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Esports Transmedia Universes

The Case *Overwatch*

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Introduction

Over the years and recently in particular, various elements of esports have gathered piles of research from culture and economics to health and gender (e.g., Jin & Chee, 2008; Scholz, 2019; Szablewicz, 2016; DiFrancisco-Donoghue, 2019; Taylor & Voorhees, 2018; Witkowski, 2018; Kari et al., 2018). However, few have considered the role of transmediality as an explicit part of esport ecosystems—perhaps because of the strong tendency of both the industry and scholars to entertain esports as an extension to traditional sports (e.g., Kane & Spradley, 2017; Jenny et al., 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2018) rather than part of fictional and narrative cultural lineages. In other words, transmedia studies have always been concerned with fictional and narrative cultural content in particular, and current esports research somewhat uncritically perceives the phenomenon as sports or sports-like to which fictional elements are trivial. In this chapter, our goal is to introduce transmediality as a core pattern that delineates esports design, play, and player-audience interaction on multiple levels. As a case study, we provide a cross-sectional analysis of the esports title *Overwatch*.

Transmediality has been studied from numerous perspectives such as media economics (Albaran, 2013; Clarke, 2013; Davis, 2013; Rohn & Ibrus, 2018), storytelling engagement (Dena, 2009; Evans, 2011; Harvey, 2015; Jenkins, 2006, 2013; Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, 2011, 2014; Mittel, 2015; Ryan, 2013), and journalism (Rampazzo & Tárcia, 2017). Transmedia storytelling has been coined by Henry Jenkins (2013) as “the systematic unfolding of elements of a story world across multiple media platforms.” In this chapter, analysis is conducted within the rubric of a specific “transmedia universe,” which reconciles these perspectives and takes into account the complex and incoherent nature of many transmedia phenomena, including storytelling, production, and consumption (Koskimaa, Välisalo & Koistinen 2016). As such, the transmedia universe encompasses the production, franchise marketing, non-diegetic contents (including paratexts), collectibles (like toys), as well as the wide range of unofficial transmedia

expansions: fan fiction, fan art, and other externally created materials generated via multiple transmedial user practices (Koistinen, Ruotsalainen & Välimäki, 2016). Thus, the transmedia universe is not fixed on storytelling or production viewpoints, but aims to incorporate audience (and player) perspectives to transmedia in equal measure. As such, the transmedia universe differs from most other conceptualizations of transmediality by its scope and therefore fits well with multilayered media phenomena such as esports.

In order to analyze *Overwatch* as transmedia, we utilize multi-sited data that we approach with two methods that correspond with the game's transmedial pathways between two overlapping domains: the fictional world of the game *Overwatch*, and nonfictional world of competitive esports—both of which are channeled and developed by various diverse media. First, we draw from an ongoing survey concerning the reception of *Overwatch* and its professional Overwatch League; second, we employ a close reading of the game as a playable product and a watchable Overwatch League spectacle including broadcasts, social media engagement, among others. We situate *Overwatch* into the framework of transmedia studies and probe how (and what kind of) transmediality emerges in the case of this particular esport—and what can it teach us about the relationship between fiction and nonfiction in game-centered esports transmedia universes. The first section provides an overview of how transmedial elements have operated in esports historically and how the emergence of *Overwatch* fits in this historical context. The subsequent four sections discuss transmediality in *Overwatch* via the respective angles of media presentation, characters, narrative, and social media. The chapter ends with a discussion and conclusions.

Background: Transmediality and *Overwatch*

Transmediality has been part of the gaming culture from early on, and has been a topic of several case studies such as those of *Walking Dead* (Ecenbarger, 2016), *World of Warcraft* (Barbara, 2018), and playable webtoons (Pyo et al., 2019). To a large extent, many popular esports belong to this same tradition—yet with a number of elements that make them particularly interesting for transmedia studies. While transmedial forms and dimensions of gaming have certainly evolved in time along with cultural, social, and technological change, we stress that the below elements of esports transmediality, despite being represented in a linear way, overlap significantly.

Already in the “prehistoric” era of competitive arcade gaming, tournaments made heavy use of *multiple media outlets*. Petri Saarikoski and colleagues (2017), for instance, provide an archeological window to how Atari and related distributors employed marketing strategies for their *Pac-Man* tournaments: the event could be held at an amusement park, be reported via numerous magazines, geared toward TV audiences, and ultimately expanded with promotional material that included the hit song “Pac-Man Fever.” As such, early gaming tournaments were transferred and transformed to multiple media channels that were critical in the formation of the “esports product” into a coherent entity (see also Borowny & Jin, 2013).

Characters and their storylines were used as transmedial entities in competitive gaming already in the 1990s. While characters have been associated to gaming since the birth of the industry, titles such as *Street Fighter* and *StarCraft* set them in direct contact with the time's "esports" scene: players' styles, strategies, and professional identities were developed in partial relation to heroes, races, and other playable entities that had characteristics and fictional histories of their own. David Sirlin's (2005) founding work on competitive fighting games provides relevant insights concerning the differences in strategies and play styles that intertwine with the characters and narratives both inside and outside the games (see also Kane, 2008; Ferrari, 2013).

The rise of MOBAs (multiplayer online battle arena games) in the 2000s is an example of an explicit application of transmedia *narration*. Titles like *League of Legends* that were designed specifically for esports play involved evolving narratives; playable champions were published with dramatic written backstories that followed wider storyworld building in comics, fictional bulletins, and video media. While few players paid attention to the above elements in the first place (Watson, 2015), these narrational attempts presented various experimental means of transmedia storytelling by developing plotlines via actual gaming outcomes and, vice versa, allowing the plot events (such as character death) affect competitive play (cf. Seo, 2016).

The proliferation and enriching of *social media* has added one more layer to esports transmediality affecting the temporalities and modes of production and consumption of transmedial content. Image, text, and video based services such as Reddit, Twitch, and Twitter have become key channels through which the phenomenon is discussed, distributed, created, and recreated. Esport *play* no longer takes place in-game alone (it never did), but also outside of the game where experts, fans, and players engage to a degree that can easily outplay the core gaming activity (Taylor, 2018). While these changes have played a key role in the recent development of esports in particular, we repeat that none of the transmedia elements have emerged by linear progression, but rather via various shifts and threads related to production and popularity in the cultures of gaming.

Our present case study—team-based online multiplayer first-person shooter *Overwatch*—was published in 2016 by Blizzard Entertainment and it utilizes all of the mentioned transmedia approaches. The game provides its players with heroes of a squad formerly known as the *Overwatch*, plus a selected number of friends and foes. These form the playable character pool, set in a future where Earth is inhabited by not only humans, animals, and plants, but also by evolved robots known as the Omnics. This has also led to a worldwide conflict known as the "omnic crisis" (war between omnics and humans) and the *Overwatch* was created to put an end to this. When starting the game, players learn some of the earlier information through opening cinematics. There is much that is left unknown, and the background remains oblivious as long as one merely plays the game itself: the lore does not unfold, as the game is focused on six-player teams combating against other six player teams. To learn about the lore, one has to adventure beyond the game and look for comics, animated shorts, and short stories by the publisher.

At the same time, the menu screen would (currently) be dominated by the illustration of a hero called Zenyatta, wearing a particular skin devoted to the professional player

Jjonak, who became known for his hero defining play style on Zenyatta. And indeed, turning *Overwatch* into lucrative esports has likewise been an organized effort from the developer: in late 2017, globally franchised Overwatch League was started with a Pre-season followed by Season 1 starting in January 2018. All the teams in the league, rather than representing established esports organizations, represent new organizations based on cities around the world, inviting fans to forge local affinities for their chosen team.

While a plethora of literature about transmedia storytelling, transmedia worlds, and transmedia universes focus on the fictional world of a given product (see Thon, 2016), the concept of transmedia has also been applied to nonfictional narratives and worlds (see *View* special issue “Non-Fiction Transmedia” in 2017). In line, while the fictional lore and world of *Overwatch* are part of the *Overwatch* product, it is steadily surrounded by the nonfictional universe of *Overwatch* esports. These two are not opposite to each other, but exist alongside each other, mingle, and overlap. *Overwatch* is a combination of a professional esport scene and a rich fictional universe. The latter, while present in the game itself through playable heroes, maps, and occasional co-op events, is further developed in multiple media such as comics, animated shorts, short stories, and further speculatively expanded by the fans and their products. Memes, stories, and fan art around *Overwatch* esports and its players (and casters) simultaneously function as transmedial extensions in themselves.

Accordingly, not unlike its peer esports that seek the sweet spot between centralized competitive gaming and expanding transmedia annexes, the culture and play of *Overwatch* comes with a range of active para-sectors the diversities and intensities of which fluctuate along with both temporal and spatial factors. The present focus is on the current state of *Overwatch* transmedia in the West. The following four sections look at *Overwatch* transmediality through media presentation, characters, narrative, and social media.

Medium of Overwatch

Much like *Pac-Man* already in the early 1980s and many follow-up gaming titles since, *Overwatch* has been marketed openly as a transmedia product with a video game as its core. While it is technically possible to engage solely with the video game and ignore the rest, the results of our *Overwatch* reception survey suggest that this is rarely the case. The survey data was collected between August 2018 and July 2019 in *Overwatch*-related social media locations (Facebook, Reddit, Twitter). The survey received 457 responses overall, of which 29 were deemed unreliable and removed. This left us 428 valid responses overall. Due to the collection strategy that targeted game communities online, the final sample should be considered representative of the active online players and fans in particular. The survey included a great variety of questions, only selected of which are referenced in this study (Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 Reasons for Playing *Overwatch*.

Why do you play Overwatch? Choose all the relevant options.	Percent
To relax/unwind	50.8
To socialize	30.7
To have fun	83.1
To get better at the game	75.0
To become a pro-player	13.3
To obtain in-game cosmetics	30.0
To produce content for stream/videos	6.3
To be part of the Overwatch community	28.5
To learn more about the Overwatch storyworld and its heroes	29.7
Other, what?	3.0

Table 9.2 *Overwatch*-Related Activities.

Have you taken part in any of the following activities, in connection to Overwatch? Choose all the relevant options.	Percent
Follow/participate in discussions on Overwatch forums	35.3
Follow/participate in discussions on Reddit (e.g., r/overwatch; r/competitiveoverwatch)	37.4
Follow/participate in discussions on other websites and services	32.7
Watch live-streams and videos	92.5
Stream / Create videos of gameplay (your own or others')	30.6
Writing about the game (reviews, blogging, creating wiki content, etc.)	7.5
Writing fan fiction	3.3
Creating fan art	7.7
Enjoying other people's fan productions (fan fiction, fan art, etc.)	57.7
Cosplay	7.7
Collecting cosmetics (skins, voice-lines, poses, emotes, etc.)	60.0
Collecting merchandise	38.1
Watching animated short-films of Overwatch created by Blizzard	86.1
Reading comics of Overwatch created by Blizzard	60.3
Other, what?	10.5
None of these	1.5

Table 9.3 Do You Watch/Have You Ever Watched *Overwatch League* Games?

Do you watch/Have you ever watched Overwatch League games?	Percent
Yes	92.8
No	7.2

The first question to be discussed here concerned motivation. The respondents were asked to choose (as many as needed) from ten motivational factors that can be considered representing competitive, social, and autonomous dimensions of play—partly consistent with self-determination theory and its revisions (see Ryan et al., 2006;

Table 9.4 *Overwatch League*-Related Activities. Those Respondents Who Indicated They Follow or Have Followed *Overwatch League* (n.397)

Have you taken part in any of the following activities, in connection to <i>Overwatch League</i> (OWL)? Choose all the relevant options (n.397)	Percent
Watching matches online	97.7
Watching matches on site	28.2
Watching streams by professional players	75.8
Following OWL related content in media	76.3
Follow/participate in discussions on forums and in social media	32.7
Writing about OWL (on fan sites, blogs, eSports publications, etc./articles, blogging, creating wiki content, etc.)	6.3
Creating fan art about players/teams	0.8
Writing fan fiction about players/teams	0
Engaging with other people's fan creation	7.2
Buying OWL merchandise	23.9
Buying OWL cosmetics (in-game or twitch)	44.6
Other	2.2
None of these	0.4

Vahlo, 2018). Expectedly, the respondents expressed multiple motivations to engage with *Overwatch*, most popular being “to have fun” (83.1%), closely followed by “to get better at the game” (75.0%). Moreover, the survey shows that participating in practices that are somehow transmedial in nature (Koistinen, Ruotsalainen & Välimäki, 2016) are typical for *Overwatch* players, as no less than 98.4 percent of the respondents ($n = 428$) engage in practices beyond playing the game. The most common of those practices is watching live-streams/videos (92.5%), followed by the consumption of fictional lore via developer-produced animated short films (86.9%). More than half of the respondents also enjoyed reading *Overwatch* comics (60.3%) or consuming content such as fan fiction and fan art, created by other fans (57.7%). It is also noteworthy that consuming fictional content created by fans was nearly as popular as consuming official comics published by Blizzard. The majority of respondents (92.8%) also mentioned watching *Overwatch League* matches online.

Again, the lore of *Overwatch* is mainly told in three mediums: comics, animated short stories, and written narratives. As these open up the genesis of *Overwatch* and reveal hero origins, such content is almost entirely lacking in the video game. Special events like those of “anniversaries” make an exception by introducing brief playable missions with background stories, yet these are few in quantity and scarce in depth. Next to the above, the world of *Overwatch* expands to a number of toys and figures like LEGO sets, clothing, discussion forums, content platforms, and a cereal brand named after one of the playable heroes, Lucio.

A big part of all parallel *Overwatch* media outlets derive from the game’s active esports scene, which officially took off in 2016 along with the *Overwatch World Cup*. The event in question marked the beginning of an era of active *Overwatch* esports scene, to be tightly controlled by the developer-publisher Activision Blizzard. The *Overwatch World Cup* was followed by Season 0 that set the stage for the franchised

Overwatch League, starting in January 2018. This led to a shutdown of most third-party *Overwatch* tournaments due to the company's desire for (trans)media control.

Overwatch esports strongly seek to represent its transmedia content as sports and tend not to draw from the fictional *Overwatch* world. Hence, the two remain clearly separate from the perspective of the product-owning company: next to (or above) fan-created media content, the *Overwatch* esports world is mediated through its owner's video productions, and the fictional world likewise via Blizzard-controlled comic and animation productions (see Karhulahti, 2016, 2017; Blom, 2018). Despite this polarization, esports and fictional elements get mixed in both professional Overwatch League productions and the evolving video game. For instance, the Battle.net launcher that enables access to Blizzard's other video games also broadcasts Overwatch League matches, thus merging fictional *Overwatch* (and other Blizzard) content with *Overwatch* esports. The contrast between the two surfaces strongly in the game's official forums, where requests for the possibility to disable the "irrelevant" esports content have been frequent. The introduction of team skins (available as in-game purchases) that can be earned by watching *Overwatch* via the live-stream platform Twitch received similar criticism, forming a conflict typical to transmedia universes. While cross-media cosmetics remain part of *Overwatch* video game play and the professional Overwatch League is persistently advertised in almost all of the company's public channels, the contents of the two dimensions remain separate and the links between them function first and foremost as marketing.

Our final example is a poster of Dennis "internethulk" Hawelka that is part of the *Overwatch* in-game world. "Internethulk" was the founder and an original member of the highly successful competitive *Overwatch* team IDDQT (later known as EnvyUs), which dominated the Western *Overwatch* scene before the franchised era of Overwatch League. As "Internethulk" passed away in 2017, Blizzard commemorated him by establishing a Dennis Hawelka award as well as placing a poster in his honor to one of the video game's maps, Eichenwalde (Hawelka was German). This poster, alongside with a candle burning next to a flower, remains part of playable product with a small text saying "I <3 DH." This illustrates how the playable video game *Overwatch* functions as a mediator and a moderator between the professional esports universe on one hand and the fictional world on the other. In both, the two can be occasionally experienced simultaneously.

Characters of *Overwatch*

In transmedia storytelling, fictional characters are a common transferable element between the affiliated media (Beddows, 2012, 146; cf. Eder, Jannidis & Schneider, 2010, 19). Likewise, in *Overwatch*, playable heroes are central to many forms of content published around the game. Episode by episode, the animated short stories and comics usually tangle around one hero and their backgrounds. These characters seem to be important for the majority of *Overwatch* players—our *Overwatch* survey indicated almost all the respondents (over 95%) to have a favorite hero either based on

the fictional lore or gameplay; meanwhile, consuming these character-centered stories were among the most popular user practices around the game itself.

In *Overwatch* esports, the characters are present first and foremost in connection with professional players. Most players are known for playing particular characters, and audiences strengthen this connection through different practices such as creating fanart about the players as playable heroes of the game. These depictions of players as game characters are occasionally integrated into official marketing materials, which blur the lines between the fictional world of *Overwatch* and the nonfictional world of *Overwatch* esports.

At the same time, professional players bear similar transmedial features as the playable characters in the fictional *Overwatch* world. One example is the players' battletags (i.e., nicks) that are used as their names of reference. These battletags travel beyond the official Overwatch League and its broadcasts: players use and are known by them in multiple media platforms such as Twitter, Twitch, Reddit, and so on. In our *Overwatch* survey, nearly all respondents who mentioned a favorite player only referenced the player by their battletag, not their given name.

The professional players of the Overwatch League are often presented as star athletes whose images are built on their skills, performances, and personalities—not unlike the game's playable heroes or fictional characters in general. Accordingly, for the survey respondents who mentioned a favorite player the personality of the player was the most important reason for choosing them as a favorite (58.5% of respondents). Evidence for a strong connection between the two is present in the second most important reason for choosing a favorite player: the hero the player usually plays (50.9% of respondents). This further underlines the mixed relationship between the fictional and the nonfictional worlds of the *Overwatch* esports product.

Again, while audiences thus draw straight lines between the characters and the players, the actual lore published by the developer (as character backstories and other fictional world developments) is kept largely outside the public presentation of the competitive esport scene. On some levels, this applies also to fan engagement, as collective activities related to fictional characters such as fanfiction or fan art creation are much more rare when it comes to esports players. For example, Archive of Our Own (one of the largest fanfiction archives online) currently hosts over 30,000 stories written by fans about the fictional characters of *Overwatch*, but only a little more than a hundred stories about *Overwatch* esports players. In one analysis concerning the sportification of *Overwatch*, Turtiainen and colleagues (2018) correctly note that the fictional narratives of the game are barely present in Overwatch League; rather, these competitive events follow the formulae of traditional sports and attempt to duplicate the ethos. However, stories and narratives are an important part of *Overwatch* esports as well—but as stories of the world of esports, its players, and teams. Prominent forms of these stories are copypasta (short text clips often focused on players) circulated in, for example, discussion forums and the chats of livestreams. Memes can serve this function as well, as we discuss further on. This further expands the role of transmediality in *Overwatch*: not merely centered around the lore, but also (and sometimes more so) on the stories of actual players and their roles in everyday life.

Narratives of *Overwatch*

Narrative inquiry of transmedia storytelling has mainly focused on the fictional transmedia worlds and how they deliver stories. The “stories” are purposely in plural here, as an unlimited number of stories may be situated in any transmedia world. The stories as a whole, and how they relate to each other, is one focus of transmedia narratology (Scolari, 2009). Another approach is to look at transfictional identities, how fictional characters travel between the stories (Ryan, 2013). Typically, there is an expectation of a high degree of coherence between the stories (Jenkins, 2006).

Looking at *Overwatch* as a transmedia universe encompasses not only the fictional and narrative world of *Overwatch* but also the nonfictional and non-narrative elements. As to the latter, *Overwatch* is dominantly built upon various contents tied to the professional scene, including the live-streams with commentators, pre and post-game analyses, player presentations, and so on. The possible narratives constructed around these elements are mainly nonfictional ones; the characters within are not in-game heroes but actual players and their public personas. The coherence, if there is such, is to be found in how the Overwatch League is branded and reinforced in the totality of the contents produced, and the story arc usually spans one competitive season. There are similarities between TV series and league seasons: breaks between them create disruptions (players change teams and actors get written out) and the waiting time gets filled in with extra materials (such as short online episodes of TV series or stories and videos on esports players and teams): all providing fans something to follow and build up expectations toward forthcoming events (cf. Evans, 2011, 38–9).

The Overwatch League provides an integrating frame for the stories, but the contents themselves are heterogeneous and diverse. The narrative aspects are unstructured compared to the fictional stories of the game that get disclosed via animations and comics. In both cases, as in transmedia generally, the audience has an important role in filling in the enriching perspectives on the narratives. The audience can make its voice heard in real-time via the chat windows of live-streams, but also in “audiencing” (see Taylor, 2015) at physical esport events, cosplay groups, and the multiple fan content sites offline as well as online. The voice of the audience is subdued by the developer and its current direction, but there are always dissenting voices finding their way to official and unofficial sites. The narrating voices, in general, can be divided into two main discourses: the directing or dominating one, and the dissenting or resistant one.

At the time of writing, the game’s official website offers two types of narrative domains concerning the professional Overwatch League: articles and videos. The former has three distinct categories: analysis, feature, and news. Both features and analyses articles are written by named persons, whereas the news pieces are usually by the developer Blizzard Entertainment. On the main page of the website, all article types are published under the heading “Recent News,” but Analyses and Features are written in first person which makes them more like stories than news pieces as such.

There is also a tendency to “storify” the accounts, like in an analysis article “Meta 2.0: You Can (Not) Go Goats,” where a statistical analysis of hero selections and combinations for the current season is presented as a step-by-step evolving change of

the “meta,” which in esports refers to a “shared notion of the most efficient competitive strategies” (Karhulahti, 2020, 110). The protagonists in this story are the teams Outlaws and Valiants, who are trailblazing a new meta. The implied reader, in turn, is a committed *Overwatch* player who is able to enjoy all the subtleties of the professional level strategic choices mentioned (but not much explained). This kind of addressing creates a strong feeling that the reader belongs to the in-crowd of true *Overwatch* aficionados. Feature articles, in turn, usually focus on a specific team or player; for example, “The Indispensable IDK” focuses on one player, but again, builds up a story of a young person not too interested in the beginning—yet ending up as a key player in one of the professional teams and becoming a potential contender for the Best Support Player title. The story takes its closure from Ho-Jin “IDK” Park’s twentieth birthday which he spent in Texas, showing how far from his South Korean home IDK has reached through the *Overwatch* career. Interestingly, the IDK article makes a reference to the fictional world of *Overwatch* by comparing IDK to his favorite hero, “perpetually gregarious and good-natured, just like Lúcio.” Lastly, the news articles are more impersonal in tone, and reporting rather than narrating.

Notably, there are earlier accounts of the meta practices in regard to evolving esport play strategies, and how they expand the play space outside the game itself. Ben Eglinton (2015), for instance, explicates the connection between the meta and Marsha Kinder’s early transmedia concept, but like Christopher Paul (2011), still mainly employs Gerard Genette’s notion of paratexts and their reading (see also Donaldson, 2015; Taylor & Elam, 2018). In this article, our focus is not on the *practices*, however, but (like the original Genettean position) we rather perceive the materials as connected particles; namely, as parts of a specific transmedia universe. In the same way as the *Overwatch* fictional materials, the *Overwatch* meta articles are storified and personified.

In the videos section, there are recordings of full matches but also video features, analyses, and news clips. The features are mainly player presentations, with the exception of reality TV (like) shows where the teams are competing in cooking. All these are filled with product placement and overt advertising, yet references to the fictional *Overwatch* world are scarce. In “A Very Zen Interview with Jjonak,” the video opens with a scene of an *Overwatch* character in a meditation posture, before cutting to the player Jjonak, in a similar posture—this exemplifies once more the character-driven transmedia strategies that, in *Overwatch*, tend to bind fictional hero(ine)s to actual players and their personas. Here narration can be characterized as a Blizzard discourse, which emphasizes the Overwatch League and addresses players largely as elements in it (with rare exceptions of players being portrayed more as individual personalities exceeding their in-game role). This discourse also acknowledges the sponsors and the *Overwatch* merchandise. Fans and the audience are present in many videos, both match recordings and the features, but are mainly used as an illustration, for example, to emphasize the crowd’s wild appreciation of Sinatraa’s non-conventional moves. Notably, frequent references to the home cities of the teams are added by making the players visit specific regional sites, asking them to prepare local food in a chef competition, and thus tagging the events to traditional sports teams that place the *Overwatch* team in question into the lineage of longer traditions.

Lastly, in addition to articles and videos, the *Overwatch* website offers information on professional standings, program, and basic statistics. These data are not narrative in the narratological sense, but do fill a position in the transmedia storytelling framework by providing elements for the stories about Overwatch League and its players. With reference to Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's (2004, 2011, 2013) notion of "transmedial worlds" in which such networks are "abstract content systems," the above non-narrative data still operate as "content" that adds to the complexity of the "system."

Social Media around *Overwatch*

Every stage and season in the Overwatch League has its narratives that are continually repeated in broadcasts by shoutcasters and analysts. These narratives sometimes have their origins in the personal livestreams of players, their fan channels, and other social media outlets such as the popular discussion forums. The occasional viewer might learn about these narratives from a produced broadcast but also from its chat that is often full of memes traversing through multiple media. Arguably the most central location of development and origin for such narratives as well as memes is the Reddit platform and its subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch in particular.

Subreddit/competitiveoverwatch has over 150,000 subscribers and contains posts about competitive *Overwatch* at large, with a particular focus on the esports scene and the Overwatch League. The topics of the posts vary: there are match threads in which the users discuss ongoing games, highlights of good plays, and rumors about possible player transfers, among others. The subreddit also hosts numerous posts about the professional players in the Overwatch League and their sayings in other social media accounts. Team representatives, players, casters, and the game developers appear to follow the conversations to an extent, as they are frequently found commenting on discussions via their verified accounts. The casters constantly refer to the subreddit in questions during Overwatch League broadcasts, with comments such as "see you in reddit" often dropped after controversial statements. The subreddit plays a crucial role in the production and sharing of news, gossip, and topics in general related to the Overwatch League. The users of the subreddit continuously not only watch the official matches of the league but follow the personal streams of the players too.

As an example, the subreddit/competitiveoverwatch was central in the creation of perhaps the most popular meme of Season 1 in the Overwatch League. Taking place from January 2018 to July 2018, Season 1 was pioneered by the stories of players and teams that played an essential part in building the transmedial world of *Overwatch* esports. From the beginning, some teams turned out to be clear fan favorites: Dallas Fuel by the value of being the most successful Western *Overwatch* team "EnvyUs" rebranded, Soul Dynasty by being the only South Korean team (while not the only team consisting of South Koreans alone), and Houston Outlaws by being perhaps the most well-branded team in the League.

Central to the branding of Houston Outlaws was captain Jacob "Jake" Lyon, who has also become known as the "cover boy" of the Overwatch League. Considered

good looking and clearly articulated by the fans, Jake is seen as the antithesis of the “stereotypical gamer” by the press too and is consequently often seen representing esports and *Overwatch* in public occasions (see Voorhees & Orlando, 2018). While thus widely loved by the fans, Jake also evoked dissenting opinions that in the subreddit were commented to be too articulated and long, and his general ethos and skills fake or lacking. Those arguing for the lack of skill further insisted him to be competent with merely one hero, Junkrat. This fictional hero, a rough-looking outlaw from Australia, was generally held as one of the easiest to play with area of effect damage grenades as the main weapon—against the many other heroes who rely on sharp aim (a common measure of skill). Along with Jake’s success with Junkrat, the fictional hero was eventually turned into “Jakerat” and numerous memes constructed around this pun entered the live-stream chat every time Houston Outlaws was playing or the hero Junkrat was played by others. The broadcasters took the “Jakerat” meme still further by using the term in official shows as well. Jake the Junkrat thus passed through the transmedia worlds of *Overwatch*, tying together fictional and factual entities via a player, hero, and fan-created character drama.

Discussion

Transmedia “worlds” have been seen to operate by the principle of reestablishing connections between dispersing media and fragmented audiences, or, as Christy Dena has phrased it, transmedia is a way to satisfy different audience groups through “tiering”: “the addressing of different audiences with different content in different media and environments” (2009, 239). In a similar vein, Carlos Scolari has investigated “how these new multimodal narrative structures create different implicit consumers” (2009, 586). The present case *Overwatch* implies transmedia being an efficient response to the increasing trend of fragmentation of media and audiences, indeed. As a game with a rich player base—in the light of our survey—of diversely motivated and oriented individuals, transmediality is a means to satisfy multiple desires and interests in a way that provokes further desires and interests, depending on one’s respective approach.

The official *Overwatch* website seems to serve first and foremost dedicated *Overwatch* (and *Overwatch League*) followers who also have considerable play experience with the game. This group is able to appreciate the highly technical analyses, and know the players and teams well enough so that little background information is needed. On the other hand, the parallel content types are likely to attract more casual followers too. The livestreamed *Overwatch League* matches (as well as pre- and post-game studio discussions) provide explanations also of the basic aspects of the game, clearly aiding newcomers and occasional followers. Hence, tiering of content for different audience segments is prominent, addressing various implicit audiences.

Our analysis provides a base for a number of practical implications. For instance, the fact that livestreams appear more accessible than official website content suggests Blizzard seeing the former as the main entrance for new players. The already engaged and dedicated audiences, on their turn, would rely more on the detailed website

accounts, ultimately culminating in user-generated fan content. In the end, all the mentioned sources belong to the holistic *Overwatch* transmedia universe where teams, players, sponsors, and audiences represent and reproduce tiered contents. There are almost limitless options to enter (and exit) the universe, and while it makes no sense to talk about “a” story, many stories intersect in it and add to its near infinite depth.

Ultimately, *Overwatch* can be looked at through two types of transmediality. One can be called the Jenkinsian transmedia storytelling approach, which emphasizes the fictional worlds and stories set in them, and is focused on the game itself. The other one, focused on *Overwatch* esports, emphasizes the spectacle: matches and tournaments bounded by time and place, as well as stories and media content used to build this spectacle. While one of the main motivations here is tiering of contents for different audiences, this transmediality also serves as a marketing strategy to grab and keep the attention of audiences—especially when the main attraction, for example a TV show, is not running (see Evans, 2011); or as in this case, between the matches and *Overwatch League* seasons. Additional tiered content provides breadth and depth to the players and the world itself.

While the same players seem to engage with both *Overwatch* fiction and esports, there are considerable differences in the ways they engage with them, as revealed in the answers to the survey questions “Have you taken part in any of the following activities in connection to *Overwatch*” and *Overwatch* esports, respectively? While certain activities are popular in relation to both—such as participation on discussion boards—other activities such as writing fan fiction are much more common in relation to the narrative world of *Overwatch* (see Tables 9.1 and 9.2). Meanwhile, most popular activities related to following the *Overwatch League* are simply watching the matches (97.7%) and player streams (75.8%) online as well as following *Overwatch* esports content in media (76.3%). The fictional *Overwatch* world, however, leaks into the esports scene too through audience practices, as in memes used in live-stream chats and popular copypastas. The developer’s inclination to keep the two worlds separate may be a product of the relatively premature state of transmedia esports and *Overwatch* in particular, and once better established, may capitalize potential to engage audiences even better by more overtly acknowledging the overlap specifically with players and characters, not excluding those in proliferating user-generated contents.

Conclusion

In this chapter, based on player survey data ($n = 428$) and close reading of fictional as well as nonfictional public game contents and esports contents, we have provided an analysis of esports transmediality in practice via the case study *Overwatch*. With reference to the surveyed *Overwatch* players and the game’s four examined transmedia dimensions (medium, characters, narratives, social media), our analysis paves the way for an understanding of the networked connections and operations between relevant entities in not only the present context but esports in general.

First, the study at hand draws a picture of the *Overwatch* transmedia universe as a system of two worlds, one focused on fictional world building and another on actual esports. The former is developed primarily by the game's developer in the media of comics, videos, and written narratives. The latter, while likewise largely directed by the developer in its official Overwatch League, evolves in competitive esport scenes via various platforms such as those of live-streams, social media, and online websites in general. The two worlds overlap and are mediated by *Overwatch* and its play that advances or promotes few elements of either; instead, it allows the two worlds to exist and connects them.

Second, our findings evidence a leading function of characters and esports athletes in transmedia worlds and esports transmediality in particular. In *Overwatch*, both fictional characters created by the developer and actual (professional) players in the Overwatch League are frequently introduced, promoted, and transferred from one medium to another. While there are different transmedial worlds at play, they are not separate, but intersect and affect each other—and the present case provides an example of how the fictional heroes and esports players occasionally merge as a result of both the developer's official content design and the fan's unofficial creative efforts.

Third, we advance and provide support to what previous transmedia theory has referred to as *tiering*: a strategy by which the execute owner of the product employs transmedial practices in order to invite and satisfy audiences on various levels of interest and motivation. In *Overwatch*, the (sometimes blurring) networked dichotomies of factual-actual, casual-competitive, and narrative-non-narrative present transmedia elements the appreciation and understanding of which depends largely on one's personal as well as media-specific affordances and preferences. Depending on how one is able and willing to participate, the *Overwatch* universe enables one to access, affect, and even create various fictional and actual stories.

We stress that esports, *Overwatch*, and their transmedial play are in constant change and have always differed between regions around the globe. Hence, as a possible limitation, our analysis has been based mainly on the Western perspectives of production and reception in the current era of one single esport, which may differ from those of other times, regions, and esports. As such, nonetheless, the study paves the way for transmedia research in the field and sets a ground that hopefully allows for more detailed scrutinies.

Note

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