shame and exploit women heroes. The lewd cosplay discussed has substantial creative dimensions. Outside the heteronormative mainstream of pornography artists create erotic depictions of existing characters using their own bodies that explore their own affinity with the heroes. The different participants partaking in the creation of the erotic imaginary of *Overwatch* utilize their agency to both problematize and affirm the misogynistic structures of mainstream heterosexual porn, which has unquestionably diversified the erotic and pornographic representations that are available.

There is a great deal of further work to be done to further examine the diversity in (and of) *Overwatch* pornography. This chapter has focused on establishing the connections between esports cultures and mainstream heterosexual pornography which together reinforce everyday misogyny in esports and gaming culture by normalizing it as a masculine and heterosexual space. Other crucial topics for future research include examinations that develop scholarly perspectives on the diversity found in fan-made porn and erotica, the preponderance of pornography made with 3D engines, the prominent role of VR developers in the institutionalization of *Overwatch* porn, and work that situates these developments in a global history of gaming erotica.

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NOTES

1. See Paasonen (2017) and Saunders (2019), for general discussion of 3D animated porn.
2. From: <https://www.brazzers.com/video/4024831/two-can-play-that-game>.
3. From: <https://www.brazzers.com/video/3985531/oversnatch-a-xxx-parody>.
4. From: https://vrcosplayx.com/cosplaypornvideo/overwatch_a_xxx_parody-323578/.
5. From Raychul Moore’s Instagram profile: <https://www.instagram.com/theraychul/?hl=en>.
6. “D.Va is a former professional gamer who now uses her skills to pilot a state-of-the-art mech in defense of her homeland.” from Blizzard Entertainment’s official website for *Overwatch*: <https://playoverwatch.com/en-gb/heroes/dva/>.
7. From Meg Turney’s Instagram profile: <https://www.instagram.com/megturney/?hl=en>.

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CHAPTER 11

The Talk of the Town: Community Perspectives on Loot Boxes

Joseph Macey and Mila Bujić

You know what the problem is?

We gamers don't have a lobby, unlike the gaming industry.

There is no representation of our interests.

Blizzard Entertainment Forums

INTRODUCTION

Video games are something of a lightning rod for controversy, since their inception they have been proposed as the cause of a range of societal problems including violent behavior, problematic gambling behavior, obesity, and social isolation (see Bensley and van Eenwyk 2001; Gupta and Derevensky 1996; Vandewater et al. 2004; Colwell and Kato 2003). Given that almost all new technologies and media have at first been received cautiously, if not subject to outright hostility, by mainstream society, such concerns are to be expected. However, the presence of the “technopanic” (Marwick 2008) narrative in discussions concerning video games is

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particularly enduring. A potential explanation being that video games are often at the forefront of technological development, characterized by innovation, experimentation, and the creation of new interactional relationships.

Innovation in video games is not restricted to the games or hardware but is present in all facets of gaming from the social practices surrounding games to the business models employed by the industry. The most significant developments of recent years have been the move from “games as a product” to “games as a service” (GaaS) (Sotamaa and Karppi 2010), and the increasing prevalence of monetization strategies first pioneered in free-to-play (F2P), or “freemium”, games (Alha et al. 2014). These models originated in those of utilitarian software (Seufert 2013; Turner et al. 2003) and proliferated alongside the rise of the Internet, which enabled a more direct interaction between the consumer and the service, as opposed to a one-time purchase of a product. GaaS moves away from the traditional single-point-of-purchase to the continuous revenue approach, focusing on the continued development and release of new content in order to secure both ongoing player engagement with the game and to drive monetization. Consequently, GaaS relies on a large and active playing community which serves both as a source of revenue and of data used to develop subsequent updates, including adjustments to monetization strategies. Although only a small proportion of users, or “whales”, usually accounts for at least half of the revenue (Tomić 2018), social factors also seem to significantly influence how often and much users spend on an otherwise F2P product (Shi et al. 2015). Both GaaS and, to a lesser degree, monetization practices associated with F2P also serve the ongoing drive toward a “platformization” of digital economies (Kenny and Zysman 2016), evident in both the video game industry directly (Zanescu et al. 2020, 2021) and in associated sectors such as streaming (Abarbanel and Johnson 2020).

Perhaps the most (in)famous of these monetization strategies is the loot box, an in-game item which has become ubiquitous in recent years, appearing in F2P games and premium games alike. Indeed, loot boxes have proved to be such a successful means of monetization that they have enabled many notable games to abandon traditional models and adopt the F2P model, for example, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO), *Rocket League*, and *Eve Online* (Hornshaw 2016; Torbet 2018; Swiatek 2020). Loot boxes are a means of distributing in-game rewards to players via random number generation and come in many forms: they can be distributed

to players for free, purchased with in-game currencies, or with real-world currencies. The items from loot boxes can be strictly cosmetic, with no direct effect on the game, they can be in-game resources, or even in-game currency used to buy specific items. Some loot boxes provide items which can be traded with other players or sold via online marketplaces for real-world currency, while others provide items which are linked to player accounts and cannot be traded or transferred (Nielsen and Grabarczyk 2019; Macey and Hamari 2019).

Loot boxes have proved to be a controversial addition to games, with concerns being raised over their similarity to gambling products such as scratch-cards or slot machines (Gong and Rodda 2020); they have been subject to numerous investigations by regulators and, in some countries, are the subject of specific legislation (Macey and Hamari 2019). Indeed, loot boxes are emblematic of the ongoing convergence between gaming and gambling (Macey and Hamari 2020; Johnson and Brock 2020), a trend which is also visible in the wider video game ecosystem, for example in esports (Macey et al. 2021); additional content such as battle-passes (Zanescu et al. 2020); and in streaming services such as Twitch (Abarbanel and Johnson 2020). The issue of loot boxes first came to the attention of mainstream news media, and subsequently regulators, after the 2017 release of the game *Battlefront 2* (*BF2*) provoked a significant backlash from the gaming community. The particular way in which loot boxes were implemented was criticized for promoting “pay-to-win”, or purchasing in-game items that provide an advantage when playing (Zendle et al. 2020). This is particularly problematic in multiplayer games as those not making purchases can effectively be prevented from progressing regardless of their in-game skills. The publisher, Electronic Arts (EA), was forced to make numerous changes to the implementation of loot boxes in *BF2* after a sustained campaign by players (Perks 2019). It is important to note, however, that not all multiplayer games include P2W mechanics, for example, *Overwatch* loot boxes do not include items which directly provide in-game advantages to players.

Loot boxes have been subject to specific legislation in several countries; however, the regulatory approaches are inconsistent and dependent upon local interpretations of what constitutes gambling and of the function and value of virtual items contained within loot boxes (Macey and Hamari 2019). Belgium, for example, has ruled that any loot box which can be purchased with real-world currencies is considered gambling (The Belgian Gaming Commission 2018), whereas the Netherlands considers those

whose contents can be directly exchanged for real-world currencies as gambling (Netherlands Gaming Authority 2018). Due to differences in how loot boxes are employed (e.g., *CS:GO* vs. *Overwatch*) these interpretations lead to some types constituting gambling in one country, but not the other.

To date, academic treatments of loot boxes have assessed the legal implications of loot boxes, their psychological impact, and the potential associations with problematic gambling behaviors (Abarbanel 2018; Li et al. 2019; Zendle and Cairns 2018). Despite these varied approaches, a significant perspective is notably absent from the discussion, that of the players. Their inclusion is relevant for several reasons, the most pertinent of which derives from the contemporary dominance of the GaaS model (Sotamaa and Karppi 2010). The move from a goods-dominant model to a service-dominant model has resulted in a cooperative process of value creation (Huotari and Hamari 2012), one in which consumer perspectives and experiences take on more significance due to the ongoing relationship required to make it a viable approach. The significance, and potential influence, of the playing community was clearly demonstrated in the response to the release of *BF2*, highlighted earlier. In order to produce an appropriate response to the question of whether or not loot boxes constitute gambling and what is their place in contemporary games ecosystem, the expert analyses must be complemented with consumer voices. Adopting such an approach also serves to engage consumers in the wider debate and, therefore, increases the likelihood of reaching solutions which are acceptable and/or comprehensible to all stakeholders. This is particularly important in regard to games such as *Overwatch* which, as described above, are judged differently by different regulators.

This chapter utilizes content analysis (Bengtsson 2016) to investigate discussions of gambling in *Overwatch* fan communities, regarding the specific topic of loot boxes. As such, this work is guided by the following research question: *what attitudes and opinions are expressed by the Overwatch community regarding loot boxes?*

METHOD

Data Collection

Data was collected during September 2020, both from the official *Blizzard Entertainment* Internet forums and from various *Reddit* communities.

Although discussions likely exist on other forums (e.g., social media, news portals), we have limited our data collection to the community's core meeting places, denoted by the communities being defined by games or, specifically, *Overwatch*. However, such searches should not be understood as definitive and encompassing all possible discussions on the topic, but due to their themes are likely the focal points for similar discussions. As such, they are sufficiently reliable to provide insights into the community's attitudes. Given the aim of the research, it was decided that posts reacting to the decisions of the Belgian legislators would form the basis of the data collection. The search was conducted based on the keywords *Overwatch*, *loot boxes*, and *Belgium*. The inclusion criteria assumed only that the discussion thread topic related to loot boxes in *Overwatch*. The majority of comments were made in explicit reference to loot boxes in *Overwatch*; however, in some cases it was unclear if the comments related specifically to *Overwatch* or to loot boxes and games in general. In cases where the intent of the poster was not clear, it was decided that they be retained in the analysis, but that they would be included in a dedicated theme: The effects of loot boxes on games in general—T3. As such, all themes relate specifically to the context of loot boxes in *Overwatch*, except T3, as outlined. Throughout the process, we have followed the guidelines of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK for ethical research. According to the same guidelines, no specific ethical approval was needed.

Our primary aim was to ensure the representation of players' voices, as such particular attention was devoted to finding voices of marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ and people of color. After the first stage, we had collected data from the official Blizzard Entertainment forum, r/Overwatch, and r/GamerGhazi.¹

In order to ensure representation of diverse voices, we decided upon a second round of data collection, in this round, the eligibility criteria were relaxed to include any discussion about the impact of loot boxes on games and gaming. After amending the eligibility criteria, posts from a further four forums (r/DisabledGamers, r/girlgamers, r/gaymers, and r/SRSGaming²) were added to the dataset. However, of the discussion groups identified, r/POCGaming, r/LesbianGamers, r/AutisticGaming, r/BlackGamerGirls, and r/AgainstGamerGate were found to contain no relevant data. Table 11.1, below, details the final sources which provided data and the total number of individual comments from each source.

Table 11.1 Sources of data and the corresponding number of retrieved comments

<i>Source</i>	<i>No. of comments</i>
Blizzard Forums	
<i>Overwatch</i> : General Discussion	154
Reddit	
r/Overwatch	1100
r/DisabledGamers	3
r/GamerGhazi	47
r/girlgamers	30
r/gaymers	21
r/SRSGaming	43
Total:	1398

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed by both authors using content analysis; we adopted an inductive category development approach in order to mitigate preconceptions and to ensure comprehensive representation of the community's attitudes (Mayring 2004). Therefore, no previous theory or literature was used to guide the pen-and-paper coding process through forming pre-determined concepts for analysis. However, the authors' positions as both players and games researchers and not *tabula rasa* should be acknowledged. In that vein, although the coding was open, authors themselves have experience and previous knowledge on loot boxes and the related issues, with one having a slightly positive attitude toward them, and the other slightly negative.

Both authors independently conducted the three phases of analysis (decontextualization, recontextualization, and categorization; Bengtsson 2016) with the only pre-determined aspect being the categorization of negative, positive, and neutral comments and incorporating only comments which demonstrated explicit opinions, so as to reduce bias that would be introduced by researchers' interpretation of vague statements. The results were then matched, compared, and discussed in order to establish comprehensive and reliable identification of codes. At this stage, two distinct approaches to organizing codes into themes emerged: (a) a hierarchical structure, incorporating the main topic, such as the relationship of loot boxes and gambling, and any relevant sub-themes; and (b) a series of dichotomous pairs describing the broader discussion positions, such as whether parents or companies should monitor and regulate minors'

interactions with loot boxes. Following a discussion, we adopted method (a) as it was felt that it had a stronger direct link to the research question, and was more easily communicable to the intended audience. However, the coding scheme was informed by method (b) as opposing opinions were not coded as distinct themes, for example, the theme “loot boxes in *Overwatch*” contained both positive and negative views, in preference to creating two sub-themes: “loot boxes in *Overwatch* are bad” and “loot boxes in *Overwatch* are good”.

Although all of the posts from the selected discussion threads were included in the dataset, a significant portion, over 50%, was discarded during coding because their content was either duplicates of earlier posts or not deemed relevant to the main topic of this study. Furthermore, individual usernames were not tracked, and each comment was analyzed as an independent item.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We found that all comments posted across a range of discussion forums could be classified according to one of seven main themes. These themes were consistent no matter whether the comment expressed positive, negative, or neutral opinions. However, some small differences were observed in relation to the sub-themes present in the discussion. For example, only those who expressed a negative opinion about loot boxes referred to earlier business models and game design practices when considering the effect of loot boxes on games. A full list of themes and sub-themes is provided in Image 11.1 with example quotes following theme descriptions throughout the text. Usernames have been omitted in order to protect the users’ privacy.

Monetization of Loot Boxes: T1

The first theme lies at the very heart of the debate, with proponents of loot boxes contending that the revenue generated by sales funds ongoing game development and that their purchase is a matter of personal choice. Indeed, some explicitly stated that they chose to make purchases as a way of providing revenue to companies who make F2P games. This finding provides further evidence for the emerging importance of donations as a motivation for purchasing virtual items, in particular those which are non-functional, or cosmetic (Alha et al. 2018; Marder et al. 2019).

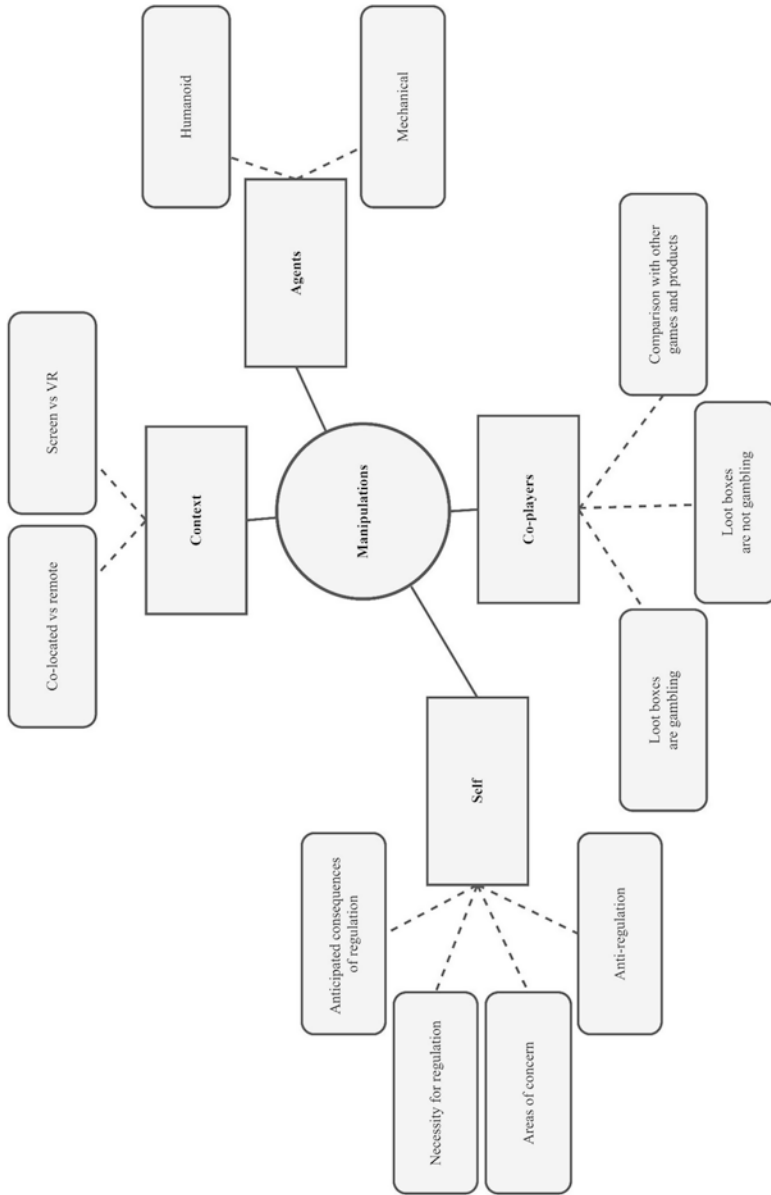


Image 11.1 Themes and sub-themes found in *Overwatch* community's discussions on loot boxes

You don't have to pay for anything you don't want to, I simply use my earner in game coins to buy anything I want.
r/overwatch

Conversely, critics argue that the profits from loot boxes more than account for development costs and that they are, in fact, excessive. Furthermore, they highlight the ways in which loot boxes exploit psychological triggers and prey on vulnerable populations as a means of driving sales.

I personally have had a lot of problems around loot boxes due to my OCD.
r/disabledgamers

This debate demonstrates the importance of access to accurate and reliable information, both regarding the profitability, or otherwise, of loot boxes and the degree to which games employ potentially exploitative practices. For example, recent work has highlighted the development of software which uses player data to search social media in order to present purchasable content which is more appealing to an individual (King and Delfabbro 2019). Interestingly, academic research was referred to fleetingly by some critics but not by proponents of loot boxes.

In order to allow consumers to make informed decisions about games, and about the monetization practices they employ, transparency must be improved. The issue of transparency, in particular the need to provide easily accessible and accurate information to players, is reminiscent of one of the key concepts of responsible gambling frameworks (Blaszczynski et al. 2011). Indeed, the approach of responsible gambling is one which incorporates various perspectives, including consumer protection and harm minimization, which would help address the concerns of critics without impinging upon the areas valued by those who favor loot boxes. However, the efficacy of various responsible gambling strategies, for example limit-setting or pop-up messaging, is unclear and has been found to vary between different groups, for example when grouped by age (Ladouceur et al. 2017; Gainsbury et al. 2018). As such, dedicated research is required in order to identify the most effective strategy, or strategies, to utilize in a community of video game players, particularly considering the influence of community on purchase intention (Hsieh and Tseng 2018).

Contents of Loot Boxes: T2

The codes classified under this theme referred to the virtual items accessed through opening loot boxes, rather than the method of delivery. Particular attention was paid to the utility, or lack thereof, of the virtual items.

*At the end of the day, again, it's purely cosmetic and has no effect on gameplay, so who actually cares.
r/overwatch*

Indeed, even those who did not view loot boxes positively often couched their opinion in terms of the desirability of the virtual items themselves, with limited references to the loot box as a distribution mechanic. Instead, the discussion is framed in reference to the ways loot boxes and their contents impact the players' experiences of the game, and even constitute a part of the gameplay experience. This perspective is one in which the value of the items themselves is constituted in terms of experiential value, rather than purely functional terms. However, this may be a result particular to players of *Overwatch*, or other games of the genre, as the value players ascribe to virtual items has been found to differ between game types (Ho and Wu 2012).

In situations where the virtual items directly affect gameplay, providing a competitive advantage, players are united in opposition. This final finding is in line with prior research in which games perceived to be pay-to-win were found to be the least well-regarded by players (Hamari and Keronen 2017; Alha et al. 2018).

The Effects of Loot Boxes on Games in General: T3

The perceived influence of loot boxes on the gaming experience extended beyond the virtual items they provide. First, the experience of opening loot boxes was viewed positively, while the use of a random number generator (RNG) to allocate rewards was thought to be fair to all. Such a view illustrates one of the primary social functions of gambling as an activity, that it is a mechanism which compensates for unequal access to resources by ensuring that all participants are dependent upon chance rather than any other determining factor (Abt et al. 1984).

Second, loot boxes were found to affect the in-game experience as the random distribution of cosmetic skins supported a more diverse aesthetic during play, ensuring that not all players were using the most recent, or

“best” skins. Finally, in regard to positive effects, there was particularly strong support for the idea that the inclusion of loot boxes obtained through in-game activities creates an active and coherent player base; content available via direct purchase was given as an example of how monetization can cause rifts and elitism within a gaming community.

*For many people, the community interaction is an important part of the game.
For those people, cosmetics do without a doubt affect gameplay.
r/overwatch*

Conversely, the ubiquity of loot boxes was thought to have damaged the community by normalizing the presence of exploitative monetization mechanics, a position supported by existing research (Gainsbury et al. 2015; King and Delfabbro 2019; King and Delfabbro 2020). Indeed, many expressed the view that games were no longer designed with the aim of providing an enjoyable experience for players but, instead, to extract as much revenue as possible:

*When freemium elements are involved, you don't play the game ... it plays you.
r/girlgamers*

A distinct sub-theme we identified was the comparison between contemporary games, characterized as employing either GaaS or F2P as a business model, and older games which utilized the traditional, product-based business model. The latter approach, according to some, provides better value for money, more meaningful play experiences, and reward skilled play. Such comments echo a narrative which runs throughout the wider playing community: the qualitative comparison of “real” games and gaming to “lesser” practices which include, but are not limited to, casual gaming, a preference for browser-based games or social network games, and pay-to-win practices. These perspectives are connected to wider issues of gatekeeping and the idealized meritocracy of gaming (Paul 2018; Alha 2020).

The Implementation of Loot Boxes in Overwatch: T4

Shifting the focus from the effects of loot boxes away from games in general, the discussion is somewhat simpler, being a comparison between the perceived benefits and detriments of the way in which loot boxes are

implemented within *Overwatch*. Those of the former position argued that *Overwatch* should be exempt from regulation, with the most regularly observed justifications for this position being: loot boxes ensure all content can be accessed by all players, eventually; *Overwatch* provides players with free loot boxes and, therefore, there is no requirement to purchase them; that it prevents pay-to-win; and that in-game currency can be earned, allowing players to make purchases without using real-world currency. Finally, the single most common reason for defending the presence of loot boxes in *Overwatch* is that the system is not as bad as in some other games, in particular games such as *CS:GO*, or *Battlefront 2*.

Overwatch system (random lootboxes, but only cosmetics) is the least cancerous among the most profitable ones, so I'm good with it.
r/overwatch.

Those players who did not support loot boxes tended to discuss the *Overwatch* system in more concrete, less relativistic terms.

Having the least stinky shit in the crap heap does not suddenly make their shit a chunk of gold.
r/overwatch

As such, they critiqued both the publisher, Blizzard Entertainment, for obscuring the inherently exploitative nature of loot boxes, and those players who continued to support their inclusion in the game:

Loot Boxes and Gambling: T5

When comparing the implementation of loot boxes in *Overwatch* with that of other games, such as *CS:GO*, the rhetoric we observed largely mirrored that of the wider debate about loot boxes and gaming (T3) observed within the data. Proponents of loot boxes arguing that: they cannot be gambling as they are marketed as providing a set of random items; that they cannot be exchanged for real-world currency; and that they always provide the player with something, a position adopted by the Entertainment Software Rating Board. In opposition, critics argue that the combination of financial outlay and chance-based rewards is enough to classify loot boxes as constituting a form of gambling. As such, the debate within the *Overwatch* playing community mirrored that within both academia and

regulatory authorities (Martinelli 2017; Holden and Ehrlich 2017; Macey and Hamari 2019). In addition, direct parallels were drawn between the potential consequences of opening loot boxes and participation in gambling, with one comment highlighting the existence of research which addressed this specific issue. Although the comment did not include further details, there is an ever-growing body of work which has found associations between paid loot box opening and behavior which is indicative of problematic gambling (e.g., Macey and Hamari 2019; Zendle and Cairns 2018).

The discussion also reflected another issue which is a common feature of discussions about loot boxes—the perceived similarity between loot boxes and other game-like or playful products that provide random items, such as Kinder Eggs and Collectible Card Games (CCGs). The argument, presented by many, including Executives at EA, the publisher of *BF2*, and the *FIFA* series among others, is that loot boxes simply utilize “surprise mechanics” in the same way as many other, unregulated, products (Madigan 2019). While many players offered reasons why loot boxes can be distinguished from such products, there was a near-universal acceptance that this issue should be explored in detail given the apparent similarities between the various products.

Spending real money for a random chance at getting something good is generally considered gambling, although if you push it too far then a Kinder Surprise is gambling, so you can't be too religious about this definition.
r/overwatch

What is apparent, however, is that the legal definition of gambling currently employed by many regulators³ causes a significant amount of confusion as, in wider society, the terms of reference are notably broader and incorporate more general instances of risky behavior (see Abarbanel 2018). The situation is further complicated by the increasing presence of virtual items which can be purchased, but whose usage is restricted to specific, game-based, contexts and the fact that these items are not owned by the players, but are instead licensed for use by the publishers (Corbett 2019).

Loot Boxes and Regulation: T6

Given the nature of this research, it is unsurprising that T6 contains the most sub-themes and distinct issues raised by players. In addition to the specific features discussed under T4, those opposing regulation of loot

boxes did so on the basis that: they are not actually a problem; they are not addictive; the risks are obvious and well-understood by all; there are worse things than loot boxes; and, that as only a small percentage of people are affected by gambling problems, regulation ruins the game for the majority. Indeed, the notion that problems are the fault of individuals was an especially strong narrative, with players explaining problematic consumption to either a lack of self-control or of proper parenting. Such views have previously been found to exist in other studies of games employing F2P business models, and which include in-game items such as loot boxes (Alha et al. 2018). This is more than likely connected to the beliefs, also expressed by players, that governments should not regulate games in any circumstances, and that individuals should be allowed to spend their money as they wish.

*Don't penalise the normal majority for the lack of self-control of a tiny minority.
r/overwatch*

Another particularly dominant opinion was that regulation was the result of a politicized narrative, that expressing concern about loot boxes was “fashionable”, and that attempts to regulate can be attributed to a lack of understanding on the part of regulators:

*so, clueless politicians make bullshit laws about things that don't matter because they think that will make them popular, and target things that don't even fit their bullshit description because they're popular, while ignoring others that fit a hell of a lot more but are less popular. And the players are the ones getting screwed.
r/overwatch*

As previously, this attitude is indicative of an outlook in which games are under attack from outsiders, from those who are opposed to gaming by adopting such a position, individuals are acting as gatekeepers to the world of games and gaming (Alha 2020). Furthermore, this supposed lack of understanding, or even concern, on the part of regulators may be a source of a second sub-theme which views regulation negatively: the idea that regulation will harm both games and players. There appears to be a common belief that removing loot boxes from games will actually disadvantage players financially as alternative systems will raise the price of virtual items to levels which exceed the current costs of obtaining via opening

loot boxes, whether paid or earned through in-game activities. The adoption of a consumer-centered framework, one similar to responsible gambling initiatives, would be a viable means to ensure that such concerns are addressed (Blaszczynski et al. 2011; King and Delfabbro 2019). Indeed, some claim that it is the skins themselves which encourage addictive behaviors, not the delivery mechanism, and that simply removing loot boxes will not address the underlying problem, yet prior research has demonstrated that such a view is not grounded in reality (Zendle and Cairns 2018).

Once again, those players who were critical of loot boxes approached the issue of regulation from a perspective which stressed social responsibility over individual perspectives. Particular attention was given to the fact that regulation is needed to protect those who are most vulnerable, such as children, and that parents cannot always keep up with developments in gaming and, as such, may not even know what loot boxes are. Indeed, one comment explicitly stated that current practices are skewed toward companies as players lack representation. However, it must be remembered that any attempts to introduce legislation framed solely in terms of protecting a single group, for example children, would likely disproportionately affect other groups and, therefore, a balanced approach is required (Abarbanel 2018). Comments expressing support for regulation were confident that other authorities would soon legislate against gambling in games and that such approaches would drive companies to develop fairer monetization practices. It is interesting to note that both sides of the debate expressed the opinion that the attention being paid to loot boxes is the direct result of EA's misjudged approach to monetization by employing *pay-to-win* loot boxes or, more succinctly, their "greed". By implementing a system which essentially required players to purchase loot boxes in order to unlock a wealth of major characters, and by conferring in-game advantages unavailable to those who chose not to pay, EA violated the principle of fairness so important to players (Alha et al. 2018; Karhulahti and Kimppa 2018).

Finally, even those who view loot boxes critically discussed their concerns about regulation. However, while they felt that regulation would be beneficial, the lack of a consistent approach was seen to undermine the process. Indeed, potential problems were not simply the result of different interpretations of what constitutes gambling, but also due to varied interpretations of the value of virtual items; issues addressed in prior research (Martinelli 2017; Holden and Ehrlich 2017; Macey and Hamari 2019).

Concern was also expressed that game companies would find ways to circumvent legislation as they have done in other jurisdictions, for example, China.

Alternatives to Loot Boxes: T7

Numerous references were made to both other games and the ways in which their monetization systems affected the players' experiences. Those who expressed positive opinions about loot boxes were, unsurprisingly, skeptical about possible alternatives with criticism aimed at direct purchase and downloadable content in particular.

*be careful what you wish for, as any scheme that replaced lootboxes will probably be worse. Money talks.
r/overwatch*

Perhaps the single most common concern about direct purchase is that companies will introduce pricing structures which do not provide value for money, resulting in increased expenditure on the part of players. Some even commented that direct purchase would “disadvantage” those who want to collect virtual items as they would be unable to obtain them through gameplay. In the same way that loot boxes were thought to enhance the game experience and to benefit the community, direct purchase was presented as being a detrimental influence: causing splits within the community among those who had paid for access to different content, such as maps, and those who had not. Once again, this perspective references both the potentially democratizing nature of randomly distributed resources (see T1) and, somewhat counter-intuitively, the tendency to value a meritocratic approach where any in-game benefits must be “earned” through in-game achievements (Alha 2020). Finally, there was a clear sentiment that if loot boxes are removed from games, companies will develop new means to monetize games which are, in some way, worse for players. What is most apparent from these comments, is that many viewed the situation in terms best described as “either/or”, and did not raise the possibility of dual systems.

In comparison, those who view loot boxes negatively discussed a greater range of alternatives, including more dynamic systems incorporating different solutions to serve different types of players. In contrast to the opinions expressed above, direct purchase was held up as the fairest, most

consumer-friendly method of accessing cosmetic items in the game; however, other proposals included season passes, earning in-game credits, random rewards earned through completing in-game objectives, and in-game progression by completing set challenges. It is notable that many of these alternatives were also felt to improve the game experience, promote an active player base, and reward skilled play. A clearly expressed concern was that, if required to remove loot boxes, companies would introduce systems which are even more exploitative. It is interesting that individuals raised examples of different means by which in-game items could be obtained from a purely functional perspective, but did not raise the potential for other forms of oversight based on the principles of responsible gambling, such as personal limit-setting or pop-up messages encouraging breaks in play (e.g., King and Delfabbro 2019).

META-PERSPECTIVES

During the coding process, we noticed several perspectives which cut across many, if not all, of the themes and sub-themes we identified. Given that they were seen to influence differing contexts and opinions, we felt that they did not constitute distinct themes but, instead, offered a means of interpreting attitudes toward a specific theme or sub-theme.

The first of these can be considered to be a political outlook, as responses could be placed on a spectrum between individual and social responsibility, whether on the part of individuals, parents, companies, or governments. Such a viewpoint was particularly evident in T1 and T6, although its influence extended to other discussions. Second, almost all themes were seen to be influenced by the perceived power dynamics between players and game developers; specifically, the (in)ability of the community to effect meaningful change, for example through economic activity (i.e., boycotts) or direct representation. Finally, we observed the apparently universal condemnation of pay-to-win mechanics, a perspective which highlights both the integrity of the game and the play experience. With this in mind, it is important to develop both monetization methods and regulatory approaches which do not compromise or unduly influence the way in which players interact with the game.

Similar to these underlying perspectives, the themes which emerged can also be directly connected to several discussions and theoretical perspectives addressed in existing research, notably: meritocracy/gatekeeping (Paul 2018; Alha 2020); F2P/ethical game design discussions (King and

Delfabbro 2019; Perks 2019; Alha 2020); responsible gambling/consumer protection (Blaszczynski et al. 2011; Abarbanel 2018); and the conceptualization of value in respect to virtual items (Ho and Wu 2012; Hamari and Keronen 2017; Marder et al. 2019).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The most obvious, and significant, limitation of this study concerns the nature of the data that was gathered; written comments were taken from historic discussions on forums which were open to all. Accordingly, it was impossible to assess any variations in tone in individual comments, such as sarcasm. As such, all comments were judged at face value. Furthermore, no demographic or other contextual information relating to individuals was provided, meaning that we cannot guarantee all those who posted are players of *Overwatch* despite their membership of community forums. We propose that this study serves as the basis for an ongoing investigation, with the use of qualitative interviews, in particular, facilitating an exploration of players' attitudes and opinions.

Such an approach would also offer a prospective means of investigating our finding that attitudes toward loot boxes appear to be affected by political outlook, an insight which offers several intriguing possibilities for future research.

A further limitation is that the eligibility criteria required that comments explicitly addressed the issue of loot boxes, rather than gambling in general, resulting in a small number of potentially informative posts not being included in the analysis as they took the form of generalized or abstracted commentaries, for example on the nature of gambling. The most notable of these related to the way in which virtual items provide value to players and, therefore, transcend definitions of gambling which are anchored in real-world currencies or financial instruments. Pursuing further exploration of this issue is, therefore, a necessary direction for future research.

Finally, due authors' personal limitations, only discussions in the English language were considered for this study. Future studies should consider expanding their data collection to non-English sources, thereby improving the inclusiveness of community voices and enabling extensive research into cross-cultural perspectives of loot boxes, gambling, and games.

CONCLUSION

Despite increasing academic attention being paid to the ongoing convergence between video games and gambling, consumer perspectives have so far received little attention. Given that the dominant business models in the contemporary games industry are focused on promoting long-term player engagement (GaaS) and extensive player bases (F2P), the significance of players as stakeholders has increased accordingly. This research, therefore, aimed to complement existing research into the gambification of video games by examining posts in a range of player-centered discussion forums in order to understand attitudes toward loot boxes within the *Overwatch* community.

Analysis of comments from six distinct discussion forums revealed seven main themes with a further 14 sub-themes identified, see Image 11.1. A number of implications, both practical and theoretical, arose out of this work. First, in respect to practical issues, attempts to regulate both loot boxes specifically, and the wider gambification of video games more generally, would benefit from adopting frameworks similar to responsible gambling initiatives in order to address the issue. Indeed, it may be worth considering any attempt at regulation from the perspective of consumer protection rather than from legislation framed solely in the context of gambling. Second, monetization strategies adopted by game companies directly impact upon the consumer experience of playing games, as such careful consideration is required in order that the chosen strategy does not negatively impact players. Similarly, no matter players' opinions on loot boxes specifically, the presence of "pay-to-win" mechanics is perceived to be highly problematic, destroying the balance of a game. This is particularly relevant in competitive multiplayer games, such as *Overwatch*, which are popular esports titles. Finally, the approach adopted by both regulators and legislators requires more effective communication regarding the rationale behind their adopted strategy in order that regulators can demonstrate that they are not anti-game or anti-gamer. As a consequence, decisions are more likely to be understood and accepted by the gaming community, rather than being perceived as diktats from an uninformed and uninterested authority. Active and targeted communication strategies on the part of authorities are likely to result in improved interactions between regulators and consumers.

In respect to theoretical issues, this study provides further evidence that some players choose to make in-game purchases as a means of showing

their support for the game developers (e.g., Theme 1), thereby adding to the existing knowledge concerning motivations which drive digital purchase intentions. In addition, perhaps the most significant implication derives from our findings regarding how players conceptualize the value of virtual items in many ways, both in material and experiential affordances. Established legal definitions of gambling frame the concept of value in predominantly monetary terms⁴; however, the increasing convergence of gaming and gambling, and the growing prevalence of digital currencies, virtual items, and hybrid gambling activities, means that such definitions require revision.

A final issue of note is that every attempt was made to ensure that voices of marginalized groups were included in the discussion; however, no difference was observed in the themes governing discussion in the different communities. Furthermore, no distinct sentiment (positive, negative, neutral) was associated with any specific community. From this, our analysis of the data suggests that personal experiences of loot boxes are not determined by factors such as race, gender, or sexuality.

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NOTES

1. r/GamerGhazi presents its purpose as where “diversity and geek culture collide”.
2. r/SRSGaming presents its purpose as “a place to post cool and interesting pictures, videos, articles, and other things about games and gaming. Pretend it’s like r/gaming except not shit and awful.”
3. While legal definitions of gambling vary between jurisdictions, the potential prize is predominantly quantified in terms of real-world money, or “money’s worth”. See Macey and Hamari (2019) for an overview of the legal situation regarding loot boxes.
4. A notable exception is that of the Isle of Man whose regulators include virtual items in their definition of “money, or money’s worth” (Isle of Man Gambling Supervision Commission 2019).

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