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Player Reception of Change and Stability in Character Mechanics

Tanja Väiläsallo and Maria Ruotsalainen

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

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

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

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

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

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

THEORY

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

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

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

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

MATERIALS AND METHODS

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

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

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

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

REINHARDT: STEADFAST WARRIOR

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

BRIGITTE: INTRODUCING A NEW PLAYABLE CHARACTER

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



Image 5.3 Brigitte in the *Overwatch* hero gallery

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DISCUSSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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

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

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