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Author(s): Ruotsalainen, Maria; Törhönen, Maria; Karhulahti, Veli-Matti

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Maria Ruotsalainen, Maria Törhönen,
and Veli-Matti Karhulahti

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

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M. Ruotsalainen (✉)
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Jyväskylä,
Jyväskylä, Finland
e-mail: maria.a.t.ruotsalainen@jyu.fi

M. Törhönen
Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences,
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
e-mail: maria.torhonen@tut.fi

V.-M. Karhulahti
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Jyväskylä,
Jyväskylä, Finland
e-mail: vmmkar@utu.fi

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

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

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

MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

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

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

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

Something for Everyone

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

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

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

Since 2018, the *Overwatch* esport scene has been dominated by the global Overwatch League consisting of 20 teams around the world, owned and operated by Blizzard. Despite having been designed and marketed as a "global" league, in 2021 almost all teams come from North America and the system is modeled after their local sports leagues. As such, *Overwatch* played a key role in bringing franchised professional leagues to international esports, but not without costs, as the numerous financial and political crises (some of which are presented in the below chapters) illustrate.

Ten Chapters

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

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

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

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

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

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