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Author(s): Ruotsalainen, Maria; Välisalo, Tanja

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“Overwatch is anime” - Exploring an alternative interpretational framework for competitive gaming

Maria Ruotsalainen

University of Jyväskylä
Seminaarinkatu 15
40014 University of Jyväskylä
maria.a.t.ruotsalainen@jyu.fi

Tanja Välisalo

University of Jyväskylä
Keskussairaalantie 1
40014 University of Jyväskylä
tanja.valisalo@jyu.fi

ABSTRACT

Esports has often been likened and compared to traditional sports. This paper suggests an alternative interpretative framework for competitive gaming by focusing on the team-based first-person shooter game *Overwatch*. We explore *Overwatch* esports using multi-sited ethnography and demonstrate how the fans and viewers use a rich spectrum of cultural products to enrich and explain their relationship with esports. In the case of *Overwatch*, anime is particularly prominent, used not only to enrich and explain, but also to challenge ‘sports normativity’, which is visible in the media discussions on *Overwatch* as well as in the production choices of the esports tournament organizer. This also has consequences on the norms and the values of the fans and the viewer: for instance, it affects the way masculinity is constructed in the context of competitive *Overwatch*.

Keywords

Esports, *Overwatch*, anime

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps tired of the speculations of the fans of *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016) esports on Reddit, Christopher Kjell Mykles, better known as “MonteCristo”, esports talent and the caster of the *Overwatch* League, tweeted in 26.12.2018: “As we approach another season of the *Overwatch* League, I’d like to take a moment to remind everyone the following: the *Overwatch* League is not an anime. If someone is bad, then they get cut. There are no redemption arcs. Villains can, and often do, win.” This was his way of suggesting that the avid fans and viewers of the *Overwatch* League could lay down their narrative speculations in regards of the professional esports league, speculations which borrowed their twists and turns from the popular anime series and blurred the lines between the real and nonreal as well as that of fact and fiction. The tweet was a reaction to a longer continuum: it is not uncommon for the fans of *Overwatch* esports to create character arcs for players and teams, perceiving them as either heroes or villains, or to hope for redemption arcs for those whom they feel have been wronged - all this while utilizing anime as a shared point of reference.

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When looking at the media discussions as well as academic literature about esports, anime is not what esports is usually compared to. Indeed, esports is much more likely to be compared to traditional sports, which are also often seen as the hallmark for esports to reach. Yet, it is possible that fans of a particular esports title do not find sports as the only or the most meaningful point of comparison. Instead, they draw from other cultural products whilst negotiating the meanings they assign to a particular esports. Based on our ongoing multi-sited ethnography of *Overwatch* esports, it appears that while competitive *Overwatch* is definitely seen as a form of sports by its fans, it is also approached through products such as anime and its position in society is negotiated through multiple points of references. This process of negotiation is of course not solely dominated by the fans but includes multiple agents with different goals and agendas.

In this vein, we examine the diverse conceptual frameworks, anime and sports, which are used to understand a particular esports, *Overwatch*, as a contemporary cultural phenomenon. Our aim is to examine the phenomenon holistically, the need highlighted by Kim and Thomas (2015), thus by taking into account the diverse participants related to the phenomenon. In order to do this, we utilize nearly two years of multi-sited ethnography which has helped us in setting our research question, that of wanting to understand the relationship of *Overwatch* esports to anime and sports. To gain a better understanding of this we examine the ways the mainstream media in the United States position esports in its coverage of the Overwatch League (OWL). We furthermore examine both the production and the reception of the OWL. We analyze the elements present in the broadcasts as well as how fans discuss the OWL. For this, we utilize data gathered from discussion forums, social media, media, and a research survey as well as brief fieldwork conducted in the Overwatch League games. We contrast our findings with the ways esports is discussed in academic literature and ponder frameworks through which esports can be understood as a multifaceted phenomenon with multiple actors with different interests and goals.

Our aim in this article is not to deny or argue against the similarities between sports and esports nor to ignore the ongoing sportification of esports. We rather seek to widen the scope through which esports, or in this case, a particular esports title, can be understood as a cultural product with meanings negotiated in the axis of production and reception. At the same time, we want to draw attention on how this process is never linear nor straightforward but consists of multiple different agencies and goals and how multiple meanings of the phenomenon become embedded in the cultural product and its ecosystem simultaneously. This also brings forth the constant tension in what esports is and who gets to define it.

We also want to focus on one particular esports title and thus highlight the fact that there are significant differences between different esports titles and the ways their viewers relate to them - while many of them are often called just esports. It is worth noting that not only do different esports titles differ from each other in terms of content and audience reception, but the same is true for established sports as well (Cushen et al. 2019).

DATA AND METHODS

A mass of ethnographic research has taken place on, and in, online game communities where scholars have used the method of participant observation, entering the game world and participating in its activities while simultaneously identifying themselves as researchers (Boelstorff 2006, 32; cf. Boelstorff 2008; Nardi 2010; Pearce 2009). When studying game-related communities, such as esports audiences, which are not necessarily situated inside the game world, it is not quite as clear how to develop an understanding of a culture and where to find research participants. The challenges

related to defining a fieldsite in ethnography has been an ongoing discussion in the field of ethnography for over 30 years (Tuncalp & Lê 2015). It has been long acknowledged that a fieldsite is rarely a clearly defined physical location, but rather the researcher constructs the fieldsite with the choices she makes when planning and executing the research (Falzon 2016; Tuncalp & Lê 2015). Multi-sited ethnography addressed this from 1995 onwards by advocating researchers to follow the object of research across different locations rather than confining the research to one physical site (Marcus 1995). The concept of field is further complicated when the research transfers fully or partially online, as it often does in research related to digital games, as the “online” is not separated from “offline” but rather a fragmented continuum (Hine 2000). This forces the researcher to constantly reflect on what to include and what to exclude.

Adopting the multi-sited approach has enabled us to gain multiple views on how audiences understand Overwatch esports and how this relates to different actors (publisher, players, media) in the field. Throughout our research, we have aspired to remain sensitive to the fact that our choices construct the field site and to consider not only how well it captures the phenomenon of Overwatch esports, but also whose voices it allows to be heard.

For this reason, we approached those following Overwatch esports from several different directions: (1) participant observation on online discussions collected from both the official Overwatch forum as well as Overwatch discussion areas on the online discussion forum Reddit, (2) participant observation in OWL games, (3) data collected from the audiences themselves, most significantly using an online survey spread through social media, and (4) articles about Overwatch in the US mainstream media. Online discussion forums have been followed daily from the beginning of 2018 until October 2019 and in addition to participant observation relevant discussions were downloaded and saved for further analysis. We have read the official Overwatch forums as well the Reddit subreddit (a discussion thread devoted to a particular topic) *r/competitiveoverwatch* almost daily since the beginning of 2018, the launch of the OWL. We have furthermore watched approximately two to four broadcasts of the OWL games on the video live streaming service Twitch weekly since the beginning of the research as well as two Overwatch World Cups, in Twitch as well. The mainstream media articles gathered were published between 9.1.2018 and 15.5.2018, and mainstream media was defined as established media which is not specialized in esports or games. The online survey was open from August 2018 to November 2019. Our data consists of 428 responses which remained from the total of 440 responses after filtering out empty forms. 426 respondents gave their age (2 responses were unclear), with a range of 11 to 54 years, and the majority (81.7%) being between 15 and 29 years of age. The respondents’ median age is 23.

Majority of the respondents were male (75.9%), 22.0% female, and 2.1% identified differently. The data represents 24 different nationalities, with French making up 49.5%, Finns 19.6%, Americans 8.4%, and Swiss 6.3% of all respondents. We used opportunistic recruitment for finding the respondent, posting the survey to a number of social media sites including, but not limited to, the Overwatch subreddit *r/overwatch* and the Facebook group Women in Overwatch. We encouraged the respondents to share the survey link and also utilized Twitter for sharing it.

DEFINING ESPORTS

According to Michael G. Wagner (2006), the term esports (or electronic sports or eSports) dates back to the late nineties. As of now, it can be argued that esports has become the quasi standardized way to refer to competitive gaming both in and beyond academia. It is thus not surprising that the definition of esports and its relationship to sports has drawn the attention of researchers of multiple fields. For instance, Jenny et

al. (2017) examine esports in relation to established sports and ask what esports might be lacking in order to be considered as an “actual sport”. They note that “It appears that eSports include play and competition, are organized by rules, require skill, and have a broad following. However, eSports currently lacks greatly physicality and institutionalization” (Jenny et al. 2017, 15). They furthermore draw attention to the playful or gameful nature of esports which might hinder it to be taken seriously as a “authentic” sport. Hallman and Giel (2018, 17) on their turn, argue that “eSports is close to but not yet equivalent to sports”. Similarly to Jenny et al. (2017) they draw attention to the need for organizational structures in esports, but they are not overtly worried about the perceived lack of physicality, as sports such as chess and darts are very comparable to esports in this regard. They do point out that the strong commercial focus in esports can make it harder for it to be accepted as sports. Both of these approaches assign sport as a norm esports should aim to reach.

It is worth noting that in multiple contexts comparing esports to established sports makes sense, since equating esports with sports can have beneficial consequences. Multiple esports representatives are pursuing the status of sports for esports, for instance by suggesting esports as Olympic sports (Hallman and Giel 2018; Jenny et al. 2017), in the hope that this status will open doors for esports in terms of funding, governmental support (depending on location), and being recognized as collegial sports (Jenny et al. 2017). Being recognized as a sport can also help esports to break into the mainstream and make them more easily approachable to wider audiences (Heere 2018) and more appealing to the investors and marketers (cf. Taylor 2012, 157). Moreover, there is an inherent element of competition in both competitive gaming and sports and those engaged with competitive play themselves see mastery of skill as well as fair play as central values in esports (Seo 2014)

Another important aspect is that esports tournaments and their broadcasts are often sportified (Heere 2018; Jonasson & Thiborg 2010; Turtiainen et al. 2018). This is also the case in *Overwatch* esports. In their study of the *Overwatch* World Cup 2017 Turtiainen et al. (2018) note that the broadcast of the event widely utilizes elements from traditional team sports and can thus be analyzed through the concept of sportification. Sportification refers to both a process where a recreational activity achieves sport status (Mora and Héas 2003) and how an activity has sports like elements to it (Carlsson & Svensson 2015).

Nevertheless, the concept of sport - as well as esports - is itself value laden and suggests a certain kind of understanding of competitive gaming and not all researchers nor competitive gaming communities have readily embraced this definition nor have a similar understanding of what is most central to it. Hamari et al. (2017) argued that we ought to pay more attention to the ‘e’ part of esports - while not being against the term itself - as it creates aspects that are unique to esports, such as player-viewer asymmetry. Karhulahti (2017) suggests the term commercial sports, drawing attention to the fact that esports are always more or less controlled by the publisher, not by an external organization. Looking at the self-identification of gaming communities with the concept of esports, Simon Ferrari (2013) highlights how the fighting game community has a distaste for the term esports. He lists multiple reasons for this, such as the aesthetics and historical identity of the fighting games (which according to Groen 2013 is somewhat underground and rowdy), the previous experiences with esports organizers, and caution towards advertisers and their potential influence on the scene.

In this paper, we will use the term esports while discussing organized competitive *Overwatch* as that is the term the publisher as well as most fans use. We will, however, continuously remain sensitive and reflective on what this concept implies and see how

understanding of esports and its relationship of sports is understood in the particular case of *Overwatch*.

OVERWATCH AND OVERWATCH ESPORTS

Overwatch was published in May 2016 by Blizzard Entertainment. It is a team-based first-person shooter in which teams of six players compete against each other. The players choose, at the time of the writing, between 32 playable characters, all with different abilities (approximately four new characters are added to the game every year). The characters fall into three distinctive roles: damage dealers, tanks, and supports. The characters are also a part of the fictional *Overwatch* universe and while its lore is scarce in the game, it can be found from multiple different media: comics, animated shorts, and short stories. *Overwatch* is thus a transmedial world which expands beyond the game itself (Blom 2018; cf. Klasttrup & Tosca 2004; Scolari 2009).

Overwatch has had an active esports scene from the beginning on. The first major esports event was the World Cup 2016 which has ever since been an annual event held at Blizzcon, a gaming event by Blizzard Entertainment. In their research about the sportification of esports, Turtiainen et al. (2018) examine the sportified elements in the production of the *Overwatch* World Cup 2016 by comparing it to FIFA 2014. They conclude that there are similarities between the two broadcasts in multiple areas, including the structure of broadcast, commentary, game presentation, game highlights, and the presentation of team and players and the audience. They furthermore argue that “the *Overwatch* broadcast was clearly built following the structure of traditional sports broadcasts” (Turtiainen et al. 2018, 16).

Following two World Cups, in January 2018 the *Overwatch* League was launched. OWL is a franchised esports league with a total of 20 teams. The teams are city-based much like in most traditional sports leagues and while most of the teams represent cities in the United States, there are teams which represent cities in European and Asian countries (two in Europe, one in South-Korea and four in China) - OWL is thus labelled as a global league. The first two seasons - 2018 and 2019 - took place mostly in Burbank, Los Angeles, with occasional homestand games elsewhere, but from the next season (2020) onwards the games will be held in the homestands of the teams in their respective cities.

Overwatch esports has been a largely top-down endeavour where the publisher, Activision Blizzard, holds a tight grip of its intellectual property (IP). Thus, almost all *Overwatch* esports are organized and governed by Blizzard. This has led to criticism amongst both fans and players as its perceived that it has caused the grassroots *Overwatch* esports to die, and weakened some of the regions, like South America and Europe, where there is less financial investment in the tier 2 scene of the game (O’Brien 2019).

Maintaining a tight hold of the IP has allowed the publisher to define the way *Overwatch* esports is presented overall, and like the *Overwatch* World Cup, OWL utilizes a number of elements from traditional team sports in its self-presentation. Firstly, the format itself borrows from traditional sports as franchised sports leagues are common in the US (for instance the NBA in basketball and the NFL in football). Secondly, many of the same sportified elements are present in the OWL broadcasts as in the *Overwatch* World Cup: casters and hosts discussing the games, statistics of the players and the teams, and analyses of different plays. Moreover, the players wear jerseys with numbers on them, and the audience is encouraged to act like in other sports games by offering thundersticks for them to use and by rewarding them for wearing team shirts by promoting them to better seats in the games. Beyond the broadcast, other connections to established sports exist as well: a number of OWL teams are owned by

the same companies or individuals which own notable traditional sport teams and OWL games are also broadcast in ESPN, a channel which is reserved for sports broadcasts. Furthermore, the OWL logo draws aesthetically from the logos of major sports leagues in the US, with a human silhouette against a dual colored background like in the NBA logo, although in the case of OWL the human silhouette is that of a game character rather than a player.

OVERWATCH ESPORTS IN THE UNITED STATES MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Framing *Overwatch* esports as sports has definitely influenced the public discourse around esports. This becomes clear when examining the way the United States mainstream media discusses the OWL. While the OWL is marketed as a global league, so far it has been played exclusively in the United States. For this reason - as well as accessibility in terms of language - we have chosen to analyze data gathered from the United States mainstream media. For the purpose of our research, we defined mainstream media as a press with large following, established status, and not mainly focused on video games. We gathered all the articles we could find from the time period 9.1.2018-17.4.2018, thus focusing on how the OWL was discussed in the beginning of the League. For finding the articles, we utilized multiple methods: search engine Google, subreddit *r/competitiveoverwatch* (where discussants often link these articles) and searching directly in the biggest news sites in the United States. We only included articles published online. The most represented sites were the *Washington Post* and the *BBC News*.

Thematically the articles can be divided into three main categories: 1) those introducing the OWL and esports to the larger audience; 2) those, mostly present in regional newspapers or local sections of newspapers, focusing on the hometown teams, and 3) those tackling the most prominent controversies taking place in the OWL. When analysing the ways the OWL is discussed in these articles, esports is mainly presented in a positive light, due to two factors ascribed to it: the ongoing professionalization of esports, which includes the potential for financial gain for the investors, and esports likeness to established sports. These are seen as indicators that esports is growing up and maturing.

The discourse on the professionalization of esports is constantly entangled with established sports. Established sports are seen as a positive norm that esports should reach, and the focus is often on the aspects of OWL that are adhering to this norm. Consequently, game culture is posited as something esports needs to grow apart from. Game culture is depicted as the different and potentially dangerous other, which is defined through its allegedly pervasive toxicity. This is most obvious in the articles discussing the punishments and eventual firing of the Dallas Fuel player Félix "xQc" Lengyel, due to his homophobic remarks towards a co-player and allegations of racism, as for example in *Business Insider* (15.4.2018): "Despite growing pains, the Overwatch League is working hard to separate itself from the toxicity that often looms in gaming culture" (Fagan 2018). It is also an undertone present in most articles, as esports is seen as liberating gamers from their socially deprived existence.

Depicting game culture as the 'other' in US mainstream media is not a new phenomenon. Adrienne Shaw (2010) notes that game culture is most often defined in the United States press in contrast to mainstream culture, as its "other" - as being something different and distinct from it. According to Shaw, there is a tendency in the press to see game culture as something for young males, who passively consume culture, and who tend to be somewhat awkward loners.

The fans and viewers of *Overwatch* have a more varied perception of what game culture is, but they do see the interconnections between sports and esports and embrace them as well. When looking at our survey, 248 (57.9%) of 428 respondents indicated that they see “esports as sport amongst other sports”¹. Nevertheless, sports is definitely not the only way esports is perceived: 209 (48.8%) chose the option “way for good players to make a living” and 383 (89.5%) chose the option “form of entertainment”. It is maybe this latter meaning which also resonates in the understanding of ‘*Overwatch* as anime’, a framework we turn towards next.

OVERWATCH AS ANIME

When entering to The Novo, a theatre in Los Angeles Downtown which hosts the home games for two OWL teams, Los Angeles Valiant and Los Angeles Gladiator, the first impression is a mix of a small con² and that of a sports event: A man marketing Budweiser Light looks for participants over 21 years of age to offer them VIP badges which include free drinks, and at the same time cosplayers dressed as *Overwatch* heroes are having their photos taken with fans. There are also a number of participatory activities - a booth where one can play *Overwatch*, artists that will draw participants as their favorite *Overwatch* heroes, and a stand where one can get their battletag name embedded in a badge designed in accordance to the colors and the logo of the home team Los Angeles Valiant. There is also a small shop which is filled with different regalia for fans to buy: team jerseys, OWL hoodies, key chains, and so on, similar to conventional sports merchandise.

The games played in the arena can be watched in multiple locations: from the number of screens located around the upstairs bar as well as around the downstairs bar; from the seating area where one can see the players and the big screen showing the game. Every seat has a pair of thundersticks for the viewers to use for cheering. Throughout the day - there are four different matches played - the audience trickles in, but the last matchup is clearly the most popular: one between Los Angeles Valiant and Los Angeles Gladiators, also marketed as the “Battle of LA”. The production has even made their own trailer for this game, a mockup of *Star Wars* films. This is the spectacle that draws the largest audience and the loudest cheers, and this is also the home team’s last chance to make it to the play-offs. While possible, it is unlikely though: Los Angeles Valiant has had a rough season and the team they are facing, Los Angeles Gladiators, is amongst the best teams in the League. Before the match itself starts though, one of the players of LA Valiant delivers a message through the host Mica Burton. The message is short and simple “*Overwatch* IS an anime”, implying that the LA Valiant could win the game, that redemption arcs are possible - and that MonteCristo is wrong implying this not to be the case. The message is received with loud cheers from the live audience.

The idea of the redemption arc reflects the typical anime and manga narrative set in a dystopian fictional world where young heroes represent a hope for rescue and after facing many challenges can finally gain redemption (see Phillipps 2008, 72). While it is true that different kinds of “hero narratives” are popular in many sports (Ryan 2006), in *Overwatch* esports fandom they are often explicitly connected to anime and anime conventions. This is of course not the only way the fans construct these narratives, as for instance, also popular copy pastas from traditional sports are used. Nevertheless, comparing the OWL to anime is a recurring motif in the Reddit discussion board r/competitiveoverwatch which is the largest subreddit devoted to *Overwatch* esports, with 228 000 members at the time of writing. Anime works as a point of reference when something is described as “anime like”. This can be a particular play done in a match, or someone’s appearance, or certain kind of turn of events. Also *Overwatch* itself is seen as something akin to anime in its style, which is also present in some responses to our survey. It is argued amongst the discussers on Reddit that due to this *Overwatch* appeals to a certain kind of audience - to “weebs”³ as stated in the reddit discussions -

while “grown men” rather play games like *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. These comments highlight how the visual style as well as other non-formal elements of the game are an integral part of digital competitive gaming (Johnson & Woodcock 2017).

The anime interpretation has gained momentum since MonteCristo’s tweet 26.12.2018 “Overwatch League is not anime” and the fan works created as a reaction to it, but it is not the only reason to consider the anime framework in order to understand what kind of phenomenon *Overwatch* esports is.

Narratives and narrative arcs typical of anime have been the focus of discussion of the OWL as or not as anime. When Chan-hyung "Fissure" Baek, the main tank player for the team London Spitfire, was rather suddenly transferred to another team, a revenge arc was constructed by the fans in the r/competitiveoverwatch: He was depicted as the hero and the protagonist who is to take down his old team together with his new team. When later in the season he was seen “letting down” his new team by refusing to play in the play-offs, the arc changed, and he became the villain of his own story. It is worth noting that many events outside the official matches contribute to the construction of these narratives, among them the players’ personal streams from where clips are taken and used as material for these narratives.



Figure 1: Agilities as Genji. Artist: cdicedtea. Twitter 10.6.2019.
<https://twitter.com/cdicedtea/status/1138130708428337153>.



Figure 2: KariV as Ana. Artist: Jellyfish. Twitter 14.7.2019. <https://twitter.com/PoisonHepari/status/1150325080565510144>.

Central to how anime is embedded into *Overwatch* esports is fan art. *Overwatch* itself has inspired a multitude of art created by fans, but so has *Overwatch* esports. Fans create artwork of their favourite players as the heroes they often play. For example, Toronto Defiant player Agilities has been portrayed as Genji (Figure 1), the hero he is known for playing, and his teammate KariV has been portrayed in the hero Ana's apparel (Figure 2). In these artworks players become intertextually connected with the fictional world of *Overwatch* through references to game heroes. These artworks depict how players in fact are characters of the anime that is *Overwatch* esports. Like in anime, audiences of *Overwatch* esports foreground its characters (Azuma 2009; LaMarre 2009, 300). Indeed, MonteCristo, the esports caster critiquing the notion of the OWL as anime, has himself been represented as a villain in a video made by *Overwatch* fans as a response to his criticism and as an ultimate act of undermining his claims (Ryan 2019).



Figure 3: Kariv's face pasted into a popular meme. Kylee, Twitter 24.6.2019. <https://twitter.com/kyleenim/status/1142973344800751616>.

Characters are also a tool for intertextual references to particular works of anime. Los Angeles Valiant player KariV's face was pasted on an image of a grandmother character shooting a machine gun (Figure 3) in the anime series *Sabagebu! Survival Game Club!* The original image has been used as a meme since 2014, especially in Reddit and

Tumblr communities⁴, but its use here is an example of how particularly anime characters are used in the discussion and commentary around *Overwatch* esports.

The concepts of narratives, stories, and characters indicate something belonging to the world of fiction, something not real. This is seemingly at odds with the values traditionally connected to sports where the concept of ‘fair game’ and authenticity are seen as important (Suits 2007). On closer inspection, there are narrative elements to traditional sports as well, e.g. in the form of ‘memorable moments’ or ‘biggest sports stories’ which in time become part of collective memories of a particular sports, community, or country, passed on and sustained by media as well as oral history traditions. Nevertheless, characters and narratives have a stronger presence in some sports than others.

Professional wrestling has been described as “masculine melodrama” (Jenkins 1997, 64), where athletes have distinct personas and often represent either ‘good’ or ‘evil’ with matches representing a fight between these opposites. The wrestlers’ aim is to induce emotional reactions in the audience rather than win the match, of which the outcome is usually decided and even rehearsed beforehand. In the last few decades meta-storylines of relationships and events outside the arena have been introduced as part of the performance of professional wrestling (Jansen 2008; Smith 2008).

While professional wrestling balances between the real and not real, with audiences expecting the fake and watching for signs of the “real” (Mazer 1998), *Overwatch* esports audiences play with the idea of esports being fake. It is a common motif in the Reddit discussion board and Twitch chat to suggest that certain events are “scripted” and there appears to be an amount of pleasure for fans in playing with what in *Overwatch* esports is real and what is not. These discourses do not necessarily reflect an actual belief in arranged matches but reflect the playful approach of audiences. On the other hand, as the engagement of professional wrestling audiences with the real-fake paradigm can be seen as cognitive work taken up to satisfy the need for more intelligent and challenging entertainment (Jansen 2008, 642; Johnson 2005), so can the speculations of the OWL audiences be seen as something deriving from this need for cognitively challenging entertainment.

Overwatch as anime is not only present amongst the fans and the viewers, but also in how teams and players market themselves: for instance, the team Los Angeles Gladiators has offered its fans the opportunity to meet the players in an anime convention and a player of the same team hosted a competition in his Twitter (Lane 2019) to draw him as “Tisumi”, an anime-style character the player uses as his alter ego. Moreover, the OWL production itself has recently also started to adopt more anime-like aesthetics to its self-presentation: after the eight teams making to play-offs in season 2 were announced, OWL produced short animated videos of each with an aesthetic style which arguably utilized conventions of anime. These short animations were later utilized by a fan to compile a short “anime” by editing the order of events and adding genre appropriate music (양쥬 2019).

The notion of *Overwatch* as anime has also been critiqued because of its treatment of players as characters. An article by Tina Sang (2018) claimed that intrusive demands for friendship and personal information from players by the fans are more common in esports compared to other fandoms as the fans often have more direct access to the players due to shared play environments and stream culture. Nevertheless, *Overwatch* as anime should not be deduced to “stan” behavior (as Sang terms it), as the creative fandom rising from it has multiple functions and also challenges the paradigm of esports as (solely) sports.

CHALLENGING THE “SPORTS NORMATIVITY”: MASCULINITY IN *OVERWATCH* ESPORTS

“If you’re thinking that Disalvo fits the stereotype of a friendless, socially awkward gamer, disabuse yourself of that notion. He’s an affable and confident young man who’d been a swim instructor, a lifeguard, and an excellent hockey player. He has a good sense of humor, and when he laughs, he looks startlingly like James Franco. In other words, if he’d wanted to date, he probably could have. But he didn’t, and his classmates didn’t know what to make of it” (Hill 2018).

The above extract is from a *Wired* article titled “The *Overwatch* Videogame League Aims to Become the New NFL”. It repeats the common stereotypes about gamers as awkward loners, as discussed before, but then challenges them by presenting a professional esports player Stefano “Verbo” Disalvo, who is nothing like these stereotypes. Rather, he is an “excellent hockey player” and “he looks startlingly like James Franco”. In 2012, T.L Taylor noted that the “geek masculinity” present in esports and gaming culture can be alienating for many advertisers who will rather work with traditional sports as there the traditional masculinity they think their target groups find appealing is present. Even though the way hegemonic masculinity is constructed and portrayed is constantly in flux (cf. Taylor & Voorhees 2018), the way the *Wired* writer talks about Verbo frames Verbo as someone who fits the model of traditional masculinity, in which being athletic and engaging in sports is central (Anderson 2009).

Yet, looking at the way *Overwatch* is framed as anime, it appears that neither of these portrayed masculinities (that of a lonely gamer or the militant masculinity of an athlete) fits in the way masculinity is constructed in the *Overwatch* esports ecosystem. The anime framework influences what kind of masculinity is perceived desirable amongst - at least some of the - fans. When Houston Outlaw’s player Jiri “LiNKzr” Masalin discussed his favourite anime in his stream, the clip was circulated and commented on in the *r/competitiveoverwatch* subreddit. Many of the commentators discussed their own anime preferences, but some also drew attention to LiNKzr’s habitus which they commented to be somewhat “anime like” and as such presumably very appealing to girls - something which they portrayed as positive and desirable. This kind of masculinity can be seen as a stark contrast to the kind of masculinity that Hill (2018) paints as desirable in his article discussing the player “Verbo”. Moreover, terms like “wholesome” and “adorable” are often applied to male players in a praising manner in the *r/competitiveoverwatch* discussions. Another example is the case of two *Overwatch* esports casters dressed as schoolgirls and dancing to a song from the anime series *Kaguya-sama: Love Is War*, which is located in a school environment, as part of a Twitch stream (Sideshow 2019). Japanese anime provides a wide range of representations of masculinity, which transgress the traditional gender roles (Fennell et al. 2013, 443). This way it can challenge both masculinities presented in media in connection to games, that of the lonely, often toxic, gamer, and that of the e-athlete who reproduces normative masculinity.

CONCLUSION

In our paper, we have argued for the existence of alternatives to esports as the sole interpretational framework for competitive gaming in the case of *Overwatch*. Even though fans do understand *Overwatch* esports as sports, there is also a strong anime framework in existence. The use of ethnographic method made visible tensions and processes, which are not (as acutely) visible through the mediatized representation of esports. The anime framework brings forth how fans playfully position *Overwatch* as both, sports and fiction. The meaning of esports is constantly negotiated in the axis of production and reception and the way the fans understand *Overwatch* esports can also influence the way those working in the *Overwatch* esports ecosystem – casters, players, teams – frame it. Framing the OWL as anime also challenges the way mainstream

media portrays “game culture” and esports, by suggesting that game culture is not constituted only of “toxic loners”, and that esports differs from traditional sports in multiple ways, including the promotion of masculinities that are non-normative, especially in the context of sports. ‘Overwatch as anime’ is a way for viewers to interpret *Overwatch* esports but also to alter it and influence the product itself even though Blizzard has a tight hold of the IP and, thus, be active participants in the construction of esports as a contemporary cultural phenomenon

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ENDNOTES

¹ The respondents were asked to choose as many options as they saw relevant.

² *Con* is an informal common phrase used to refer to a convention centered on some form of popular culture, such as a comic book convention.

³ *Weeb* is a somewhat derogatory term referring to a person obsessed with Japanese culture.

⁴ Information is based on a search conducted using TinEye, a reverse image search service.