



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

H. Wirman (✉)
IT University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark
e-mail: wirman@itu.dk

R. Jones
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, School of Design,
Hung Hom, Hong Kong
e-mail: rhys-g.jones@connect.polyu.hk

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.
10. Rule34. 2015. Overwatch Search Results. <https://rule34.xxx/index.php?page=post&s=list&tags=overwatch>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
11. PEGI 2015. Overwatch Search Results. https://pegi.info/search-peg?q=overwatch&op=Search&age%5B%5D=&descriptor%5B%5D=&publisher=&platform%5B%5D=&release_year%5B%5D=&page=1&form_build_id=form-dEwpBs8vLFAh1iNxrAHxcclug8CqK6LaS86nIzwCJ-8&form_id=pegi_search_form. Accessed 3 June 2021.
12. ESRB 2015. <https://www.esrb.org/ratings/34210/Overwatch/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
13. Chalk, Andy The Overwatch Playboy Parody ‘Playwatch Magazine’ has been shut down by a copyright claim. PC Gamer. <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-overwatch-playboy-parody-playwatch-magazine-has-been-shut-down-by-a-copyright-claim/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
14. End User License Agreement.
15. Terms of Use.

REFERENCES

- Banks, John, and Humphreys, Sal. 2008. "The Labour of User Co-creators: Emergent Social Network Markets?" *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 14, no: 401–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856508094660>.
- Banks, John. 2013. *Co-creating videogames*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Blizzard Entertainment. *Hearthstone*. Blizzard Entertainment. PC/Mobile. 2014.
- Blizzard Entertainment. *Overwatch*. Blizzard Entertainment. PC/Playstation 4/Xbox One. 2016.
- Blizzard Entertainment. *World of Warcraft*. Blizzard Entertainment. PC. 2004.
- Bohunicky, Kyle and Youngblood, Jordan. 2019. The Pro Strats of Healsluts: Overwatch, Sexuality, and Perverting the Mechanics of Play. *WiderScreen* 1–2.
- Carpenter, Nicole. 2018. Here's how Blizzard's official Ashe cosplay came together for BlizzCon. *Dot Esports*. <https://dotesports.com/overwatch/news/heres-how-blizzards-official-ashe-cosplay-came-together-for-blizzcon>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Carpenter, Nicole. 2019. Blizzard cancels Overwatch launch event at Nintendo's New York store. *Polygon*. <https://www.polygon.com/2019/10/15/20915358/overwatch-launch-event-cancelled-nintendo-nyc-store>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Chalk, Andy. 2016. Blizzard Releases Crazy Detailed Overwatch Art and Cosplay Guide. *PCGamer*. <https://www.pcgamer.com/blizzard-releases-crazily-detailed-overwatch-art-and-cosplay-guide/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Chalk, Andy. 2019. Bipartisan Members of Congress Call on Blizzard to Reverse Blitzchung Punishment. *PCGamer*. <https://www.pcgamer.com/bipartisan-members-of-congress-call-on-blizzard-to-reverse-blitzchung-punishment/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Chalk, Andy. The Overwatch Playboy Parody 'Playwatch Magazine' has been shut down by a copyright claim. *PCGamer*. <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-overwatch-playboy-parody-playwatch-magazine-has-been-shut-down-by-a-copyright-claim/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Chu, Michael. 2019. Thanks for All the Messages about 'Bastet'! Jack and Vincent Were in a Romantic Relationship Many Years Ago. Both Identify as Gay. ♡. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/westofhouse/status/1082394625837428736>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Consalvo, Mia. 2017. When paratexts become texts: de-centering the game-as-text. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2: 177–183.
- Deyo, Nico. 2020. How An Overwatch Skin Left Some Of D.Va's Biggest Fans Feeling Betrayed. *Kotaku*. <https://kotaku.com/how-an-overwatch-skin-left-some-of-d-vas-biggest-fans-f-1840880191>. Accessed 3 June 2021.

- ESRB. 2015. <https://www.esrb.org/ratings/34210/Overwatch/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Frank, Allegra. 2017. Overwatch's Gamer Girl Hero Inspires a Feminist Movement (Update). *Polygon*. <https://www.polygon.com/2017/1/26/14376436/overwatch-womens-march-dva>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Frank, Allegra. 2019. Some of Overwatch's best skins are steeped in folklore and mythology. *The Verge*. https://www.polygon.com/2017/7/13/15965716/overwatch-doomfist-legendary-skins-nigerian?fbclid=IwAR3oNMVoWGHoW DtElpmXN9s7oOf9_WA7mENDFkRSHeDmrzIvZAm8-BSLC8. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- FreedomHKG. 2019. [#BlizzCon2019] In favoring China, @Blizzard_Ent has taken actions that outrageously intervened free speech of players in Oct. Protesters are now speaking up for freedom of expression and #HongKong. #StandwithHK #FreedomHK #HongKongProtests. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/FreedomHKG/status/1190350006286528522>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Grayson, Nathan. 2016a. Overwatch's Director On Competitive Mode, Controversies, And The Future. *Kotaku*. <https://kotaku.com/overwatches-director-oncompetitive-controversies-and-1783869335>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Grayson, Nathan. 2016b. Gremlin D.Va Is Now Overwatch Canon. *Kotaku*. <https://kotaku.com/1785427959>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Hellekson, Karen. 2009. A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture. *Cinema Journal*, 48, no. 4: 113–118.
- Hellekson, Karen and Busse, Kristina. 2014. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Hovdestad, Kevin. 2019. Not Everyone at Blizzard Agrees with What Happened. Both the 'Think Globally' and 'Every Voice Matters' Values Have Been Covered up by Incensed Employees This Morning. [Pic.twitter.com/I7nAYUes6Q](https://pic.twitter.com/I7nAYUes6Q). *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/lackofrealism/status/1181639970332659712>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Huang, Zeping, and Hunter, Gregor Stuart. 2019. Gamers Boycott Blizzard After Protest Sympathizer Is Banned. *Bloomberg*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-09/gamers-call-for-boycott-of-blizzard-after-hong-kong-protest-ban>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Huddleston, Tom Jr. 2018. This 29-Year-Old Makes Six Figures a Year as a Professional Cosplayer. *CNBC*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/06/29-year-old-stella-chuu-makes-six-figures-as-a-professional-cosplayer.html>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: exploring participatory culture*. New York: New York Univ. Press.
- Kamen, Matt. 2016. Blizzard Sues 'Cheat-Maker' for Breaching Overwatch Copyright. *WIRED UK*. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/blizzard-sues-overwatch-cheat-maker-bossland>. Accessed 3 June 2021.

- Karacorvus. 2017. r/Overwatch—My Titanium Pharah Cosplay. Over 200 Hours of Work!. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Overwatch/comments/6gbwkb/my_titanium_parah_cosplay_over_200_hours_of_work/. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Kern, Mark. 2019. This Is Blizzard's Official Worded Response in China. I Checked and the Translation Is Accurate. Can You Imagine Anything More Mealy Mouthed and Slobbering for Forgiveness? *Pic.twitter.com/hRliM2Eq2V*. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/Grummz/status/1182363839175614464>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Kim, Matt. 2016. The 6 Best 'Overwatch' Fan-Created Mythologies. *Inverse*. <https://www.inverse.com/article/18487-blizzard-overwatch-fans-best-headcanon-narratives>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Knowyourmeme. 2016. Gremlin D.Va. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/gremlin-dva>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Kretzschmar, Mark, and Stanfill, Mel. 2019. Mods as Lightning Rods: A Typology of Video Game Mods, Intellectual Property, and Social Benefit/Harm. *Social & Legal Studies* 28, no. 4: 517–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663918787221>.
- Kücklich, Julian. 2005. Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry. *The Fibreculture Journal*, no. 5.
- Lamerichs, Nicolle. 2018. *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Lee, Julia. 2018. D.Va's Black Cat gothic lolita skin misses the mark: Come on, Blizzard. I thought we learned about this already. *HeroesNeverDie*. <https://www.heroesneverdie.com/2018/1/22/16920292/d-va-black-cat-skin-opinion-overwatch>. Accessed June 3 2021.
- Lisco, Dawnthea Price. 2019. The Video Game Company That Banned a Pro-Hong Kong Player Is Handling Its China Controversy About As Well As the NBA Did. *Slate Magazine*. <https://slate.com/technology/2019/11/blizzard-blitzchung-hong-kong-too-late-sorry.html>. Accessed June 3 2021.
- Nebu. 2020. The Orc Statue. *Blizzard*. <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/blizzard/21349313/the-orc-statue>. Accessed June 3 2021.
- Nieborg, David B., and Thomas Poell. 2018. The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity. *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11: 4275–92.
- NYXL. 2020. Overwatch Pros Try Parkour in Workshop Mode. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOZ4YP-f9sI>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Maxis. *The Sims 3*. Electronic Arts. PC. 2009.
- McKead, Kirk. 2017. Blizzard Send a Copyright Notice to the Makers of Overwatch Lad Mag Playwatch. *PCGamesN*. <https://www.pcgamesn.com/overwatch/blizzard-are-taking-down-overwatch-porn>. Accessed June 3 2021.

- Media Molecule. *LittleBigPlanet*. Sony Interactive Entertainment. Playstation 3. 2008.
- Mod DB. 2015. Overwatch. <https://www.moddb.com/games/overwatch>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Mortensen, Torill E. and Jørgensen, Kristine. 2020. *The Paradox of Transgression in Games*. London: Routledge.
- Overwatch. 2019a. Overwatch Fan Art Contest: Hero Skin Design. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/678558549439761/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Overwatch. 2019b. Overwatch Cosplay Battle. <https://cosplaybattle.playoverwatch.com/en-us/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- PEGI. 2015. Overwatch Search Results. https://pegi.info/search-pegi?q=overwatch&op=Search&age%5B%5D=&descriptor%5B%5D=&publisher=&platform%5B%5D=&release_year%5B%5D=&page=1&form_build_id=form-dEwpBs8vLFAh1iNxrAHxcclug8CqK6LaS86nIzwCJ-8&form_id=pegi_search_form. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Partin, William Clyde. Bit by (Twitch) Bit: ‘Platform Capture’ and the Evolution of Digital Platforms. *Social Media + Society*, (July 2020).
- Peuter, Greig de and Young, Chris J. 2019. *Contested Formations of Digital Game Labor*. *Television & New Media*, 20, no. 8: 747–55.
- PlayOverwatch. 2018. Overwatch Animated Short | “Shooting Star”. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7j2d6YCQbg&qt=>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Pornhub. 2019. The 2019 Year in Review. <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2019-year-in-review>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Postigo, Hector. 2003. From Pong to Planet Quake: Post-industrial Transitions from Leisure to Work. *Information, Communication and Society* 6:593–607. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118032000163277>.
- Reddit. 2015. Overwatch Porn: Overwatch’s Very Own Pornhub. Overwatch Hentai, Overwatch Rule 34, Porn, Hentai, SFM. https://www.reddit.com/r/Overwatch_Porn/. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Rule34. 2015. Overwatch Search Results. <https://rule34.xxx/index.php?page=post&cs=list&tags=overwatch>. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Scott, Suzanne. 2015. “Cosplay Is Serious Business”: Gendering Material Fan Labor on “Heroes of Cosplay”. *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 3: 146–54. Accessed 3 June 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43653443>.
- Sheldon, David P. 2007. Claiming ownership, but getting owned: Contractual limitations on asserting property interests in virtual goods. *UCLA law review*. University of California, Los Angeles. School of Law 54, no.3:751–787.
- Shikowitz, R. 2009. License to Kill: MDY v. Blizzard and the Battle over Copyright in World of Warcraft. *Brook. L. Rev.*, 75: 1015.
- Shur, Etelle. 2017. Remixing Overwatch: A Case Study in Fan Interactions with Video Game Sound. *Scripps Senior Theses*: 1076.

- Sotamaa, Olli. 2007. On modder labour, commodification of play, and mod competitions. *First Monday*, 12(9). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v12i9.2006>.
- Terranova, Tiziana. 2000. Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy. *Social Text* 18:33–58.
- Tushnet, Rebecca. 2009. Economies of Desire: Fair Use and Marketplace Assumptions. *William & Mary Law Review*, 51:2.
- Turk, Tisha. 2014. Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom’s Gift Economy. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 15.
- Välisalo, Tanja and Ruotsalainen, Maria. 2019. “I never gave up”: engagement with playable characters and esports players of overwatch. In *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG ‘19)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 40, 1–6.
- WIRED. 2017. Blizzard’s Jeff Kaplan Answers Overwatch Questions From Twitter: Tech Support: WIRED. YouTube. https://youtu.be/LKg7_qGhWVc?t=828. Accessed 3 June 2021.
- Wirman, Hanna. 2009. On productivity and game fandom. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 3.
- Wirman, Hanna. 2013. Playing by Doing and Players’ Localization of The Sims 2. *Television & New Media*, 15, no. 1, 58–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476413505001>.
- Zephronica. 2019. r/HongKong—Was Gonna Burn This Cosplay, but This Is a Much Better Use of It. #MeiSupportsHongKong. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/HongKong/comments/dfq9kg/was_gonna_burn_this_cosplay_but_this_is_a_much/. Accessed 3 June 2021.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.

