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Maria Ruotsalainen

Overwatch Esports and the (Re)Configurations of Gender and Nationality

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ABSTRACT

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The dissertation comprises five research articles and a compilation portion, focusing on gender and nationality in competitive *Overwatch*. *Overwatch* is a team-based first-person shooter that Blizzard Entertainment published in 2014. From the beginning onwards, it has had an active esports scene. In 2018, the game's publisher took hold of the whole esports scene and organised it in a league format—strikingly similar to how traditional sports leagues in North America are organised—and to a yearly (2016–2019) organised Overwatch World Cup.

Against this backdrop, I examine how gender and nationality are portrayed within the production of competitive *Overwatch* Esports and how they are performed and negotiated within the reception of competitive *Overwatch*. Drawing from the concept of banal nationalism, I suggest the production choices of *Overwatch* esports are meant to evoke nationalist sentiments from the viewers and fans, intimately tying in with the ongoing sportification of *Overwatch* esports and esports in general. The ongoing sportification of *Overwatch* esports also affects how gender, particularly masculinity, is portrayed and positioned within this particular esports. The influence of traditional sports strengthens the position of hegemonic masculinity, often leading to portrayals of athletic masculinity as the desirable masculinity within the *Overwatch* esports ecosystem.

However, examining the reception of *Overwatch* esports reveals a richer and more varied picture of how masculinity and gender are negotiated within *Overwatch* esports. The players, fans, and viewers both affirm and resist the nationalist ethos and the sportified aesthetics and the configurations of the masculinity they suggest, drawing also from alternative ways to frame competitive gaming. Particularly relevant for this is anime aesthetics which are used by fans to frame *Overwatc*h esports. This also affects what kind of desirable masculinity is negotiated amongst fans: The hegemonic masculinity is reconfigured to a form of hybrid masculinity, with elements of athletic masculinity, geek masculinity, and Kawaii masculinity, allowing (white and Asian) men to have more varied gender expression. Unfortunately, this allowance has little to no bearing on the positions of the others and women continue being marginalised in *Overwatc*h esports.

Keywords: esports, competitive gaming, gender, nationality, nationalism, qualitative research

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

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Overwatch esports ja sukupuolen ja kansallisuuden (uudelleen)määritykset
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Tässä väitöskirjassa tutkin sukupuolen ja kansallisuuden rakentumista *Overwatch* kilpapelaamisessa. Väitöskirja koostuu viidestä tutkimusartikkelista ja kokoelmaosasta. *Overwatch* on joukkuepohjainen ensimmäisen persoonan ammuntapeli, jonka Blizzard Entertainment julkaisi vuonna 2014. Sen ympärillä on alusta alkaen ollut aktiivinen e-urheiluskene. Pelin julkaisija otti vuonna 2018 haltuunsa koko e-urheiluskenen ja järjesti sen liigamuotoon, seuraten perinteisten urheiluliigojen mallia Pohjois-Amerikassa. Lisäksi julkaisija järjesti vuosittaiset *Overwatchin* maailmanmestaruuskisat vuosina 2016-2019. Tätä taustaa vasten tutkin, kuinka sukupuoli ja kansallisuus rakentuvat *Overwatch* e-urheilun vastaanotossa sekä tuotannossa.

Ehdotan banaalin nationalismin käsitteen pohjalta, että *Overwatch* e-urheilun tuotantovalinnat on tarkoitettu herättämään katsojissa ja faneissa kansallismielisiä tunnekokemuksia ja että tämä liittyy läheisesti *Overwatch* e-urheilun ja koko e-urheilun jatkuvaan urheilullistamiseen. *Overwatch* e-urheilun jatkuva urheilullistaminen vaikuttaa myös tapaan, jolla sukupuoli ja erityisesti maskuliinisuus esitetään siinä. *Overwatch* e-urheilun vastaanoton tarkastelu paljastaa kuitenkin rikkaamman ja monipuolisemman kuvan tavoista, joilla maskuliinisuus ja sukupuoli neuvotellaan *Overwatch* e-urheilussa.

Fanit ja katsojat vahvistavat mutta myös vastustavat kansallismielisiä tunteita sekä sen ehdottamia maskuliinisuuden muotoja hyödyntäen vaihtoehtoisia tapoja ymmärtää kilpailupelaamista. Erityisen relevantti tälle on anime, jota fanit käyttävät *Overwatch* e-urheilun kehystykseen. Tämä vaikuttaa myös siihen, minkälaisesta halutusta maskuliinisuudesta fanien keskuudessa neuvotellaan: hegemoninen maskuliinisuus muotoillaan uudelleen hybridi-maskuliinisuuden muotoon, jossa on elementtejä atleettisesta maskuliinisuudesta, nörttimaskuliinisuudesta ja kawaii-maskuliinisuudesta. Tämä mahdollistaa (valkoisille ja aasialaisille) miehille monimuotoisempia tapoja performoida maskuliinisuutta, mutta valitettavasti sillä on vain vähän tai ei ollenkaan vaikutusta muiden asemaan, ja naiset ovat edelleen marginaaleissa *Overwatch* e-urheilussa kuten e-urheilussa yleensäkin.

Keywords: e-urheilu, kilpapelaaminen, sukupuoli, kansallisuus, nationalismi, laadullinen tutkimus

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In Jyväskylä 2.8.2022
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ORIGINAL PAPERS

1 INTRODUCTION

I ended up researching *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) esports almost by accident. My research of *Overwatch* esports started by playing the game, as it often does. Like many other researchers who research games, I am passionate about video games and play them frequently. Two major events marked my transition from someone who plays the game *Overwatch* and follows its esports scene for my own interest to someone actively researching *Overwatch* esports. The first event happened while playing *Overwatch*: Multiple times, with slight variations in the structure, other players asked me the following question: "Why do all females play Mercy?" Mercy is one of the playable heroes in *Overwatch*. Sometimes, I was asked in an aggressive tone, others, in an accusatory one – despite that not all women play Mercy, nor do I often play Mercy, nor could I ever speak as the voice of all women. Yet the imaginary notion that "all women play Mercy" seemed to strongly persist amongst the players. This observation started me working on the intersections of play, gender, and esports regarding *Overwatch*, leading to this dissertation's second article, written with Usva Friman.

The second event that made me research *Overwatch* esports related to the *Overwatch* esports scene, particularly the World Cup 2016 (OWWC 2016), which occurred in a yearly BlizzCon and showcased *Overwatch* teams from multiple countries. The World Cup was promoted as an exhibition event, so no monetary prices were included. Rather, the World Cup paved the way for the Overwatch League to start in 2018 and function as a tool for marketing the game. As a viewer, I found the event fascinating, partially because of its likeness to traditional sports (something I was unused to seeing in esports). When Usva Friman and Riikka Turtiainen contacted me for Overwatch World Cup 2016-related research (leading to this dissertation's first article), I was extremely keen to participate.

At this point, I was deeply invested in *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* esports. After the World Cup 2016, I started actively following the *Overwatch* esports scene (consisting of third-party tournaments back then, most notably APEX, held in South Korea) and simultaneously examined with fascination how different kinds of "becoming a fan" occurred within me. Small things created affective ties with a team or player: recognising the player from an earlier event, having seen

a player or team do a particularly impressive play, and yes, the player being from my home country. Untangling these sentiments highlighted how they were never constructed in a vacuum but always existed concerning larger debates and stances on what esports are, who can claim to belong to them, what is valued, and what is suppressed. These moments would evoke moments of conflict as I would be impressed by a skillful play by a highly regarded player, only to later learn they had made disparaging remarks about women players. Then I would later realise how the whole construction of the idea of skill in *Overwatch* is highly gendered: such as the idea of Mercy "taking no skill" to play – a widespread notion which, with gendered assumptions about heroes, made me, at one point, stop playing her altogether.

I grew increasingly interested in esports fandom and continued actively following the scene. When the Overwatch League was launched in January 2018, I had taken into systematically reading the most prominent discussion forum – the subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch – that revolved around it. Simultaneously, I followed the official *Overwatch* forums (which were, surprisingly, very much "anti-esports"), several podcasts, mainstream media news about *Overwatch* esports, and numerous streams from professional players. I also started collecting data from all of these instances. At this point, I realised what had started as a player's passion was turning into systematic research. Once this became apparent, I started shifting my dissertation's topic towards *Overwatch* esports.

At this point, I also discussed with my colleague, Tanja Välisalo, about conducting a survey about *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* esports fandom together. We had worked with survey data together before, and I thought she could find the topic interesting, partly because of the playable characters of *Overwatch* and the relationships the players forge with them (her research being largely focused on fictional characters) but also because of esports fandom. Having someone from the fan studies background helped the research immensely and clarified the kind of questions I did not know how to ask. With Tanja, we designed a survey targeted at *Overwatch* players and the Overwatch League's viewers. Particularly, this dissertation's third article draws from the survey results. We also did brief fieldwork in Los Angeles, California, as we participated in an Overwatch League event. This fieldwork functioned as a cataclysm for the dissertation's fourth article, focusing on fandom and its ways of perceiving *Overwatch* esports beyond sports and nationality. The dissertation's last article, written with Marko Siitonen, returns to the theme of nationality, exploring the spectatorship of Overwatch World Cup 2019 and the role of nationalism and ethnicity within, rounding up the research and combining it to form a complete picture.

1.1 Research focus

In the piece "Licensing for the League of 21st century" Daniel Siegel, Activision Blizzard's head of esports licensing at the time, describes Overwatch League –

the franchised esports league for the team-based first-person shooter *Overwatch*), as:

> the first major global, city-based professional eSports league.[1]

and continues by stating that:

> We believe that organizingzi the league by cities, a format long embraced by traditional sports, can create the most rewarding and engaging experience for teams and fans by amplifying the affinity between them, fueling passion around competition and rivalries, and contributing to the growth of unique cultural elements around the game.[2]

Much is going on in these statements. Even if we ignore that whether the Overwatch League (OWL) is truly "the first major, city-based professional eSports league" is debatable – as what Championship Gaming League did in the 2007–2008 season had many of these elements (c.f. Taylor, 2012; Scholz, 2019) – plenty remains to unpack. While Daniel Siegel's statement is clearly about the economic model for the Overwatch League and about how to make esports profitable – something the overall scene still struggles with (Scholz, 2019), it is also about the position of esports within society and what kind of phenomena esports are or how one wants to portray it. All these facets – the cultural, financial, and societal – are, of course, inevitably entangled. Consequently, in this dissertation, I examine how *Overwatch* esports are positioned and portrayed as esports and how they are received. I trace how the publisher, media, fans, and players create, affirm, challenge, and (re)construct the central narratives around the *Overwatch* esports. I focus on how these narratives position competitive gaming and consequently (re)configure the identities of those engaging with *Overwatch* esports.

Central to my examination are gender and nationality, how they affect organising the everyday lived reality of the subjects engaged with *Overwatch* esports, and how they are portrayed and performed by the parties involved in the production and reception. Interestingly, gender and nationality were seen in the early internet era as challenged by ongoing digitalisation but remain an important way to construct, perform, and assign identities (Nakamura, 2002). While examining gender and nationality and how they are configured in *Overwatch* esports, I pay attention to their intersections with ethnicity and sexuality.

For examining gender, I draw from Judith Butler's (1990) theory on gender as a performance and from previous research in the area. For examining nationality, I utilise Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal or "cold" nationalism and previous research on the subject.

[1] Daniel Siegel, 2009, p.22
[2] Daniel Siegel, 2009, p.22

1.1.1 Contextualising the research focus: Framing esports as sports

The tremendous economic challenge for the Overwatch League, as for many esports organisers and teams throughout esports' existence, has been addressing how to turn viewership into profit. No established model exists, and the different approaches can drastically change depending on the esports' organiser (Scholz, 2019). Activision Blizzard, the publisher of *Overwatch,* addressed this by seizing complete control of *Overwatch's* IP, heavily limiting how other actors can influence the *Overwatch* esports scene (Scholz, 2019). The publisher's tight control over the franchise has also allowed them to almost dictate how *Overwatch* esports are portrayed and enabled them to unify its portrayal, making *Overwatch* esports even more apt to be focused on and researched as a singular esports entity while tracking how gender and nationality are performed and negotiated within and in relation to it.

The tight control over the *Overwatch* esports has given the game's publisher immense control in modifying the *Overwatch* esports and how it is publicly presented. The model Activision Blizzard chose to make the Overwatch League profitable is one used in many traditional sports, where a big part of the revenue comes from broadcasting rights, selling the advertising slots, getting sponsors, and selling merchandise and tickets to home games to the fans. For this kind of approach to work, it requires the audience, investors, and advertisers to perceive *Overwatch* esports, at least somewhat, as a legitimate sport. Audience and fans must participate in live events on-site and purchase the merchandise, investors must invest, and advertisers must want to place their adds on the product. Arguably, advertisers and investors will more likely find the product more appealing when it is distanced from gaming culture – often portrayed as problematic in media and public discourse (Shaw, 2010) – and aligned with traditional sports. When portrayed as sports, the product will likelier promote traditional and athletic masculinity found in sports rather than the "geek" masculinity common in game culture, possibly making it more appealing to investors and advertisers (Taylor, 2012).

Framing esports as sports is nothing new, as the word sport is already present in the word esport. Simultaneously, sports are often seen as the hallmark that esports should reach (Jenny et al., 2017). Framing esports as sports is seen as possible way of making esports more socially acceptable, promoting their sustainability (Heere, 2018; Jenny et al., 2017). How esports align more closely with sports is called *sportification*. Sportification can refer to how an activity (in this case, esports) becomes increasingly like traditional sports through establishing relevant institutions and how this activity is portrayed and presented like sports (Heere, 2018; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Thiborg, 2011). Elements of sports are increasingly utilised in producing esports events, including team jerseys, player walk-outs, and thunder sticks given to the live audience. In the case of World Cups or other events in which national teams compete, country flags and nationalist narratives are common (see Articles 1 and 5). Thus, while creating a model for profitability and the brand for *Overwatch* esports, the publisher also partakes in the ongoing negotiation on the cultural

significance and place of esports, affecting what kind of cultural phenomenon *Overwatch* esports and esports in general are. By attempting to align *Overwatch* esports closely with established sports, the implicit claim of superiority of sports regarding other ways of framing competitive gaming is inherently present.

Framing esports as sports is not without consequences. Such regulates how esports can negotiate their identity and how those who partake in esports ecosystems can negotiate their identities, influencing the way gender can be performed (Taylor et. al., 2009; Taylor & Voorhees, 2019) and stressing the importance of national and regional belonging. In the West, esports started mainly as a supranational endeavour (with some exceptions). Meanwhile, emphasising the importance of locality and nationality is deeply embedded in traditional sports (Crawford, 2004; Hong, 2013; King, 2006), often leading to strands of nationalist and tribalist displays (Crawford, 2004). Furthermore, even if this is slowly changing, sports continue to be seen as a masculine activity (particularly true with most popular titles) – at the level of participation and fandom (Crawford, 2004). Such can further affect how gender becomes negotiated as part of esports – particularly when paired with the ongoing hostility towards women and gender minorities in gaming communities.

Similarly to sports, gaming has long been seen as an activity for young, predominately white and Asian men; a great deal of research has addressed the hostility and harassment that women playing video games experience (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Uszkoreit, 2018; Richard & Gray, 2018; Ruvalcaaba et al., 2018; Witkowski, 2012). Thus, how esports are constructed as sports or something else is neither innocent nor inconsequential but affects what is deemed as acceptable and desirable ways to perform one's identity in the competitive gaming space.

While the publisher frames *Overwatch* esports as sports, how *Overwatch* esports is perceived and its meanings are constructed are not solely dictated by the publisher. Rather, this framing is an ongoing and contested process. As such, how *Overwatch* esports becomes positioned as a cultural phenomenon depends on the substantial nexus of actors and their relations: the publisher, the players, the established esports personas (casters, commentators, and analysts), the media (the game, esports, and mainstream media), the policymakers in different countries, and the fans and viewers of esports.

In this process, spectators, fans, and the players of *Overwatch* are in a unique position to affirm and resist the narratives embedded in the video game *Overwatch* and the presentation of *Overwatch* esports, actively partaking in negotiating the identity of Overwatch Esports. Since the rise of fan studies, the active role fans take in negotiating the meanings of the media texts they consume has been highlighted (Jenkins, 2006). Fans (and viewers and spectators) are not powerless receivers, but actors with agency and potential to influence. Also notable is the line between spectators and players is often muddy, as those who consume esports often play the game (Taylor, 2012).

In esports events, the influence of spectators is particularly relevant. The streaming services broadcasting esports – in the case of *Overwatch* esports this

was Twitch.tv until the end of 2019 and 2020 onwards it has been YouTube – include a live chat option. Thus, for a spectator, the esports spectacle envelops not only through the official production choices and but also through ongoing chat of other spectators, in which one can participate. While these chats are usually moderated, they still function as sites of affirmation and contestation and can directly alter the meaning wished to be conveyed through production choices.

1.2 Research goals and research questions

How *Overwatch* esports are situated in society is an ongoing process interpreted in multiple ways. This research aims to look at the production choices of *Overwatch* esports and how media, fans, players, and spectators relate to *Overwatch* esports and participate in negotiating the cultural identity of *Overwatch* esports. I also examine how their own identities are constructed within this nexus. In essence, the research examines what kinds of meanings production, fans, and players assign to *Overwatch* esports while remaining sensitive that other important actors partake in these meaning negotiations. Based on these research goals, I have formulated the following research questions.

> *RQ1. How does the publisher attempt to define Overwatch esports through the broadcast production?*
>
> *RQ2. How does the way Overwatch is portrayed by the publisher reconfigure gender and nationality?*
>
> *RQ3.How do fans affirm, contest, and reconfigure the configurations of gender and nationality within Overwatch esports?*

Next, I will discuss each research question separately and specify which articles aim to respond to which research questions (see also Table 1).

Table 1: The table above shows which article addresses which research questions.

Article/research question	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Article 1: “Not Only for a Celebration of Competitive Overwatch but Also for National Pride”: Sportificating the Overwatch World Cup 2016	x	x	
Article 2: “There Are No Women and They All Play Mercy”: Understanding and Explaining (The Lack of) Women’s Presence in Esports and Competitive Gaming			x
Article 3: "I never gave up": engagement with playable characters and esports players of *Overwatch*			x
Article 4: “*Overwatch* is anime” - Exploring an alternative interpretational framework for competitive gaming	x	x	x
Article 5: “KKona where’s your sense of patriotism?” - Positioning nationality in the spectatorship of competitive Overwatch play	x	x	x

1.2.1 R1: How does the publisher attempt to define *Overwatch* esports through the broadcast production?

Article 1 of this dissertation focuses on the first research question by examining the sportification of the Overwatch World Cup 2016 (see Table 1), which is done by looking at the production of the event and comparing it to the FIFA World Cup 2014. The comparison shows similarities and differences between the two events; their productions are traced, and the sportified elements in the Overwatch World Cup 2016 are highlighted. The article also demonstrates that national sentiment is evoked in both events through nationalist symbols and narratives.

Articles 4 and 5 also address the first research question, which Article 4 does by examining the sportification of the Overwatch League and the fan and media reception of the Overwatch League. Article 5 looks at the Overwatch World Cup 2019, focusing particularly on the live reception of the event (unlike the first article, where the focus is on production elements) while looking at using nationalist symbols and narratives on the production side.

1.2.2 R2. How does the way the publisher portrays *Overwatch* reconfigure gender and nationality?

Articles 1, 4, and 5, while addressing the first research question, also address the second by examining how nationality is configured within the production of *Overwatch* Esports. This is particularly prevalent in Article 5, which focuses on producing national sentiment and the reception of the Overwatch World Cup. While Articles 1 and 5 mainly focus on the production of nationalist sentiment (regarding the RQ2), Article 4 also looks at what kind of masculinities the sportification of *Overwatch* esports suggests.

1.2.3 R3. How do fans and viewers affirm, contest, and reconfigure the configurations of gender and nationality within *Overwatch* esports?

Articles 2, 3, 4, and 5 address the third research question, all of which concern the reception of *Overwatch* esports. Article 5 examines how spectators co-construct nationality in Twitch chat with the Overwatch World Cup 2019 broadcast through visual elements and casting. Article 4 touches once more on the sportification of *Overwatch* esports and examines how mass media portrays Overwatch League in that light while exploring how portrayals affect the desired masculinity within *Overwatch* esports. Likewise, Article 4 pays attention to how fans, viewers, and players affirm and contest the configurations of gender and nationality by focusing on how they negotiate and frame *Overwatch* esports – not solely as sports but through anime.

Articles 2 and 3 mainly address the third research question. Article 2 examines the imaginary conception that “all women play Mercy”, its effect on how women are perceived (or not perceived) as professional esports players, and how women negotiate their gender performances in relation to this imaginary.

Article 3 examines what reasons viewers, players, and fans give for their favourite playable heroes and esports players, drawing attention to the role that nationality, gender, and sexuality play in these reasons.

1.3 The structure of the work

This dissertation consists of a seven-chapter compilation and five articles. The first chapter is the introduction.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the theoretical foundations of the work, the relationship between sports and nationalism, the sportification of esports, and examine the concept of gender and the way it is used in this work.

In the third chapter, contextualising the research, I will focus on the history and current state of esports and present some influential research about esports. I will also discuss gender and nationality in esports beyond *Overwatch* esports. In chapter three, I will discuss *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* esports in-depth. I will present the game and its esports scene and situate *Overwatc*h esports in the larger trajectory of esports history and research.

The fourth chapter explores the methodological framework and the methods and data utilised in the research. In chapter four, I will demonstrate how the approaches in different sub-studies (articles) vary but complement each other well.

The fifth chapter summarises the key findings from the articles. The sixth chapter explores the intersections among the different sub-studies and draws conclusions based on them. The dissertation closes without a conclusion, highlighting the limitations of the research and mapping out potential future research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will present the central theories and theoretical concepts in this dissertation. I will start by discussing gender and then nationality, which function as central theoretical concepts in this work. I will furthermore present the theoretical foundations of my understanding of both.

After establishing these two key categories and how they operate within the research, I will move towards theoretically mapping how different actors habituate the space of *Overwatch* esports.

2.1 Gender, performativity, and intersectionality

Gender studies originally emerged as women's studies in the 1970s. Women's studies aimed to create a field focusing on women in a world where men were perceived as the norm (Davis et al., 2006). Women studies later developed into gender studies, where the focus shifted from women as the focus of research to how gender structures reality and is embedded within existing structures. Simultaneously, studying men and masculinities became a part of gender studies. Through this evolution, gender became increasingly understood as an analytical category applicable in research to understand how structures, cultures, and institutions produce gender. Thus, in current gender studies, gender is no longer seen as an essentialised quality of an individual but a process that is realised, depending on the context in which gender is produced (Davis et al., 2006).

Seeing gender as produced and performed within particular contexts and institutions is particularly important in the work of third-wave feminists. While second-wave feminists often saw gender as the starting point of inquiry (and sometimes even essentialised it), current theories on gender largely posit gender as the result of historical and localized processes, ask how gender came to be a certain way, and how can we influence these processes (Di Palma & Ferguson, 2006). Finding the opportunities to influence and imagine gender otherwise than established in a given context includes examining how femininity is constructed,

how the preferred performances of femininity or accented femininity are maintained, the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, and the structures upkeeping both. While gender (like sex) is often constructed as a binary system between a man and a woman, which is naturalised and upheld, this does not mean gender must exist within this binary system nor that it always does. According to Butler (1990), upholding this system is part of how hegemonic masculinity asserts its power through gender within everyday institutions. Thus, gender and its constructions are also intimately linked in the ways power is distributed within systems and institutions.

Judith Butler's concept of performance has dramatically influenced gender studies and is widely used in analysing and understanding gender. Butler's understanding of gender is that it is performed and that this performance happens according to certain norms and expectations (Butler, 1990). Butler argues that it is the "expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates" (1990, p. xiv). Thus, gender exists through expectations, i.e., the historical processes and conditions that those participating in the system have about gender. Moreover, Butler stresses that performativity is not a singular act, but that gender is created through repeating the performances that normalise and naturalise it. These repetitions, like performance, can be conscious and unconscious and happen in many areas: linguistical, bodily, and so on (1990).

Different systems – large and small – also produce different ways of performing gender and, thus, different kinds of gendered subjects. Therefore, in the context of this research, the aim is to examine how gender and the gendered subject are produced within *Overwatch* esports. Furthermore, intersectionality is important when examining gender in different systems and institutors. Originating from black feminist thought, intersectionality stresses the importance of examining and recognizing the overlapping systems of oppression and different experience these produce. As a consequence, woman of color can have very different experiences than white women despite of the shared gender (cf. Creshaw, 2005).

In this work, nationality and production of nationalist sentiment are the most prominent systems alongside and intertwining with gender. In some of the articles, they are addressed together; in others, they are mainly considered separately. However, even when regarded separately, the sensitivity of their intersections is maintained, such as how sports are constructed as an inherently masculine activity (Wann & James, 2018) and how this sentiment is present in the sportification of *Overwatch* esports, which constructs the nationalist sentiment. I will discuss this sentiment later in more detail.

2.2 Gender and games

The next chapter of this dissertation will discuss, in more detail, esports, its history and modern-day status, and how gender has been and is coded in it. Here, I

will foreshadow this more contextualized discussion of gender in esports by presenting some of the most prominent ways gender has been theorised in the context of games and game cultures and the most important related concepts.

Considerable research has addressed the role of gender in games and game culture. Research shows that games and their characters have long promoted traditional expressions of gender, which, with few exceptions, have usually been a traditionally masculine man and the objectified (and often non-playable) woman. Other genders are barely present, and gender is constantly constructed as binary. This type of character design intertwines with the historical perception of video games as a masculine domain. In the 1980s, video games were built in the public discourse as a masculine activity, and video game makers (particularly the big studios) also started thinking of (young) men as their target audience and designing the games accordingly (Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Next, I will discuss theorisations of masculinity within game cultures and then focus on women and femininity in games and game cultures.

2.2.1 Masculinity in game cultures

Masculinity is a sociocultural construct that usually includes a set of characteristics, ways of behaving, attributes, and so on – traits aattributed to men. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant and most desirable form of masculinity in each culture and context. Also, different sub-cultures, such as game cultures, can have their distinct forms of hegemonic masculinities (Taylor & Voorhees, 2019).

Masculinity in game cultures is often understood through the lens of geek masculinity (Taylor, 2012; Lockhart, 2015). Geek masculinity reproduces the hegemonic position of white straight men within the gaming context but crucially differs from the dominant and traditional Western hegemonic masculinity in the way it assigns ideal qualities for men. Since the 18th century, the dominating forms of masculinity in the West have highlighted the physical aptness of the subjects, often combining this aptness with idealised courage (Forth, 2008). In geek masculinity, the focus shifts from physical aptness and strength to mastery over games while maintaining other ideals about masculinity, such as courage and, crucially, the hegemonic position of the dominant masculinity over different genders and forms of masculinity (cf. Taylor, 2012). Thus, geek masculinity attempts to transform a particular kind of masculinity (that of the geeks, the nonathletic ones, and so on), which has been in a subordinate position concerning hegemonic masculinity, forming a type of hegemonic masculinity within a particular context – the game culture. Geek masculinity has also been termed toxic geek masculinity, and masculinity in game cultures is discussed regarding toxic masculinity in gaming, where the weight is put on how patriarchal privilege seeks to reassert within the game culture context (Consalvo, 2012). Important thing to note is that performing geek masculinity does not assure position of power and belonging for all men in game cultures, but it's a position primary white men can obtain. Meanwhile, Asian men, whilst often seen highly skilled in games, are often feminized and othered (Zhu, 2018). Similar kind of lines of

exclusion are met by players of colour (Fletcher 2020; Ortiz, 2019; Richard & Gray, 2018).

2.2.2 Masculinity and esports

Esports are part of game culture, but they also have distinct qualities and are often likened to sports (even if the debate on whether esports are "truly" a sport continues). Consequently, the esports sphere has distinctive performances of masculinity, blending geek masculinity with other forms of masculinity and thus altering geek masculinity.

Gerald Voorhees and Aleksandra Orlando (2019) have suggested the concept of neoliberal masculinity to examine masculinity's hegemonic forms in esports while studying a *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation, 2012) team. Neoliberal masculinity ties in more with the commercial aspect of esports (which I will discuss more in the next chapter) than the sports aspect, but not ignoring the latter. According to Voorhees and Orlando (2019), marketability and optimal performance are the central aspects of neoliberal masculinity in esports (see also: Brock, 2021). They suggest that, in some ways, the esports teams are similar (or represented similarly) to the boy bands in the 1990s: Each member has a "role", be it the brainy one, the jockey, or the joker. These different roles allow some variations from traditional (athletic) masculinity and geek masculinity.

Voorhees and Orlando note that these different "roles" should not be seen as contradictory but functioning towards the same goal: marketability (2019). They examine how these different facets of masculinity are incorporated into the hegemonic masculinity in esports in marketability's favour as well as competitive effectivity, as these roles are not only (marketable) aesthetics but tie in within the in-game roles of the players and exist to ensure optimal performance for the body (2019). Thus, for instance, the support player is allowed or even encouraged to be fussy – almost maternal in relation to other players. In a similar manner, the in-game leader is to be brainy, while the entry fragger is to perform traditional athletic masculinity (Voorhees and Orlando, 2019).

This suggests that hegemonic masculinity in esports seems to differ in some ways from the hegemonic masculinity in game cultures overall or that it at least takes different variations. This is consistent with Nick Taylor's and Gerald Voorhees' (2019) point that we should not only look for hegemonic masculinity within game cultures but hegemonic masculinities (plural). Two aspects seem to differentiate the conditions and systems within which hegemonic masculinity is produced in these instances (game culture and esports): esports' connotation with traditional sports and the commercial spectacle that esports has.

2.2.3 Femininity and games

Suppose geek masculinity is the hegemonic way to perform subjectivity within game cultures. In that case, it can be asked where this leaves femininity and what are the normative or accented performances of femininity within game cultures. Research suggests that women have a highly marginalised position within game

cultures (e.g., Butt & Apperley, 2016; Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2012). This marginalised position limits how femininity can be performed, as within some game genres, any signs of femininity, such as voice, are already met with hostility (Fox & Tang, 2017). Here, the differences among different genres, games, and their surrounding cultures can be significant.

Within game culture's margins are ways to perform normative or accented (and thus more acceptable) femininity. Mahli-Ann Butt (2016) notes that sometimes women players perform acceptable femininity in video games via affective labour. Often, this means playing roles and characters oriented towards supporting other players, such as supports and healers. Here, the belonging is often negotiated through a man, be it a relative, friend, or boyfriend, who "grants" access to the game.

Women players also negotiate their belonging to game culture by hiding their gender altogether. Research suggests that "gender masking" is a common way to cope in an environment hostile to women players (Fox & Tang, 2017). While gender masking, the players tend to remove all signs of femininity or signs generally associated with femininity (voice, feminine names, "cute" icons, etc.) from their self-representation. Traditionally, female game characters have been highly sexualised (Cote 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2016). The same applies to women players (Apperley, 2022). Those players who stream also tend to experience harassment and gendering during streaming: Women streamers' chats tend to contain more gendered language than chats of men streamers and the messages they receive from the viewers are more often objectifying than those what men streamers receive. Similarly, the messages men streamers receive are more often related to game and gameplay than those women receive (Nakandala et al., 2016). Furthermore, women steamers receive attention centred around their appearance, which is used to exclude them from the status of a true "gamer". Research from Bonnie Ruberg, Amanda Cullen, and Kathryn Brewster (2019) shows how women streamers are often labelled as "titty streamers" in the game community. This sentiment argues that women streamers are interested in using their looks for financial gain and attention rather than through (good) gameplay.

Finally, women players also actively resist the expectations they face and rather than trying to obtain gamer identity by fitting into the margins of game culture, they turn away from the gamer identity all together (Butt, 2022; Friman, 2022). While this can lessen the pressure women playing video games face, it does not do away with discriminatory structures of game cultures (Friman, 2022).

2.2.4 Femininity and esports

The research on women and femininity in esports remains somewhat scarce, which is unsurprising as the presence of women at the top of the esports echelon is relatively minimal. In the Overwatch League – the focus of this research with other forms of *Overwatch* esports – there has been one woman player so far, Kim Se-yeon, better known by her gamertag "Geguri". In Amanda Cullen's 2018 article examining Geguri as a post-feminist icon, Cullen discusses how Geguri is

considered a feminist icon by some and is primarily perceived as a woman competitor by the public, while Geguri has stated that she finds her gender irrelevant for her career. Geguri has been vocal about not wanting to appear as a woman gamer, requesting to be evaluated solely by her performance (Cullen, 2018).

Diminishing the role of gender and visible gender markers appears to be somewhat common amongst women esports players. A study from Nick Taylor, Jen Jenson, and Suzanne De Castell (2009) shows how a woman playing competitively avoids any behaviour that could be interpreted as flirting by the men players, as that would diminish her status as a serious competitor and gamer. A study by Emma Witkowski (2018) suggests that women are very aware of their expectation to perform femininity within the sphere of competitive gaming and consciously adjust their behaviour according to the expectations levelled at them to have a chance to make it in esports. Women also take calculated risks to widen how they can perform their femininity while remaining careful not to overstep the boundaries too drastically. Much like in game cultures overall, femininity in esports continues to be performed on the margins, often in minimal ways.

2.3 Nationality and nationalism

This section will focus on this dissertation's second crucial concept: nationality. I will examine the concept of nationality with that of nationalism through Michael Billig's formulation of banal nationalism (1995) and then discuss nationality and nationalism concerning esports, including the ongoing sportification of esports.

The birth of modern nationalism is often argued to have happened with the birth of nation-states in Europe in the 18th century. Two main reasons are often seen as having affected modern nationalism's birth: the ideology and aesthetic preferences of romanticism – an ideology that was prevalent in the philosophy, art, literature, and culture of the era – and the need to justify the sovereignty of nations that were increasingly led not by monarchies but through democratic means. Thus, creating an ideology stressing the nation's united soul (and, therefore, will) and unifying its subjects was ideal.

In his influential work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1993) argues that the other factors influencing the birth of nationalism were the convergence of the rising capitalist system and the spreading of the printing press, creating, for instance, the standardised form of language, abolishing or marginalising some of the regional dialects, and creating shared daily news. Through these mediums, a sense of shared community was born. However, this community is, of course, as Benedict points out, imagined. Different kinds of events and displays of national unity are needed, such as the Olympic Games, to strengthen the sense of "usness" within the imagined community, thus strengthening the affective attachment to one's nation.

Nationalism as an ideology was its most potent during the 20th century and was assigned as one of the cataclysms for the horrific events of that time. Indeed,

nationalism became an important research topic following WWII. Although nationalism's displays in the public sphere somewhat lessened, they did not disappear altogether. Today, we have seen the rise of nationalism as an ideology and the growth of nationalist sentiment across the globe.

2.3.1 Banal nationalism and sports

Given the negative connotations nationalism gained after World War II, one could ask how nationalism as a sentiment and ideology prevailed to gain new momentum. According to Billig, what's notable about nationalism is its presence in everyday mundane phenomena. Billig's (1995) conceptualisation of nationalism forefronts the banal forms of nationalism alongside so-called hot nationalism – prevalent in the event leading to World War II. Billig argues that nationalism is traditionally understood in research literature through references to the extraordinary, for example, to extreme right-wing movements or creation processes of new nation-states. As a counterpoint to these approaches, Billig introduced the concept of banal nationalism – the many ways nationalism is made into being and upheld through repetitive everyday phenomena, such as displaying country flags at sporting events. Through these kinds of acts, nationalism is normalised and embedded into our daily life (1995). While banal nationalism can appear mundane, it can become heated or hot nationalism fast (Billig, 1995).

Through his analysis of banal nationalism in print media, Billig notes there is one section in every newspaper where nationalist sentiment and displays of national symbols are constant and prominent: the sports sections. Unlike other sections, where nationalism is often toned down and even openly questioned, in the sports sections, patriotism and nationalist sentiment are openly present. Thus, sports appears to be a domain where nationalist sentiment is accepted and even encouraged.

A plethora of research exists examining the relationship between sports and nationalism. Several studies have shown how sports have been used as a tool in nation-building and evoking nationalist sentiment (Bowes & Bairner, 2019; Crawford, 2004; Hong, 2013, King, 2006). Also worth noting is that sports and sports fandom are generally perceived as highly masculine activities (Crawford, 2004), further strengthening the importance of looking at how the sportification of esports influences the constructions and performances of gender and nationality.

2.3.2 Sportification and esports

While esports, or competitive gaming, has not always been understood through the lens of sports, Daniel Pargman and Daniel Svensson (2019) argue that esports is going through a similar process (that of sportification) as other activities that have eventually reached the status of sports. This means increasing regulation of the activity, defining clear rules, attracting financial investment, and increasing awareness and advanced practices in how to improve in a given game (i.e.,

training practices). Another way to view the sportification of esports are to view it through the lens of media sports – how the sports in question are represented. This includes presenting esports in ways easily recognisable from traditional sports (Heere, 2018; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Thiborg, 2011), meaning utilising aesthetics and tropes familiar in sports and modelling the broadcast structures similarly to traditional sports. The sportification of esports can seem like a natural direction due to esports' competitive nature and other similarities to traditional sports (the presence of an audience, the rule-driven structure, etc.). Notably, the consequences are not necessarily just bad or good – such as strengthening nationalist sentiment within esports or making esports more acceptable to the mainstream audience – but that there are consequences in how we frame competitive gaming.

2.4 Esports fans and spectators

This research focuses on how nationality and gender are portrayed in the production of *Overwatch* esports and how the audiences, fans, and players negotiate and challenge these portrayals. Notably, while researching esports audiences and players, it is sometimes hard to distinguish the two, as those who watch esports often also play the game (Taylor, 2012). Watching esports to improve one's gameplay has been found as one of the main motivations for watching esports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Rambusch et al., 2017; Qian et al., 2020). Furthermore, in the data utilised in this research, many who watch esports self-identify as players (Articles 3 and 5). Thus, playing the game and watching esports are part of the nexus creating the research object.

Nick Taylor (2016) and T.L Taylor (2012) have drawn attention to how scarcely research has focused on the audiences and spectators of esports, while other areas of esports have gained attention from researchers. However, audiences and spectating are integral to esports and have been part of esports since their early iterations (Jin, 2020; T.L Taylor, 2012). Furthermore, recent years have been marked by mass spectatorship of esports so that millions worldwide follow broadcasted events (Jin, 2020). There is no question then that spectating and spectators form an essential part of the esports ecosystems.

In this study, spectators and viewers are mainly examined through the lenses of fan studies[3].The birth of fan studies can be traced to the Birmingham cultural studies tradition (Jenkins, 1992). Fandom and being a fan are often characterised by passion and emotional stance for one's object of fandom; the object of fandom often holds a central role in negotiating the fan's identity. Initially, fans and fandom were a niche phenomenon, and society often ostracised fans, who were seen as odd due to their passion for the object of their fandom

[3] Depending on this research's case study, there are different framings on audiences and players are approached. In Articles 3 and 4, the framing derives mainly from fan studies, while in Article 5, the twitch chat is examined through the positioning theory (for more about positioning theory, see Chapter 4).

and the deep investment they placed in it (Jenkins, 2006). However, fans are now recognised as central to how culture operates and are at the heart of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006).

Fan studies stress that fans are not passive receivers of meanings but actively construct them (Jenkins, 2006). Although players are often framed similarly - with weight on the player agency - the fan studies approach has not been widely used in game studies (Taylor, 2012). This lack might have to do with players often self-identifying as players - rather than fans - and with researchers who engage with game and player studies from fields other than fan studies. Nevertheless, the fan studies frame can be applied to studying players and spectators, even if they do not explicitly self-identify as fans (Wirman, 2007).

3 RESEARCH CONTEXT: ESPORTS AND *OVERWATCH*

In recent years, esports has grown immensely in visibility, financial investment, and number of games played (Scholz, 2019). Esports' growth has been fast but, like any phenomenon, esports did not come out of nowhere; esports are a part of a historical continuum with their own history. Perhaps discussing the histories would be more apt: how esports have developed varies by game, developer, genre, and region. In the West, esports started as a grassroots phenomenon (and is growing fast). As a corporate endeavour in South Korea, esports were driven early on by professional tournament organisers and helped by the state's investment (Taylor, 2012; Scholz, 2019). Thus, different esports operate, produce identities, brand themselves, and negotiate their position against or within mainstream society in myriad ways. *Overwatch* esports are situated in this complex network.

This chapter aims to explore this context of the research and situate *Overwatch* esports within it. Through this exploration, I wish to show why researching an individual esports title rather than focusing the research only thematically (i.e., gender and nationality in esports) makes sense. While both approaches have their merit, I hope to show that by focusing on an individual title and the esports surrounding it, tracing how particular esports produce identities within the intersection of (that particular) game and the broader esports culture is possible. For instance, a focus on diversity has played a significant role in developing and designing *Overwatch*. Emily Jane Hayday and Holly Collisonthe (2020) have suggested that this could mean a more diverse esports scene compared to esports scenes around games that have not implemented any kind of diversity design. Moreover, research suggests that not all viewers and fans watch all kinds of esports or watch them for the same reasons: the *Overwatch* esports audience watches *Overwatch* to improve their own play, for the play's aesthetic value, and for the enjoyment of high-level *Overwatch* play (Curley et al., 2016). This does not automatically translate to their viewing experiences of other esports (Miroff, 2018). In the same vein, in a survey conducted by the author and Tanja Välisalo, 48% of the respondents watched only *Overwatch* esports, rather

than multiple different titles (Ruotsalainen & Välisalo, 2021). Thus, how different esports are constructed, branded, and operate within the esports ecosystem, the kind of audiences they have, and the viewing experiences they create are not inconsequential; the different titles are not simply interchangeable. In light of this, having studies focusing on individual esports titles, rather than only thematic focuses within the field, makes sense.

The chapter is structured as follows: First, I will look at the history and current state of esports, mainly focusing on the West. Second, I will describe how gender and nationality have been part of this history as well as the current state of esports. Finally, I will move on to *Overwatch*, presenting the game and then the evolution of the *Overwatch* esports scene.

3.1 A brief history of esports

Competitive gaming forms have existed as long as video games. One of the earliest video games with a competitive element was *Tennis for Two* (Higinbotham), built in 1958. *Tennis for Two* created a setting where players could compete against each other while others could spectate. *Tennis for Two* was the first "video game" developed for entertainment purposes (Scholz, 2019).

The earliest example of a modern video game tournament is often considered the one organised around the game *Spacewar* at Stanford University in 1972 (T. L Taylor, 2012). *Spacewar,* developed by Steve Russell in collaboration with many others in 1962, had two spaceships firing each other in a gravity well. The tournament was small but gained visibility through an article in *Rolling Stone* (Brand, 1972).

Early on, video gaming and then competitive gaming developed mainly on two platforms: first in arcades and then in game consoles (Scholz, 2019). The Stanford tournament coincided with the beginning of the arcade era, where we can see the first signs of institutionalised esports. According to Michal Borowy and Dal Yong Jin (2013), arcades can be seen as the birthplace of competitive gaming, later known as esports. Arcades created the preliminary framework to transform esports into legitimate sports, such as a centralised governing body, formal recordkeeping, and guidelines.

In the United States, particularly influential in developing competitive gaming in arcades was Walter Day, a businessman and enthusiastic arcade hobbyist, and his arcade hall Twin Galaxies, where an official scoreboard was kept and updated (Kocurek, 2012). According to Carly Kocurek (2012), "The scoreboard created a kind of rubric for quantifiable gaming success, much as the similar celebration of player statistics has helped quantify sports like baseball, football, and basketball" (p.69).

Many of the arcades also hosted competitions involving many commercial actors, somewhat contradicting the common rhetoric of esports having been, in the West, fully a hobbyist "grassroots phenomenon" which later turned into a corporate endeavour. Such showed that commercial interest was part of

competitive gaming early on – at least in this "prehistoric" phase. Simultaneously, there is no denying that the bottom-up, grassroots scene played a big part in developing esports, as demonstrated by Walter Day's scoreboard.

Alongside the arcades' competitive gaming were consoles, particularly in the US, where console gaming was more popular than in Europe (Kirkpatric, 2016). A notable example is the First National Space Invaders competition organised by Atari in Los Angeles in 1980, where the competitors played with Atari 2600. However, while this event was a success, the following one, the World Championship for Space Invaders, organised in 1981, flopped, with much less attendance than expected; the winners never received their prize money (Smith, 2012). The collapse of the console video game industry in 1983 further hindered the growth of competitive gaming in consoles, even though some genres, such as fighting games, continued thriving on consoles.

From 1980 onwards, there started to be televised shows centring around competing in video games (Kerttula, 2019). In shows like *Starcade*, gaming was mainly portrayed as entertainment rather than serious competition, despite the difference between more "competitive" and more casual gaming forms in these shows. The participants were also quite diverse: For instance, in *Starcade,* the players' ages varied and included married couples and middle-aged housewives; however, most were teenage boys (Kocurek, 2012). In some of the shows, the home audience comprised the competitors who participated by calling and playing the game using their voice, as with *TV Powww*!, and sometimes they would phone the buttons as controllers(Kerttula, 2019).

These shows differ from what we understand as esports today; the terms "esports" or "competitive gaming" were not used. In the television shows, those playing the games were presented quite differently from the contemporary "e-athletes". The framing of competitive gaming as a sport was missing, albeit there were, according to Kerttula (2019), elements of a *sport spectacle* present – visible in how the game shows and competitions were shot: "With the divided imagery showing scores, players' emotions and the game itself, the artistic direction aims to capture the intensity and the drama of the competition. When the camera zooms out to a wider image, the racetrack is clearly visible, showing how the players run from a cabinet to another. In these wider images, the audience is also visible on screen" (Kerttula, 2019, p. 4).

The rise of modern esports happened when the internet became more accessible in the 1990s (T.L Taylor, p. 87). The hallmark of many (albeit not all) successful esports is that they are played live against other player(s). The spread of the internet facilitated this online and in LAN parties, and later, with the rise of live-streaming services, most notably Twitch.tv, making spectating esports easier and more widespread (Scholz 2019, p. 21).

The term "esports" also originally appeared around 1999 in the Online Game Association press release (Wagner, 2006) and was adopted in South Korea in 2000 (Jin, 2020). Esports would become a popular way of referring to competitive gaming. Notably, today, however, the term "esports" is not embraced by the whole competitive gaming scene: For instance, part of the

fighting game scene has continuously resisted it (Ferrari, 2013). Moreover, no clear consensus exists on how esports should be written: eSport, esport, and e-sport are all used to signify the same thing (Scholz, 2019, p. 4).

The exact meaning of esports has also come under academic debate. Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2017) has suggested the ***e*** in esports could be read as meaning executive – rather than electronic as it is usually understood – as the control of the game and the rules the developer maintains are common to almost all modern esports. The developer can, at will, alter the game and remove old parts or add new ones, starkly contrasting many traditional sports where no one owns the sport, despite unions regulating the play at the professional level. Karhulahti further suggests that if one reads the ***e*** as executive, such can affect our understanding of the history of modern esports (2017). He continues showing that if one understands esports through executive ownership, the card game *Magic the Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast) is, in many ways, the first modern esport. However, it was not originally electronic (a digital version exists alongside the analogical one), as its creator already held full power over it and constantly modified the game through new card pack expansions.

As for digital esports, *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment), published in 1998, is often considered the first major esport (Karhulahti, 2017; Wagner, 2006). According to Michael Wagner (2006), one main reason for *StarCraft's* popularity was its spawn function, which allowed up to eight people to play the game through Blizzard's battle.net, even if only one owned a copy of the game. *StarCraft* was particularly popular in South Korea, where organised esports had already been growing and now made *StarCraft* its centrepiece.

The South Korean government wanted to modernise the country fast and effectively; supporting esports became included in this effort. Central to this modernisation was creating an infrastructure where esports could thrive by creating the Korean e-Sports Association (KeSPA) as part of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and supporting the widespread PC bang culture. The World Cyber Games, modelled after the Olympics, were started in 2000 to further advance esports' position (Scholz, 2019, p. 22). Thus, esports became a more socially accepted activity and being a professional player was an acceptable (and legitimate) career path, unlike in the West, where esports were still often regarded with suspicion and not seen as a real career (T.L Taylor, 2012).

StarCraft's success as esports in South Korea surprised Blizzard Entertainment (Miroff, 2018). When *StarCraft* was published in 1998, there were no initial plans to make it an esports from the developer's side. Back then, esports was still a niche phenomenon, even within the game community and production; the game developers and publishers often played little to no role in its development. Consequently, the local community organisers developed *StarCraft's* esports scene; Blizzard Entertainment had little influence or financial gain from *StarCraft's* esports scene's success (Miroff, 2018, 184; Scholz, 2019, p. 50). However, once Blizzard Entertainment became aware of the success *StarCraft* was harvesting as esports in South Korea, they started seeking ways to tighten their hold on its IP. Thus, Blizzard Entertainment made an exclusive deal with a

South Korean broadcasting company and tournament organiser, Gretech-Gom, for all *StarCraft* esports in South Korea. However, other television networks continued broadcasting unsanctioned *StarCraft* tournaments organised by KeSPA. Thus, Blizzard Entertainment sued KeSPA (Miroff, 2018, p. 184). While the two eventually reached a settlement, by the time this happened, long-lasting consequences had already formed: *StarCraft's* sequel, *StarCraft II,* was published in 2010, which KeSPA banned from all its events, leading to a decline of *StarCraft* as the most popular esports. The *StarCraft* community became divided between the titles (Miroff, 2018, p. 184), pushing *StarCraft* esports to the fringes of professional gaming and opening a way for other esports, mainly multiplayer battle arenas like *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) and *DOTA 2* (Valve, 2013), to succeed. This success has lasted to this day. The event also had lasting consequences on how esports evolved, particularly from the ownership perspective. For instance, Blizzard Entertainment would be stringent with their IPs, as with *Overwatch*. I will discuss this in more detail later.

While *Starcraft* was still thriving in South Korea, and developers across the globe were starting to wake up to the growing opportunities esports presented, in the United States and Europe, competitive gaming was mainly driven by first-person shooters, starting with *Doom* (ZeniMax Media, 1993), followed by *Quake* (id Software, 1996) (T.L Taylor, 2012; Wagner, 2006). According to T.L Taylor, the breakthrough for professional gaming in the West was the introduction of multiplayer first-person shooters to personal computers. LAN Tournaments were held around them: Quakecon, launched in 1996 and organised by voluntaries and enthusiasts, is perhaps the most prominent example (p.7). Another significant effort to bring forth organised esports was the first semi-professional online gaming league, the "Cyberathlete Professional League", founded in 1997 and growing with the success of *Counterstrike* (Valve, 1999) (Wagner, 2006).

In the 2000s, more esports tournaments and leagues started emerging. In 2001, the game developers started showing interest in their own esports, inspired by *StarCraft's* success in South Korea (Scholz, 2019, p. 26). At that time, esports (in the West) still struggled to become profitable and establish functional financial models (p. 21). The Championship Gaming Series (CGS), established in 2007, attempted to reach profitability by transporting esports to television. CGS wanted to model esports after traditional sports, planning first to focus on North America but with an interest in spreading to Europe for a Global League. Backed by commercial actors and differing from the existing esports scene that was mainly hobbyist-driven, CGS aimed to bring organisation to esports, such as by creating regulations and minimum salaries for often underpaid players. In its marketing and branding, CGS utilised established sports leagues by having regional affiliations for the teams participating, including teams such as "San Francisco Optx" and "London Mint" (T.L Taylor, 2012, p. 139). To esports enthusiasts' dismay, CGS soon ran into financial trouble as the move to television was unsuccessful, forcing them to close in 2008. As CGS had had considerable financial investment behind the move – and stringent rules for players forbidden

to compete outside CGS – its failure all but devastated the North American (PC) esports scene (Scholz, 2019, p. 21).

Fortunately, esports recovered. The South Korean esports scene continued thriving while esports grew in Europe. Events such as Dreamhack – a digital festival started in 1997 and held in Jönköping, Sweden, with a notable esports component – were becoming increasingly popular.

According to Tobias Scholz (2019), three notable events occurred around 2009–2011, further strengthening the growth of esports and helping the North American esports scene recover: the announcement of *StarCraft II* (which caused a lot of excitement, although it would not succeed as esports), the release of *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009), and the establishment of Twitch.tv in 2011 (30).

Video game live streaming started with Justin.tv, launched in 2007, but rose in popularity when Justin.tv was closed and turned into Twitch.tv in 2011. The establishment of Twitch.tv can be seen as one of the significant turning points in esports, as live streaming facilitated the spectating of online matches, larger spectatorship for onsite matches, and gave players another way to make income by showcasing their play on their own Twitch channels. Furthermore, as CGS's failure to transport esports to television in the United States demonstrated, the internet was also the avenue where the audience and players already were – it was their medium (Scholz, 2019).

From this point onwards, esports has continued growing. Many actors have established themselves as part of esports ecosystems, including esports organisations, tournament organisers, spectators and fans, and game developers. Scholz (2019) pinpoints 2014–2015 as a critical point for the growth of esports, when several significant investments in esports were made, such as Amazon acquiring Twitch.tv and the media company Modern Times Group (MTG) acquiring ESL and DreamHack (pp. 5–6).

Esports finally became mainstream in the West. As esports continued evolving, different kinds of business models for game developers emerged. Consequently, modern esports are part of the rich, emerging ecosystem, which will be discussed next, along with how esports have evolved as a cultural phenomenon.

3.2 Esports today

Today, esports are a multimillion-dollar business (Miroff, 2018). The biggest events, such as League of Legends World Championships, DOTA 2 Internationals, and CS:GO Majors, gather millions of viewers and have extensive prize pools[4]. Modern-day esports is a diverse field, and considerable differences

[4] For example, the prize pool for the League of Legends World Championship 2020 was 2,225,000 US dollars; the prize pool for DOTA international 2021 is set to be 40 million dollars.

exist between how different game developers have organised esports around their products and how much influence they have on their own titles. Esports growth can be seen in how they are becoming an organised hobby for young people, who can now join clubs to play esports. Many educational institutions also offer different programs, preparing students for careers in esports.

Despite the sizeable amount of money involved, the business models in the esports ecosystem have not yet fully stabilised; how to turn large viewership into revenue is still not completely established (Scholz, 2019). Different developers in the esports ecosystem have chosen to apply different approaches to making esports profitable, going hand in hand with how tightly they hold their products' IPs (Scholz, 2019).

According to Scholz (2019), at least five approaches can be distinguished: *ignoring*, *having a laissez-faire attitude*, *the fate of the niche*, *regulating*, and *overregulating* (p. 51). Notably, the same developer can apply multiple approaches depending on the title: For instance, Activision Blizzard is all but ignoring the esports scene of *World of Warcraft* (2004), applying the fate of the niche with *Hearthstone* and *StarCraft II* (meaning these games are successful esports but for a minimal audience; however, these games can still usually sustain their own esports scene), and overregulating *Overwatch* (pp. 53–54). According to Scholz (2019), overregulating means that Activision Blizzard controls every aspect of the esports scene of *Overwatch*. While this might help *Overwatch* escape the niche's fate, it might eventually suffocate it, too (p. 55). Meanwhile, some developers have given tournament organisers great freedom with esports – a strategy known as laissez-faire (such as Valve with *CS:GO*) and some have opted to regulate their esports scene (such as RIOT with *League of Legends*) while leaving room for other actors to participate (pp. 54–55).

The developers' different approaches towards their esports are also reflected in competitions. Some esports titles revolve around established leagues, such as *Overwatch* with the Overwatch League, while others have numerous formats, such as different tournaments and smaller leagues, which many actors organise.

Esports have come a long way as a business and are slowly becoming almost a mainstream activity. Esports has been institutionally accepted as a sport in many countries, such as Finland. The Olympic committee has lately started carefully considering making esports an Olympic sport. Multiple colleges in the United States now have collegial esports alongside collegial sports. As shown in Article 5, the mainstream media has started discussing esports in positive terms, often including news about them in the sports section or other sections of the newspaper.

3.3 Gender in the history of esports

This section investigates how gender is positioned within the history of and current state of esports. The history of esports is undeniably the history of

(modern) masculinity and defining hegemonic masculinity in a changing cultural landscape. Esports have and continue to function as a site where hegemonic masculinity is negotiated, confirmed, and contested (Taylor & Voorhees, 2019).

One of the earliest examples is *technomasculinity*, which started emerging in the 1970s and 1980s (Kocurek, 2012). Technomasculinity functioned as a form of modern masculinity, bridging elements of traditional hegemonic masculinity and the use and mastery of technology. Such alleviated the growing technology-related concerns by creating the ideal of a techno-savvy-modern man who would stand as a safeguard against potential threats that developing technologies posed. This ideal and the different ways it was constructed turned engaging in and mastering technologies, such as coding, into a masculine activity (Kocurek, 2012). This image of a new kind of masculine man who not only had physical prowess but technological mastery was utilised in multiple areas, such as making jobs in coding more appealing to men through targeted marketing (Ensmenger, 2010) or the US Army constructing the image of a modern soldier (Schueller, 2007).

Technomasculinity within the sphere of early competitive gaming was knowingly produced and performed. Kocurek (2012) stresses that asking how gaming (and, consequently, esports) became such a masculine space is important. She claims arcades were fundamental in this, arguing that "the arcade of history was certainly frequented by more men than women, but the nostalgic arcade seems to be an exclusive male enclave" (Kocurek, 2012, p. 217). She adds that women were already playing video games, noting that approximately 40% of *Pong* (Atari, 1972) players were women, which is often forgotten or ignored retrospectively (p. 39). She suggests that perhaps moving the machines to arcades lessened the number of women players, as these types of public spaces were more marketed towards teenage boys and young men. The relatively high prices made it so that the teenagers who could afford to play usually had a stable or better socioeconomic status, reminding us that the image of a white male gamer was consciously constructed by those advocating for arcades and trying to make them more appealing to mainstream audiences. Thus, Kocurek (2012) concludes that in the public imagination, the arcade was constructed as a hobby for men. While there appears to have been more men and boys in arcades, the arcade has retrospectively been made into a space almost exclusively for young men, while in reality, there was some diversity. It is in the nostalgic depictions of the arcade that it has been reconstructed as a space for men only (Kocurek, 2012).

According to Kirkpatrick (2016), the same is somewhat true regarding gaming overall, at least in Europe. By looking at the English game magazines from the 1980s, Kirkpatrick argues that playing video games was not explicitly coded as a masculine activity in the early era of PC gaming and game making. In 1985, the idea of gaming as masculine activity started emerging with the term "gamer". This term started signifying a male who played video games. According to Kirkpatrick, the emerging, more prominent game developers played a significant role in codifying games as masculine – reflected in the discourses around gaming in game magazines (2016).

The gamer identity depicted within this discourse was, in many ways, akin to the gamer identity constructed in arcades, influenced by the ideal of technomasculinity. The gamer identity combined the classical masculine values of physical strength and aptness with gameplay (technological) mastery. Games also started increasingly containing themes traditionally associated with masculinity, such as wars and space. Kirkpatrick (2016) points out that themes like wars and space are not inherently masculine but traditionally coded as masculine. Moreover, Kirkpatrick (2016) notes that as games (and gamers) became heavily coded as masculine, the people writing for the game magazines and the focus of the game reviews in them changed: The writers (including the readers who sent letters to the magazines) started overwhelmingly being men, so the reviews started focusing on game mechanics (a good game was game that had good mechanics and was hard to master), while matters such as graphics were seen as "fluff" (and thus feminine).

The trend of representing those playing games as men and boys continued in the 1990s. For instance, Amanda Cotes notes that in the Nintendo magazines from 1994 to 1999, considerably fewer women were represented in the magazines' pictures; when women were depicted, they were often sexualised (2018).

As esports spawns from the gaming culture and is, in many ways, a part of it, it is unsurprising that esports have been, ever since their inception, coded as a male space, which is also visible in how women participating in esports have often been represented. For instance, the Swedish all-women *Counter-Strike* team, Les Seules, featured in MTV's show *Play Us* in 2005, was depicted in a highly sexualised manner, focusing on partying and photo shoots rather than gameplay and competing (Carpenter, 2019).

However, while women in games and esports have continuously been hidden away, marginalised, and overtly sexualised, Jutta Zaremba (2012) reminds us that they have always existed and found ways to negotiate their identity and femininity within the masculine landscape of games and esports. Similarly to Kirkpatrick (2016), Zaremba notes that some games and genres are not inherently more masculine simply because they deal with themes traditionally coded as masculine (such as space and war). Likewise, Zaremba (2012) problematises the idea of constructing an average (casual) woman gamer, which can lead to confirming existing gender stereotypes. She asks researchers to remain cautious in how they partake in gendered discourses and research the so-called women minorities in gaming, i.e., the women who participate in power gaming[5] and esports (2012).

In her research, Zaremba looks at the self-representation of women (power) gamers in the 1990s and early 2000s. She demonstrates how they continuously toed the line of the acceptable ways to perform femininity and notes that while they conformed to the expected stereotypes by presenting themselves in a sexualised, feminine, and soft manner – to not threaten the male communities

[5] Power gaming is a term used to describe goal-oriented and results-driven play. T.L Taylor (2009) used the term to describe mmo players who poured considerable time and energy into succeeding in the game, including theory crafting and optimal tweaking of the stats.

and find allies amongst men gamers – they continuously found ways to do "gender offence", meaning breaking off from these stereotypes through minor actions (2012).

Emma Witkowski (2016) noted the same in her research on current professional women esports players: The players are very aware of the (gendered) expectations they face and how to perform their femininity advantageously while trying to break the barriers without limiting their own possibilities within esports – a tremendous amount of labour. Further research has demonstrated that to be taken seriously as professional gamers, women are often expected to negotiate away their gender and insist on it being irrelevant to their success (or lack of it) in esports (Choi et al., 2019; Siutila & Havaste, 2018).

The lines of exclusion and inclusion and the coding of what makes an authentic gamer or e-athlete, do not just traverse across gender but skin colour and ethnicity The "authentic gamer" is not coded only as male but as a white or Asian male (Fletcher, 2020; Richard & Grey, 2018). The only notable exception is the fighting game scene, which has had multiple successful players of colour. However, the fighting game scene is a niche activity in esports, which also has historically distanced itself from the concept of esports; its acceptance of players of colour has not spread to other areas of esports (Ferrari, 2013). Moreover, while the idea of an "authentic gamer" is constructed as an Asian or white male, amongst the Western esports communities', Asian players are still othered; South Korean players, in particular, are often fetishized (Chu 2019; T.L Taylor 2012).

As women and people of colour continue existing at the edges of competitive gaming culture, central to this culture is the toxic gaming culture maintaining the hegemony of technomasculinity in its more game and game culture-focused form: geek masculinity (c.f. T.L Taylor, 2012). This concept was first introduced to the discussion about esports by T. L. Taylor (2012), who argued that to understand the relationship between gender and professional gaming, we must investigate the processes of constructing masculinity within competitive gaming. In esports, the prevalence of young white or Asian men continues to be overwhelming. However, some notable minority players have broken into the top (such as Geguri in the Overwatch League). Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the intersections of esports with the neoliberal market and embedded sports imagery have affected how hegemonic masculinity is negotiated and performed with esports, making it possible, in some ways, distinct from the geek masculinity predominant in game cultures.

3.4 Nationality and sportification in history and modern-day esports

While sports deeply intertwine with nationalism and nationalist sentiment (Billig, 1994), nationalism has not generally been as strongly present in the esports world, where the teams often include members from various nationalities (Kolamo,

2018). In esports and competitive gaming, nationalism and its displays have been scarcely studied, and competitive gaming has not always been understood through the lens of sports. However, portraying players as athletes is not an entirely new phenomenon but has been used for marketing competitive gaming to the mainstream and reconfiguring the dominant forms of masculinity within it.

Kocurek (2012) notes that in the 1970s, part of making competitive gaming in arcades more accessible to the mainstream was portraying gamers as athletes. The most famous example is the *Life* magazine photo published in 1983, which depicted the competitors of an arcade competition on the street, standing next to the arcade machines while groups of women dressed as cheerleaders knelt in the front of the arcade machines and the competitors.

Portraying arcade gamers as athletes bear similarities to the current trend of the sportification of esports, where framing competitive gaming through sports functions to distance esports from gaming culture and make it more approachable for the mainstream audience (see Chapter 2, Articles 1 and 4). Thus, while the widespread sportification of esports is a somewhat recent phenomenon, framing competitive gaming as sports and players as athletes have existed to a differing degree. Moreover, some notable esports events like the World Cyber Games, launched in 2000, have framed themselves similarly to traditional sports competitions, aiming to evoke a sense of national belonging from the viewers and players (Taylor, 2012; Szablewicz, 2016). Furthermore, Szablewicz (2016) shows how in China, esports operate as a state-mandated spectacle whose primary function is to display nationalism and ideology.

3.5 *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* esports

I will next turn towards *Overwatch,* the specific title on which my research focuses. I will first discuss the game, including its core game-play mechanics, lore, and how diversity design has contributed to its creation and then discuss the development of the *Overwatch* esports scene and its current state.

3.5.1 *Overwatch* gameplay and game-mechanics

Overwatch, a team-based first-person shooter, was published in May 2016. *Overwatch* fast became known as a genre-defining game, winning multiple awards for the game of the year, such as from The Golden Joystick, the Game Awards, and Game Developers Choice Awards.

Overwatch's core gameplay is constructed around two teams of six players competing on various maps. There are also different kinds of game modes where the number of players per team and the objectives of the game mode can vary[6].

Central to the *Overwatch* gameplay is its playable characters, known as heroes in the game. At the time of this writing, *Overwatch* had 32 playable heroes, the number of which is constantly updated, with approximately four new heroes released annually. The latest hero, Echo, released in 14.4.2020, has been announced as the last hero to be released before *Overwatch 2*, which is currently in development (McIntyre, 2020). The cast of the playable heroes varies by their game-play mechanics, aesthetics, and background stories.

Regarding the gameplay, the heroes can be divided into three categories: tanks, supports, and damage dealers. Tanks and support categories have seven playable heroes, while the damage dealer category has 18. The latter has been a source of much anguish amongst the players, as it is seen to further strengthen the damage dealers as the most popular heroes to play, further increasing the queue time to play these heroes. As it stands, *Overwatch* uses a 2-2- 2[7] system; in

[6] *Overwatch* has multiple game modes, but competitive play and quick play are two of the most prominent. There are three game modes in competitive play and quick play: Control, As-sault, and Hybrid. Depending on the game mode, the teams will defend or attack the objective or defend or try to gain control of a moving payload. The teams will switch sides after the first round of competitive play. Upon death, the players will respawn within 30 seconds. The players can use their base abilities to gain the ultimate percentage throughout the play. Once they have acquired the full percentage for their ultimate, they can choose to use it. The ultimate is an ability – more powerful than base abilities. The team that gains more control over the objectives wins. Teams can be formed or pre-formed by the game as player queues for the chosen game mode. The players on the same team can communicate via in-game text and voice chats. There is also a shared text chat where the members of both teams can communicate. Quick play is a game mode that takes less time to complete than competitive game mode. The latter also differs from quick play by having a skill-rat-ing (SR) system. Each player is as-signed an SR when doing their first competitive matches (5 matches per role, with each role having a unique SR), which later determines to which tier players are placed. *Overwatch* has six tiers; players can only play with players close to their own tier in competitive mode. While playing, the players can gain or lose an SR and thus move to a higher or lower tier. The competitive mode is divided into seasons, lasting approximately one month. Other game modes in *Overwatch* are placed under the tags "ar-cade" and "custom games". Under the arcade tag, these game modes include, for instance, FFA (free for all); Deathmatch, where players play against all the other players; and mys-tery heroes, where players are randomly assigned a hero when they spawn. The game modes in the arcade rotate periodically. As the name suggests, the custom games are player-designed game modes, which vary enormously – from role-playing games to plat-former-style jumping games. Any player can set up a custom game for others to join.

[7] The 2-2-2 role-lock was introduced to the game in 2019, arguably as a response to the infa-mous GOATS "meta". In competitive gaming and esports, the term "meta" refers to a "shared notion of the most efficient competitive strategies" (Karhulahti, 2020, 110). The GOATS (the term GOATS comes from the name of the team that initially introduced this composition) meta-dominated *Overwatch* esports for almost a year (see more below) and consisted of three healers and three tanks, with no damage dealer heroes played. Thus, the introduction to role-lock was to ensure GOATS would become non-existent and that no variations would materialize. Simultaneously, the 2-2-2 addressed a problem in "ladder-play" – competitive games played in the game – by ensuring each team had two healers and two tanks (as the problem would be the overabundance of damaged dealer players). The case of GOATS demonstrates how the Overmatch esports scene is continuously entan-gled with balancing the base game; GOATS was largely considered boring to watch and, thus, detrimental to O*verwatch* in the media as an (e)sports product.

it, two of the most popular modes, quick play and role-queue competitive play[8], limit the number of heroes that can be picked from each category to two. Players must choose which role they want to play before queuing, which will affect their queue time. Almost, as a rule, those selecting the damage dealer role have, by far, the longest queue times.

Overwatch is often categorised as a team-based first-person shooter. However, the playable heroes have various mechanics, which are not limited to shooting. While some heroes like Soldier 76 are like characters from classic first-person shooters because of their aesthetics and gameplay, some of the heroes do not have shooting as a meaningful part or as any part of their kit. For instance, Mercy, a support hero, uses a staff with a lock-on beam to heal her teammates and boost the damage of her teammates can do (while she has a small gun she can switch to when she needs to defend herself) while Reinhard, a hypermasculine tank character (c.f. Välisalo & Ruotsalainen, 2022), uses a shield to protect his teammates and a hammer for doing damage; thus, he does not rely heavily on aim to perform his duty and do damage.

Picture 1: The support hero Mercy　　*Picture 2: The damage dealer hero Soldier 76*

Including several kinds of abilities in the game can be seen as part of the developer's inclusive game design, which they have discussed extensively (MCV, 2015). Having heroes with abilities not dependent on the player having an extensive background in first-person shooter games can make the game more appealing for larger audiences as it requires less of a particular type of "gamer capital" for a player to quickly feel comfortable with the game. Gamer capital refers to the kind of capital that players acquire by playing video games, including a range of social behaviours marking one as a gamer and as part of a particular in-group, with a knowledge of games and aspects related to mechanical skills (such as aim) acquired by extensive gameplay (Consalvo, 2007).

While the diversity in hero abilities accommodates different kinds of playstyles, it is not uncommon for some of the players to label some of the heroes, namely those who do not rely on aim-based abilities, as "easy heroes", with some going so far as to argue that these heroes have no place in first-person shooters.

[8]As of late 2020, there is an open queue mode for the game's competitive mode. This mode, how-ever, is significantly less popular than what has become the standard 2-2-2 mode.

This dislike can also take gendered forms, particularly in the case of Mercy, who is often labelled an easy hero for "e-girls" to play (see Article 2). E-girl, egirl, and girl gamer are the gendered terms used for women playing games, suggesting that gamers are, by default, men (c.f. Ruberg et al. 2019). This constructed imaginary is further explored in this dissertation's second article.

The diversity in hero abilities has also been part of an ongoing conflict amongst players and fans regarding *what kind of game Overwatch is*. Some players advocate it to be a competitive game, which should make its design and balance decisions based on the feedback of professional players, while other players see it as a casual game, where the balancing and design decisions should be made to benefit the player base (c.f. Blamey, 2022).

3.5.2 *Overwatch* lore and the story world of *Overwatch*

Placed sometime in the distant future, *Overwatch* brings us the heroes who formerly formed the squad known as the "Overwatch". Overwatch's task was to ensure peace and protect people across the globe from the robotic "omnics", which had gained power during the "Omnic Crisis" – a war between humans and the sentient robots. Once the crisis settled, the Overwatch squad disbanded as their power and influence had grown too large. The player learns all this upon logging into the game *Overwatch* for the first time; one formal member of Overwatch, Winston, a genius gorilla raised in space, while calling for the members of Overwatch to gather again and act, says the world is again becoming a dangerous and restless place in need of heroes.

Picture 3: The playable heroes of Overwatch as of Season 22

The formal members of Overwatch are part of the cast of playable heroes of *Overwatch*. The cast also includes "rehabilitated" omnics – allies of Overwatch – and members of Talon, the game's current villains. While Winston is a gorilla, most of the playable heroes – par three omnics and one hamster – are humans. Most of the humans are, to some extent, cyborgs, having been infused with technology to enchant their abilities or restore their ability to act. The human cast consists of various ethnicities and nationalities, with an even number of men and

women heroes. Also, some heroes' sexual orientations have been revealed; we know at least two of the heroes are gay. While the heroes' gender, nationality, and ethnicity can largely be learned through the game – from short hero descriptions and voice lines – the sexualities are in no way mentioned. Instead, one must turn to other mediums to learn this information.

Overwatch is a transmedia product (Blom, 2019; Koskimaa et al., 2021; Välisalo & Ruotsalainen, 2022), meaning the fictional *Overwatch* universe is constructed across multiple mediums and that the lore of *Overwatch* unveils through multiple mediums (Koskimaa et al., 2021), including comics, short stories, videos about characters' backgrounds, and short animations. In the game, the lore rarely advances. The fictional world is presented mainly through short hero descriptions, aesthetics, and the heroes' voice lines, which reveal some aspects of the heroes, their relationships with other heroes, and the surrounding world. The only time the lore advances in the game is during the Anniversary, a yearly event, including short player versus environment (PVE) missions to be played, from which we can learn about Overwatch's struggles against Talon, the terrorist organisation seeking to create chaos and conflict.

3.5.3 *Overwatch* and its financial model

Overwatch is a one-time purchase game; thus, the player gets access to all playable content after buying it, apart from some of the cosmetics, which can mainly be acquired through loot boxes and watching *Overwatch* esports.

Loot boxes can be earned by playing the game and bought with real money. They contain various cosmetics, such as skins, voice lines, sprays, and poses for the playable characters. None of these has any bearing on the gameplay. Loot boxes as a financial model have turned out to be somewhat problematic, as they are considered gambling in some countries (Castillo, 2019).

In their earnings call 2021, Activision Blizzard indicated that Overwatch might become free to play someday, which could also affect the financial model it uses, such as by introducing seasonal battle passes (Invenglobal, 2021).

3.5.4 Diversity in *Overwatch*

Examining the game *Overwatch* is vital in the context of *Overwatch* esports. *Overwatch's* design is marketed as highly inclusive, showcasing several playable characters from varied backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and genders (Cullen et al., 2018; Hayday & Collison, 2020; Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020).

Blizzard has been vocal about its commitment to diversity design in the case of *Overwatch*. Game journalists and academics have praised *Overwatch's* developers for including different sexualities, ethnicities, genders, nationalities, body types, and ages in the game, thus designing the characters beyond the most common tropes in mainstream video games. For instance, Amanda Cullen, Kathryn Ringland, and Christine Wolf (2018) examine disability in *Overwatch* and note how two of the heroes, Symmetra and Ana (Symmetra is autistic, and Ana has lost an eye; rather than having her eye fixed through cyborg technology, she

embraces this lack), help bring disability visible rather than rendering it invisible, which is done in most mainstream games. Game journalist Brando Simeo Starkey praises the representation of people of colour in *Overwatch*, focusing on the hero Baptiste, who, according to Starkey, is a rarity: a black, non-African American man (Baptiste is Haitian) in video games (2019).

With the praise has come criticism about how *Overwatch* has handled inclusion and diversity. While Amanda Cullen, Kathryn Ringland, and Christine Wolf (2018) praise the inclusion of disabled heroes in *Overwatch*, they note that their impact might be limited, as their disabilities do not affect the gameplay itself[9].

Picture 4: The tank hero Zarya

Criticism has also been levelled against how women and different ethnicities are represented. Most of the women heroes are (or at least appear as) young and fit, with rather stereotypical bodies of women characters in games. Exceptions are perhaps Ana, an older woman, and Zarya, who, while fit, is very muscular. Some of the ethnicities and nationalities in *Overwatch* are presented in a rather stereotypical light. Belmonte (2017) notes that in presenting the non-Western characters, *Overwatch* appears to follow *World of Warcraft* with orientalist tendencies. Moreover, despite the cyborg nature of the playable human heroes, the omnics are clearly othered in Overwatch. They tend to embody racial stereotypes and function as limits of humanity by toeing its border (Välisalo, 2018).

[9] Kyle Bohunicky and Jordan Youngblood (2019) made a similar point. Discussing the reveal of Soldier 76's sexuality as gay, they draw attention to how his sexuality is invisible and has no bearing on his gameplay. They point out that the players bring sexuality to the game and construct it to be part of the gameplay.

Despite the problems around the design of diversity, the playable heroes of *Overwatch* are popular and important amongst the fans and players (Article 3). The fans and players have been vocal about the game's lack of lore; the developer has indicated that the sequel to *Overwatch, Overwatch 2*, will mainly focus on the lore and stories of each hero.

Emily Jane Hayday and Holly Collison (2020) suggest that the diversity of representation in *Overwatch* exemplifies how developers can attempt to increase social justice in games and esports by moving away from highly sexualised representations of women and creating role models within the game, encouraging more women to participate in esports.

3.6 *Overwatch* Esports: Overwatch World Cup, Overwatch League, and Overwatch Contenders

The era of *Overwatch* esports can be divided into two main periods: before the Overwatch League era and the Overwatch League era. During the first era, *Overwatch* esports was mainly organised by actors other than the game's developer. During the second era, since the start of the Overwatch League, the developer has taken a tight hold of the IP and become the only esports organiser for *Overwatch*, par some small, local tournaments. In the early days of Overwatch esports (until 2017) were multiple tournament organisers for *Overwatch*. As of mid–2107 onwards, almost all *Overwatch* esports has been exclusively organised by the developer Blizzard Entertainment (part of Activision Blizzard) , including the yearly World Cup occurring in Blizzcon and the 2018 launched global league, the Overwatch League.

As soon as *Overwatch* was released in a closed beta phase, the first *Overwatch* esports competitions started. Initially, they were small online tournaments, as access to the game was limited to those with the closed beta key. As the game evolved from the closed beta and became available to the larger public, more tournaments started appearing, including Alienware's The Monthly Melee in Europe, North America and China, and then Apex, organised by OGN in South Korea. The latter invited the best-performing European and North American teams to join Apex.

From 2016 onwards, *Overwatch's* developer started organising *Overwatch* esports tournaments as a yearly held Overwatch World Cup (see Articles 1 and 5). The reconstruction of *Overwatch* esports happened in 2017, which saw the preseason of the Overwatch League and Season 0 of contenders (the league tear below the Overwatch League). It also saw the last season of APEX, which would someday be known as the South Korean contenders and, like other contenders, produced by Blizzard rather than OGN (a South Korean cable television channel specialising in broadcasting esports). While the Overwatch League was announced at the 2016 World Cup, it finally launched in January 2018.

Overwatch League is a franchised league drawing its format from established North American Sports leagues such as the NFL and NBA. Some teams competing in the Overwatch League are owned by the same people and organisations that the teams owned in these established sports leagues. There were 12 teams in the Overwatch League in 2018 and 20 teams in 2019 and 2020. As the league is franchised, the participating teams had to buy their spot. The estimated cost of a spot has been rumoured to be around 10–20 million in the first season (occurring in 2018) and up to 60 million in the second (Wolf, 2019).

The Overwatch League has multiple ways to gain revenue. First, for Seasons 1 and 2, it sold its broadcasting rights to Twitch.tv for 90 million dollars, followed by a 120-million dollar deal with YouTube for Seasons 3 and 4 (including the broadcast rights of another Blizzard esports league, the Call of Duty League). Second, all the teams have their own skins within the game of *Overwatch*, which can be bought with real money or with tokens earned by watching Overwatch League games. Third, following the traditional sports leagues, the Overwatch League was supposed to move to a homestand model for Season 3 in 2020, meaning all the teams host games in their home stadiums, making local fans attending the games possible; revenue could have also been earned through ticket sales and fan merchandise. Moving to homestands was, however, postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Tier two esports for *Overwatch* is the Contenders. Below contenders is an open division in which anyone can participate. Blizzard Entertainment has named the model containing these three levels the “path to pro”, suggesting that through it, anyone skilled enough can become a professional player (see Picture 5). However, this model, which the players have rebranded as the“path to poverty” (Caetano, 2022), has been widely criticised.

Picture 5: Overwatch path to pro, as depicted on their website (https://playoverwatch.com/en-us/esports/)

The main criticism has been how Blizzard Entertainments’ tight control and minimal investment in the Contenders (and thus the whole tier two esports of *Overwatch*) has all but killed the *Overwatch* tier two esports. As no way exists for

whole teams to advance to the Overwatch League (as all slots are buy-in) and the prize pools in contenders are small, little incentive exists for established esports organisations to participate in Contenders. The Overwatch contenders function like a “farm league” for the Overwatch League, essentially existing to provide the league with young talent. Consequently, most teams in Contenders are made and run by the players and often lack the financial means to support their players (Carpenter, 2018; Caetano, 2022; Scholz, 2021). Thus, South Korea is the only place where tier two *Overwatch* esports are still somewhat healthy. South Korea also dominates *Overwatch* esports; most of the young talent comes from that region (Scholz, 2021). However, while tier two seems to heavily suffer under the current organisation of *Overwatch* esports, a somewhat vibrant collegiate *Overwatch* esports scene exists, which might offer a place for young players in the United States to play (Scholz, 2021).

4 METHOD AND DATA

This chapter will discuss the data and methods used for this dissertation. As the dissertation consists of five articles, the data and methods used vary depending on the articles. However, there is also considerable overlap. For instance, data from the same survey has been used in multiple articles, and several articles use the same or similar data analysis methods (see Table 2).

I will start this chapter with a general overview of the research strategy, then discuss my research position, followed by a discussion of the research ethics. I will then move to examine the data and methods. Rather than following the order of articles and presenting the data and method by article, I have organised the data and method thematically, thus presenting them here by the type of data and method used.

Table 2: Data and methods

Article	Method of analysis	Type of Data	Data
"Not Only for a Celebration of Competitive Overwatch but Also National Pride": Sportificating the Overwatch World Cup 2016	Comparative thematic analysis	Livestream recordings Television broadcast recording	Overwatch World Cup 2016 broadcasts, including the gold medal match (South Korea vs. Russia) and bronze medal match (Finland vs. Sweden) 2014 FIFA World Cup final broadcast by Finnish national broadcaster Yle, including the tournament's gold medal match (Germany vs. Argentina)
"There Are No Women and They All Play Mercy": Understanding and Explaining (The Lack of)	Applied thematic analysis	Online questionnaire Discussion forum data	Online questionnaire concerning the gaming, gamer identities, and

Women's Presence in Esports and Competitive Gaming			participation in the gaming culture of Finnish women (t37 respondents) Discussion threads from official Overwatch forums
"I never gave up": engagement with playable characters and esports players of Overwatch	Applied thematic analysis Descriptive statistics	Survey data Discussion forum data	Pilot version of the Overwatch survey: 135 respondents Discussion threads from Subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch Discussion threads from official Overwatch forums
"Overwatch is anime" Exploring an alternative interpretational framework for competitive gaming	Participant observations Descriptive statistic	Discussion forum data Field journals Social media posts (secondary data) United mainstream media articles	Discussion threads from Subreddit r/competitive Field journals from participant observation in OWL games Overwatch survey data (428 respondents) Social media posts US mainstream media articles about OWL
"KKona where's your sense of patriotism?" - Positioning nationality in the spectatorship of competitive Overwatch play	Multimodal analysis informed by the frame of positioning theory	Livestream recordings Twitch.tv chat recordings	Overwatch World Cup 2019 final broadcast, including the semi-final match (South Korea vs. USA) and group stage (Finland vs. the Netherlands) Twitch.tv chat recordings in text format from the above-specified broadcasts

4.1 Research strategy

The overall research strategy has been to understand in-depth how nationality and gender are present in the *Overwatch* esports ecosystem, paying particular attention to how they are performed within the reception and production of *Overwatch* esports.

The research consists of five sub-studies employing different analysis methods (see Figure 1). A set of diverse data was gathered over three years, during which the research strategy evolved organically. There is a twofold reason behind this evolution. First, the first study's findings (Article 1) helped define the research questions, influencing the data gathering afterwards. Second, during the data gathering, the process was constantly in flux, influenced by findings and current events.

While data gathering, I systematically engaged with the *Overwatch* esports field through multiple mediums, including playing the game, reading numerous discussion forums, watching esports broadcasts and professional players' streams, and visiting a tournament. I will discuss this more in the following section: multi-sited (online) ethnography.

4.1.1 Multi-sited (online) ethnography

Throughout the research, particularly during the data gathering, I was constantly entangled in and engaged with the research field through multiple mediums. Here, I use the concept of multi-sited ethnography to help define the object of the research and the field in which it occurs. However, ethnography has not been the only format of data gathering. Still, ethnography has functioned as the backbone of the research, inviting a constant presence in the field.

Multi-sited ethnography can be understood as an approach that advocates for researchers to expand the notion of the field beyond the traditional idea of the field as a set physical location (Marcus, 1995). Rather, the researcher is encouraged to follow the object of the research across many locations, constructing the field on the move (Marcus, 1995). In the context of my research, the "field" has been shifting and multi-layered. The research has chiefly occurred in online spaces, including the *Overwatch* game, multiple discussion forums – of which two (the official Overwatch forums and subreddit r/competitiveoverwatch) I visited and read daily – media content about Overwatch esports, different *Overwatch*-related discords, the *Overwatch* esports broadcasts (including the Overwatch League of which I have watched almost every match during the 2018 and 2019 seasons; the Overwatch Contenders; and the Overwatch Word Cups), and live streams from numerous professional players. I also visited a physical site of the Overwatch League game for a weekend. This visit occurred in August 2019 during the homestand weekend of the team Los Angeles Valliant. The event was organised in downtown Los Angeles in a venue called The Novo. During the homestand weekend, me and Tanja Välisalo, the co-author of Articles 3 and 4, did participatory observations and talked with the audience and personnel in the event. We documented the event with field notes, videos, and photographs.

Throughout the research, observing and inhabiting the research field has functioned to locate information, identify possibilities for data, and gain familiarity and knowledge about the field overall. Simultaneously, I have participated in the field as a player and as a researcher, which influenced my position as a researcher throughout the research.

4.1.2 Researcher position

As one who plays and has played games for a long time and is most definitely an avid player of *Overwatch,* I occupy a particular kind of research position that comes with advantages and disadvantages. In fan studies, someone who studies the object of their fandom is called aca-fan, or academic fan (Jenkins, 2002). In

this vein, I am perhaps an aca-player and aca-fan – one with an intense relationship with their object of research beyond the research. Recognising what my position means for my research is essential as it has epistemological and ethical consequences, which I will discuss next.

All research and knowledge are situated (Haraway, 1988). They happen in a particular context. The researcher approaches the topic of the research from a particular position, defined not only by one's scientific background and field, and by the consequence of the methodology and methods chosen, but by the researcher's existence as being bound by time, place, and the material conditions of their existence. These parameters not only affect the research approach but the questions asked. Looking at this research, one can wonder how much it would have centred around gender would I have not been asked multiple times why all women play Mercy while playing *Overwatch*.

While all the research is generated within a particular context and carries with it the subject's position of the research, this does not mean scientific knowledge and acquiring it becomes obsolete. Donna Haraway (1986) discusses the particularity of each researcher's position and juxtaposes this with the idea of objectivity in science, arguing that even if we accept the situatedness of knowledge, this does not mean descending into pure relativism and subjectivity or following the kind of strong social constructionist program, which posits that all the makings of science are merely power moves within certain social contexts and thus does not meet the theoretical criteria and ideas of what making science should be (1986, p.567). Rather, the situatedness of knowledge opens avenues of inquiry and allows the multitude of lived experiences to be written into research. It holds the need to critically observe the world while positing that these observations occur from different positions and contribute to our understanding of the world and that these different positions are valuable as they open perspectives which could otherwise be overlooked (if we approached the research object from one fixed position, which ultimately always remains a situated position regardless).

Throughout my dissertation, I strived to be transparent about the conditions of how particular knowledge was born, its limitations, and how my position as a researcher entangles with that of producing knowledge. The process will always have a certain amount of partiality, in this case, West-centrism, which affects what kind of knowledge is produced. This partiality is not innocent. For instance, the study of esports might have, involuntarily, contributed to the fetishisation (and othering) of Asia, particularly South Korea, in the esports context. Approaching my research topic from the Western-centred perspective runs a risk of reproducing some of the harmful or one-sided narratives on esports unless particular care and awareness of my position are taken.

This awareness includes heightened sensitivity about my position as a player of *Overwatch* and a member of the *Overwatch* community, placing me in a situation where I am particularly involved with my research topic. While I do not partake in the professional esports scene of *Overwatch*, the prominent narratives and ideas tend to flow through the community, sometimes taking surprising

turns, which can affect my immediate reactions and responses. Thus, I have, as well as following the scientific principles throughout my research, decided to partner with multiple other researchers throughout the research, as evidenced in the articles. Having "outsiders", or researchers who are not as invested in the game and perhaps do not occupy a similar aca-fan position, can be beneficial. Such has been a methodological choice to balance the engaged insider position.

4.1.3 Research ethics

Research ethics can be understood in at least two interrelated ways: as a set of rules, regulations, and guidelines that must be followed throughout the research. Thus, a plan must be set to ensure they are considered throughout the research and that everything complies with the privacy laws.

The informants' anonymity in my research was guaranteed throughout: I mainly avoided using direct quotations from data gathered from publicly accessible places, such as discussion forums, where the users might have a reasonable expectation of privacy. Thus, no informant can be recognised. The only exception is the data gathered from the Twitch chat (used in Article 5), where we used direct quotes without mentioning to whom the quote belongs. Direct quotes in this data set are twofold: First, we perceive the expectation of privacy is not as strong in a Twitch chat as in discussion forums since Twitch chat is part of a live-streamed event expected to be spectated. Second, the usernames do not come up, such as by inserting the said quotes into a Google search; they only come up by looking at the event stream.

The second way to view research ethics is to see them as a methodology (Markham et al., 2018). Drawing from feminist care and situational ethics, Annette Markham, Katrin Tiidenberg, and Andrew Herman(2018) suggest that ethics are constantly embedded and evolving in the research process. The methodological decisions made throughout the research are also ethical. Ethics of care refers to an approach to research ethics that recognises the uneven power relations between the researcher and research subject (Suomela et al., 2019).

This way of understanding research ethics does not contradict the first way I presented. Instead, the two approaches can complement each other: In Article 3, written with Tanja Välisalo, we utilise survey data. We use the data from the survey's pilot version, consisting of 135 respondents. For the survey, we created multiple choice options for the questions based on analysing an Overwatch forum and subreddit discussions. However, when analysing the data, we noticed that multiple respondents, when asked why a hero or player is their favourite, chose the option "other" and explained the reason was the hero or player's gender or sexual orientation. When we revised the survey in light of the pilot responses, we included both sexual orientation and gender as options for these multiple-choice questions. This decision was methodological and ethical: While this revision made it harder to compare the consequent responses to the first 135, it made gender and sexual minorities more visible by including them as a predefined option.

4.2 Data

Eight data types were used (see Figure 3) in this dissertation's research articles. The main data corpus focused on *Overwatch* consists of data gathered between 1.1.20108–31.12.2020. What I call the sub-study specific data is the additional data used in Articles 1, 2, and 5, indirectly related to *Overwatch* or gathered outside the main data gathering period. Next, I will discuss the main data corpus and then describe the sub-study-specific data corpora.

4.2.1 Main data corpus: Survey data

In two articles, data from a survey targeted at *Overwatch* players and *Overwatch* esports spectators is utilised. Article 3 utilises the data from the survey's pilot version (135 respondents), while Article 4 utilises specific questions from the survey with the final data, consisting of 428 responses (excluding 12 blank survey forms and including the pilot survey's respondents).

Author Tanja Välisalo designed and distributed the survey. The questions were based on our analysis of related topics on the Overwatch forums and the subreddit competitive Overwatch, previous studies on engagement with fictional characters (Välisalo. 2017), earlier studies on esports spectatorship (Hamari & Sjöblom 2017), and our experience working with massive reception study projects: The Hobbit research project and the Game of Thrones research project.

Throughout the period the survey was open for the respondents, some of the questions were altered. First, after the pilot version of the survey was closed and the data for it analysed, we added two options to three of the questions. As discussed in Article 3, the sexual orientation and gender of the professional players, and, to some extent, the playable *Overwatch* characters, emerged as an essential factor for some fans and players in the open answer slots. Thus, we added the options of sexual orientation and gender to the following questions: "Why is this hero your favourite lore-based hero?" "Why is this hero your favourite gameplay-based hero?" and "Why is this player your favourite player?" We had a twofold reason for adding these options. First, the original closed-ended response options were based on analysing forum discussions. While sexual orientation and gender did not emerge in the forum data analysis, they did in the pilot data version. Thus, we decided that including these options for the next version of the survey[10] was important. Another related reason was that we wanted to give visibility and legitimacy to those who chose these options or would like to do so someday, as those choosing gender or sexuality as a reason often indicated they belonged to underrepresented groups (see Article 3).

The survey was open from August 2018 to November 2019. The pilot data was gathered during the two first months. The survey aimed at *Overwatch* players

[10] Notably, sexual orientation and gender were the only meaningful category that consistently emerged beyond the pre-given options.

and *Overwatch* esports audiences using opportunistic sampling. The survey link was shared on different social media platforms, such as Twitter (using relevant hashtags: #Overwatch, #OverwatchLeague, #eSports), Facebook (in related groups such as "Women in Overwatch", "Overwatch People", and "Overwatch Finland"), and Reddit subreddit r/overwatch. This means the respondents were most likely players who, as well as playing the game, engage with it through other practices, such as following game-related discussions on social media. As such, the data is nonrepresentative of all *Overwatch* players, better representing those who are active online community members and consumers and creators of *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* esports content (Koskimaa et al., 2021).

The survey data was used in two of this dissertation's articles. First, Article 3 centred around the survey data and used its pilot version (totalling 135 respondents). This article used five questions from the survey, focused on favourite *Overwatc*h characters and Overwatch esports players. In Article 5, one question and its responses (with 428 respondents) were used to examine how viewers, players, and fans situate esports within society. The survey data has been utilised elsewhere (cf. Koskimaa et al. 2021).

4.2.2 Main data corpus: Discussion forum data

The discussion forum data was gathered from three sites during the research. The first site was the old official Blizzard Entertainment maintained Overwatch Forums (the US version, section "general" on the site), which closed in March 2018 and was replaced by the new version of the forums. The data collected from this site was utilised in Article 2 and gathered with a combination of keywords: "Overwatch League"/"owl" with "female"/"women"/"woman"/"girl"/"grill", "Geguri", and "Mercy" with "female"/"women"/"woman"/"girl"/"grill". The data was gathered in February 2018. The earliest posts are from May 2016, the latest from February 2018. These keywords were determined by the preliminary knowledge of the community, its reactions to women players, and the aim of the research (women and professional gaming).

The second discussion forum data set was gathered from the current official Blizzard Entertainment maintained Overwatch forums (United States version, "general" section). The data was gathered using the search words "favorite", "favourite", "fan", and "fandom". The search targeted posts from March 1, 2018, to August 1, 2018. The final data consisted of 19 discussions (175 pages) focusing on character preferences, and then collected in August 2018 and utilised in Article 3.

The third discussion forum from which data was gathered was the subreddit competitive overwatch (r/competativeoverwatch). r/competitiveoverwatch is the largest subreddit devoted to *Overwatch* esports, with approximately 228,000 members when the data was gathered. The data from r/competitiveoverwatch was used in Articles 3 and 4. In Article 3, data was collected using the search words favorite", "favourite", "fan", and "fandom", to learn more about the reasons behind the fans' and viewers' favourite *Overwatch* esports teams and players. The final data set included only discussions focusing

on favourite players or teams. The search targeted all the posts up to 1.8.2018. The second data set was gathered for Article 4 and was collected directly from of participatory observations and by utilising the search word "anime". Twenty discussion threads were gathered, and different social media posts and YouTube videos referenced in the discussions were included as secondary data.

4.2.3 Sub-study specific data: OWWC2016 match recordings

For Article 1, two recordings from the first Overwatch World Cup (2106) were used. These were the finals between South Korea and Russia and the bronze medal match between Finland and Sweden. The recordings were from the official playoverwatch.twitch channel, available as recordings on YouTube and Twitch.tv. These recordings did not include the interactive live chats. As the recordings came from the official Twitch.tv site of the tournament organiser (Blizzard Entertainment), the casting was in English.

4.2.4 Sub-study specific data: FIFA World Cup 2014 recording

In Article 1, the FIFA 2014 World Cup final match (Germany vs. Argentina), video recording is used as it was the most current tournament available at the time of the research. The recording is from the Finnish Broadcast company YLE and was originally shown on television. The Finnish broadcast was used because of the unavailability of the international broadcast due to broadcasting rights. The casting was in Finnish in the recordings.

4.2.5 Sub-study specific data: Online questionnaire

In Article 2, data from an online questionnaire was utilised. This questionnaire targeted Finnish women and was conducted in December 2016. The questionnaire gathered 737 respondents. The study used three questions from the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed and analysed by Usva Friman, the article's second author, and is part of her doctoral dissertation.

4.2.6 Sub-study specific data: OWWC2019 live-stream recordings and Twitch chat recordings

For Article 5, recordings of live broadcasts of the Overwatch World Cup 2019 were used. Originally, the article's two authors and a research assistant who all followed the tournament live recorded 500 minutes of footage. Two matches were ultimately chosen for the analysis: the semi-final match between the United States and South Korea and the group stage match between Finland and the Netherlands. The games were recorded from the live stream on Twitch.tv; the recordings included the live chats. These chats were also saved in text formats via a live chat recording tool (https://chatty.github.io/), freely available online.

4.3 Methods

The following section will discuss the methods of analysis used in the articles. There is considerable methodological overlap among the studies; most utilise applied thematic analysis, descriptive statistics, or a combination of these. However, some different methods have been used. Furthermore, in some of the studies, the theoretical underpinnings and lenses were applied while using the same analysis method have differed, amounting to a slight variation in terminology when addressing similar phenomena. I will address this point in the last section of this chapter.

4.3.1 Applied thematic analysis

Applied thematic analysis (ATA) was created by combining different analysis approaches to develop an analysis method that would allow the interpretative take from the researcher and the systematicity and transparency of the analyses. ATA can consist of multiple analysis techniques, usually involving some categorisation and thematisation of the qualitative data (Guest et al., 2014). Coding the data requires an interpretative approach from the researcher; the coding and codes usually evolve together with the analysis process (Guest et al., 2014). ATA can be used with a range of different types of qualitative data.

Applying ATA to this research has commonly included that one or more researchers close read and code the data. ATA was used in three articles of this dissertation. In Article 1, the data's thematisation was done by all three authors; the various findings were compared and contrasted. In Article 2, the researcher worked in sections; Usva Friman, the second author, analysed the questionnaire; and I analysed the discussion form data. The analyses included dividing the data into emergent themes and subsequentially coding the topics within those themes. In Article 3, both authors analysed the discussion forum data following the same formula as Article 2: thematisation and coding.

In Articles 2 and 3, with applied thematic analysis, close reading of the data was utilised. At its simplest, close reading means a careful, reflective, and rigorous reading of the text. However, this contains implications concerning what we mean by careful and thorough. According to Barry Brummet, a good close reading considers and analyses the text's historical and textual (2018, p. 8). Likewise, a good close reading is ready to critique the text (p. 11). David Schur (1998) suggests four steps for effective close reading: straightforward reading, descriptive analysis, interpretation, and convincing the reader the interpretation is coherent and supported by analyses.

4.3.2 Descriptive statistics

Articles 3 and 4 utilise descriptive statistics to depict and analyse the Overwatch survey data. As only three questions from the survey were utilised directly in this research, the analysis of the survey data remains relatively light. In Article 3, the

data was used to examine and inform why players and fans found favourite heroes and players. The descriptive statistics are analysed with an open-ended answer. In Article 4, one question is utilised to show how the fans and players understand esports role in contemporary society.

4.3.3 Multimodal analysis informed by positioning theory

In Article 5, a multimodal analysis was used in the study in question; multimodal analysis is conducted through the lens of positioning theory. Positioning theory is used to help identify different positions and the dominant storylines viewers and content producers assign their activities. Multimodal analysis was chosen as it allows for analysing different modes – such as text, images, speech, and moving images – together.

Positioning theory is interested in how people position themselves and each other within a language and everyday communication (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harre & Van Langenhove, 1991). These acts of positioning amount to jointly constructed storylines functioning as devices to make sense of the world, distribute and showcase power, and create and enforce moral norms (Harre & Van Langenhove, 1991). Positioning is always a rhetorical act that reconstructs the material world and helps people position (or attempt to position) themselves in relation to others. Positioning happens within discourses; examining how it occurs within a particular discourse can help a researcher understand how the world is rhetorically generated in that specific discourse (Harre & Van Langenhove, 1991).

4.4 Note on terminology: Imaginary, narrative, and storyline

Throughout the dissertation and in different sub-studies is some variance in the terminology used when describing the object of the research due to two main reasons: the sub-studies were conducted within a longer period, affecting the terminology used, and, in some cases, the sub-studies utilise slightly different theoretical lenses, which influenced the choice of concepts. Thus, in Article 2, how women are rhetorically constructed as only capable of playing Mercy and having limited ability to succeed in esports are conceptualised as "imaginary". This concept was chosen to highlight the artificial and intentional construct of the idea of "all women playing Mercy". Many players discussing the topic recognise the falsehood of this image, making it a contested construct rather than an established discourse or storyline.

The concept of storyline is widely used in Article 5 and referred to in the discussion section (Chapter 5). This concept stems from the theoretical lens of positioning theory and is used throughout the article to understand how viewers and content producers narrativise nationality and ethnicity throughout the Overwatch World Cup 2019.

As well as the terms storyline and imaginary, the term narrative is used in Article 4 and throughout the dissertation. Narrative, as used in this dissertation, does not refer explicitly to fictional content but to how different actors in the *Overwatch* esports scene make sense, narrativise, and create meanings. When examining the transmedia universe of *Overwatch* esports, two types of (non-fiction) narratives can be traced: the official narratives of Activision Blizzard and the "unofficial" narratives of the players, fans, and viewers (Koskimaa et al., 2021). Article 4 demonstrates how these narratives are not always at odds with each other.

5 SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLE RESULTS

In this section, I will present summaries of the results from each article and further clarify each author's contribution to the articles.

5.1 Results: Article 1

Article 1 of this dissertation, "Not Only for a Celebration of Competitive Overwatch but Also for National Pride: Sportificating the Overwatch World Cup 2016", examined Overwatch World Cup 2016 (OWWC2016) – how the publisher of *Overwatc*h wishes to frame *Overwatch* esports. The article shows that OWWC2016 is a heavily sportified event.

Sportification is when an activity is made to resemble a sport. The OWWC2016's broadcast contained strong similarities to traditional sports (FIFA broadcast) in all the following areas: 1) broadcast structure, (2) commentary and expertise, (3) game presentation, (4) game highlights and acknowledgements, (5) teams and players, and (6) audience. Strikingly similar to traditional sports broadcasts, nationalism was a conspicuous element in the OWWC2016 broadcast, which the production continuously emphasised.

Finally, while there were many similarities between the OWWC2016 and traditional sports broadcasts, a key distinguishing factor was the commercial nature of the esports product. This is not to claim that traditional sports cannot be commercial, but the critical difference in esports is that the game is fully owned by the company that made it (Karhulahti, 2017). This ownership was visible in how OWWC2016 clearly functioned first and foremost as a marketing event for *Overwatch* and secondarily as an (e)sports competition.

The present author analysed the data and contributed to the writing of the article in collaboration with co-authors Riikka Turtiainen and Usva Friman. Turtiainen acted as the article's first author, Friman the second, and the present author, the third.

5.2 Results: Article 2

Article 2 of this dissertation, "There Are No Women and They All Play Mercy: Understanding and Explaining (The Lack of) Women's Presence in Esports and Competitive Gaming." examined the experiences, presence, and perceptions of and about women gamers in professional and everyday play in *Overwatch* and beyond.

The results show that when looking at women's experiences and opinions in general in competitive play and esports through a questionnaire, women perceived many obstacles related to their gender, stopping them from even pursuing a career in esports, such as the risk of harassment and the pressure to represent all women. When looking at the case of *Overwatch* through analyzing the Overwatch forum discussion data, an interesting imaginary of all women (if existing at all in the space of the play) playing Mercy was unveiled. This is basically the (false) idea that all women would only play support characters in *Overwatch*, particularly Mercy, as a large portion of the player base perceive Mercy as an easy and "feminine" hero. Many of the discussants argued that women (only) play Mercy because she is easy-to-play, cute, and nonviolent, and her role is to take care of the other players in the game. Similarly, when discussing the lack of women players at the top of esports, it was argued that women are not that interested in competition but care more about being cute, getting attention, and cooperating. Women players who participated in the discussion gave more varied reasons for playing Mercy. They also pointed out that they play other heroes, too – often leading to other players telling them to play Mercy instead.

In the discussions around the signing of Kim Se-yeon, better known by her player tag "Geguri", as the first woman to the Overwatch League, many discussants argued that this proves women have equal opportunities to reach the top of esports if they just work hard enough. Geguri was praised for her attitude towards her gender as she is known for positioning herself as a player rather than a woman player. She also downplays the role that her gender plays in her career. However, many discussants recognised that women experience various obstacles when pursuing a career in esports; views about women and competitive gaming were more informed than in the discussions about women and the hero Mercy. This suggests that while many are ready to see the structural inequalities governing women participating at the top of esports, they are less sensitive to the everyday stigmatisation of women players. The opportunities for women to participate continue being regulated by their gender while they are written out of existence ("there are no women") yet written back into existence in very limited ways ("and they all play Mercy").

All the authors contributed equally to this article. The present author designed the research, collected and analysed the data, and wrote and finalised the article in collaboration with co-author Usva Friman, who collected and analysed the dataset of responses to the questionnaire about Finnish women and

gaming. The present author collected and analysed the dataset of the forum discussions and acted as the article's corresponding author.

5.3 Results: Article 3

Article 3 of this dissertation, "I never gave up: engagement with playable characters and esports players of *Overwatch*", examined the reception of *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* esports through survey and discussion forum data. The analysis focused on three survey questions about the reasons for a favourite playable *Overwatch* hero (role- and gameplay-based) and favourite professional Overwatch esports players. The results were analysed to see what kinds of reasons emerged as important and then compared to understand if the respondent gave similar reasons for a favourite *Overwatch* hero and *Overwatch* esports player.

The results demonstrated that while some things were important in both categories (favourite player and hero), such as (perceived) personality, there were also differences. In light of this dissertation's focus, the most interesting finding was the importance of nationality of the favourite professional player (although the same did not apply to the favourite hero). Furthermore, through the open-ended option, the importance of sexual orientation and gender emerged (in both categories): Having women and sexual minorities as professional players and playable heroes was considered important from the standpoint of representation and empowerment by women respondents and respondents belonging to a sexual minority.

All the authors contributed equally to this article. The present author designed the research, collected and analysed the data, and wrote and finalised the article in collaboration with co-author Tanja Välilsalo, who acted as the article's corresponding author.

5.4 Results: Article 4

The fourth article of this dissertation, "*Overwatch* is anime – Exploring an alternative interpretational framework for competitive gaming", focuses on how *Overwatch* esports are framed not only as sports but also as anime, particularly by the fans and viewers. The article suggests that while strong sportification of *Overwatch* esports exists (the article focuses on the Overwatch League) – echoed by the mainstream media – the fans and viewers find alternative ways to frame the activity of esports alongside the frame of sports. Article 4 examines this by analysing mainstream media articles, discussion forum data, and using participatory observation.

The article results show that framing *Overwatch* esports as anime affects how idealised and desired masculinity is constructed within the context of

Overwatch, making qualities such as "adorable" and "cute" desirable masculine qualities, as stark contrast to the hegemonic masculine the athletes embody.

The article concludes that despite Blizzard Entertainment, the developer of *Overwatch*, having a tight hold of the product's IP, the meanings bestowed upon a particular product and esports are never dictated just by the developer but are always formulated within the axis of production and reception.

All the authors contributed equally to this article. The present author designed the research, collected and analysed the data, and wrote and finalised the article in collaboration with the co-author Tanja Välisalo. The present author acted as the article's corresponding author.

5.5 Results: Article 5

The fifth and last article of this dissertation, "KKona where's your sense of patriotism? Positioning nationality in the spectatorship of competitive Overwatch play", again focuses on the Overwatch World Cup – 2019 this time. However, unlike in the first article, where production was the focus, here, the focus is mainly on the reception and the audience, specifically on the live Twitch chat and how the Twitch chat constructs storylines of nationality around the event.

The multimodal analysis shows that while nationality and nationalist sentiment are constantly displayed in the broadcast and mentioned by the casters, the Twitch chat participants affirm and contest the storylines about nationality: Nationality is celebrated, and stereotypes based on nationalities are affirmed and ridiculed. The result of the analysis suggests that while nationality is a meaningful category for the viewers, and nationalist sentiment is present, most of the time, signalling belonging to a subgroup of gamers is more important. However, sometimes this subgroup can be specific to a certain nationality; using one's native language and game culture jargon indicate the constant construction of in-group and out-group while watching and commenting on the esports event.

The present author designed the research, collected and analysed the data, and wrote and finalised the article in collaboration with co-author Marko Siitonen. Siitonen acted as this article's first author. The final work represents an equal distribution of work between the authors.

6 DISCUSSION

This chapter will discuss the articles' findings and their implications in more depth and examine what they can tell us about *Overwatch* esports and esports as a contemporary phenomenon. I will also attempt to synthesise the findings and connect them to existing research.

6.1 Sportification and nationalism in the representation of *Overwatch* esports

The Overwatch World Cup and Overwatch League are heavily sportified (more about sportification, c.f. Heere, 2018; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Thiborg, 2011), influencing the kind of cultural role and significance esports has. When looking at the US mainstream media coverage of the Overwatch League (as in Article 4), esports are negotiated as positive phenomena as far as they resemble traditional sports. In this discourse, the perceived similarities with traditional sports are utilised to distance esports from gaming and the negative connotations allocated to gaming and game culture: While (e)sports are seen as a healthy, team-oriented activity where sociable young men work together towards a common goal, the gamer culture is depicted as "toxic", echoing earlier depictions of gamers in US media (Shaw, 2012). This perception combines with the rhetoric of the superiority of athletes over gamers, where the esports athlete differs from your everyday gamer – not only by the value of being sociable and meaningfully contributing to society but by the value of having the body of an athlete, reproducing the traditional hegemonic masculinity concerning esports – at least as far as the media goes.

The sportification of *Overwatch* esports thus reproduces the position of hegemonic masculinity in the esports context and appears to strengthen the construct of esports as a masculine activity. However, this is not to say that esports are not framed as a masculine activity without the sportification element; they are. Another important narrative entangled with sports, esports, and sportification is the narrative of nations and nationalism.

A plethora of research literature examines the connection between sports and nationalism; evoking associations with sports can prelude evoking national (and nationalist) sentiment. Throughout this dissertation, I relied heavily on Billig's (1995) understanding of nationalism and examined how particularly banal nationalism is present in *Overwatch* esports. When reviewing the Overwatch World Cup in Articles 1 and 5, it is evident that nationality is forefronted in producing the event. Not only is it a requisition for the event – the idea of the World Cup – but it is visible in the rhetoric surrounding the event and in the use of national symbols, such as flags. Moreover, nationalist sentiment can also be found in the reception of *Overwatch* esports. When looking at how the fans of *Overwatch* esports engage with their favourite players (in Article 3) and what the important factors are for someone being a favourite, nationality was often picked. However, such was not the case with playable heroes of *Overwatch* – only a tiny minority indicated that nationality played any part in why a hero was their favourite, while *Overwatch* heroes have pronounced (sometimes drawing heavily from stereotypes) national characteristics, such as voice lines with given native language and skins displaying the colours of the country flags.

However, regarding the favourite player, matters like personality and the hero played were even more commonly chosen than nationality. Thus, while nationality clearly matters for many when engaging with their favourite hero, it is not the most popular or only thing that matters. Instead, we can uncover a much richer tapestry of how fans, players, and viewers forge their relationship with *Overwatch* esports and its professional players.

While looking at how nationality and national sentiment are embedded in *Overwatch* esports, asking why they have been embedded there can be fruitful. There is a long history of using sports as a tool for nation-building and strengthening the nationalistic hegemony; some research suggests that esports functions similarly in China (Szablewicz, 2016). However, research indicates that modern Western sports are increasingly used to evoke different kinds of belonging: one of global localism (Crawford, 2005). In this scenario, the affective ties that fans and viewers forge with their favourite sports teams are not based on nationality. However, while the sports teams represent locations (most commonly cities), they garner fans globally. Here, the sentiment no longer serves (at least not as strongly) the interest of a particular nation but commercial and industrial interest: The aim is to evoke affective ties goods to be consumed, not for commitment to the "fatherland" (Crawford, 2005). That this is the logic under which the Overwatch League operates is very imaginable, as it is a commercial endeavour – through and through. The same applies to the Overwatch World Cup to some extent, which, while evoking nationalist sentiment, dominantly displays the main product – *Overwatch*, the game itself.

6.2 *Overwatch* as anime and (ironic) nationalism

Article 4 focuses on how fans of the Overwatch League read about *Overwatch* esports through anime references. Here, the major storylines are not borrowed from sports nor conceptualised through national pride but through typical characteristics and story arcs from anime. Anime is used to frame and construct the major storylines occurring in *Overwatch* esports and to contrast *Overwatch* with other esports. Using anime to construct narratives around Overwatch esports is not that surprising, considering the aesthetic style of *Overwatch* has similarities with anime aesthetics. However, using anime as a frame of reference with competitive *Overwatch* has interesting consequences: It creates an intentionally constructed tension between the real and unreal – fact and fiction – by suggesting the events in esports games are scripted and follow pre-established narrative arcs. These suggestions are often playful rather than serious, with fans almost flirting with the idea that *Overwatch* esports would indeed be anime (fiction) rather than sports. Certainly, perceiving *Overwatch* as anime creates an interesting contrast to perceiving (or presenting) it as sports: Suggesting the events are scripted appears to go against everything sports stand for and jeopardises the integrity of competitive *Overwatch* as (e)sports, if taken seriously. However, as Article 4 suggests, the idea of *Overwatch* esports as scripted seems to be all in fun rather than something to be taken seriously. Such does not indicate a genuine belief in fixed matches but a way to narrativise the events in a way that is meaningful to the audience.

As pointed out in the article four, part of the framing of *Overwatch* is anime by a fan base (and indeed, some of the professional *Overwatch* players) was a debate with the *Overwatch* caster Montecristo, who vocally resisted this framing by insisting that *Overwatch* esports is not anime, but rather sport and "if someone is bad, they get cut." Judging the actual sentiment behind Montecristo's position in the debate is hard, as he can be genuinely resisting the anime framing or be using it to position himself. MonteCristo is indeed perceived and constructed as the "anime villain" by himself and the fans. Casters in general do continuously partake to the anime framing of *Overwatch* esports. And not just the casters, but also the professional players and the Overwatch League teams. Finally, and somewhat surprisingly, the Overwatch League has contributed to the anime framing by using the anime aesthetics in their 2019 playoff promotion video. This is significant as Hanna Wirman and Rhus Jones (2022) note that Blizzard Entertainment in general endorses only small amount of fan produced content to an extent that it becomes part of the official game (and in this case the official esports). Blizzard's endorsement of the anime frame shows that while a strong emphasis on the sportification of *Overwatch* esports exists, the Overwatch League officials are not against utilising the storylines the fans create and incorporating them into the product. This also raises questions about what sportification means, as it suggests that framing esports visibly as sports is mainly done to garner corporate and investor interest and appeal to the mainstream public, while the

everyday production in situ is more sensitive towards the committed fans and how they engage with the product.

Framing *Overwatch* as anime moves a step away from the storyline of nationality and nations. Everybody is from nowhere; everybody is from anime. This is not to say anime is from nowhere; here, we see the importance of Asia, particularly Japan, in negotiating the meaning of *Overwatch* esports, even if it is in the data through Western and Westernised lenses.

Particularly with the Overwatch League, we see competitive *Overwatch* framed as anime. When examining the reception of the World Cup 2019 through a Twitch chat in Article 5, nations are brought to the fore again. This is unsurprising, as dividing the world into nations is a prerequisite for this event. Here, the Twitch chat continuously endorses national symbols and is often at least flirting with nationalist sentiments (and indeed with nationalism). However, the carnivalesque nature of the Twitch chat makes determining the exact nature of this engagement hard: the use of prominent emotes and memes such as kkona (an emote which is often used to signify an "American redneck" as explained in the article five) to affirm one's "Americanness" and at the same time ridicule it displays a rather ironic take on the nationalism, whilst still retaining some of its original sentiment, that of belonging to a country. This belonging, however, appears to always be secondary to other belongings signalled throughout the event in chat - that of belonging, however we want to conceptualize it, to the gamer culture, to the twitch culture, to the *Overwatch* esports audience. Before one can partake in the storylines of the nations, one must negotiate citizenship in these, at least if one wishes to do that in twitch chat, as it is through understanding its informal and unwritten rules one can start constructing other storylines. This is evident not only in the chat; the casters partake in this storytelling in the live broadcast by referring to Finns as the European kkonas, for instance. Again, similar to the framing of *Overwatch* is anime, and casters do tremendous labour by speaking continuously to multiple possible audiences – mainstreaming esports and participating in its sportification while signalling belonging to the specialised subgroups watching (and having a sense of ownership of) the events.

Both framings of competitive *Overwatch* have similarities. They thread the line between real and unreal – the factual and the fictitious – while the world of nations is affirmed and ridiculed in the latter. Yet the ironic nationalism of Twitch chat comes off as somewhat weary – as signalling that nothing is to be believed – while framing *Overwatch* as anime seems to suggest everything is to be believed. Regardless, both of these framings seem to reach beyond the everyday (of established nations and sports) towards something beyond, something fantastic, and something sublime, signalling that "we" (the audience and fans) come first and create or alter the terms of engagement. Thus, these framings function as ways of creating a counter-discourse and strengthening the audiences' sense of agency. However, as shown by the way the production of the Overwatch League utilises the anime framing in their production, it is evident that it is fast in following up on the trends displayed by its audience, and efficient in

incorporating them into its production, in service of profit and marketability. This calls for more nuanced reading of power and positionalities, rather than simply bestowing the power to the production or audience. Rather the positions of power are constantly shifting and re-negotiated (c.f. Foucalt, 1988). This also calls for looking the consequences of the production affirming the anime frame: regardless of if the *Overwatch* is anime remains as counter-discourse or is fully incorporated to Overwatch League's brand, it has consequences on desired masculinity within *Overwatch* esports. This will be discussed next.

6.3 Hybrid masculinity and the absence of women

Men are the norm in *Overwatch* esports, particularly Asian and white men, who comprise almost 100% of the professional players and most of the supporting staff and other actors in the *Overwatch* esports ecosystem. This prevalence of men is important when we look at how (hegemonic) masculinity is constructed within the *Overwatch* esports, as this prevalence also contributes to the real (in professional *Overwatch* play, particularly the Overwatch League) and imagined (in the ladder play and lower tier esports) absence of women.

Previous research has looked at masculinity in esports and suggested several ways to understand and conceptualise it. T.L Taylor (2012) discusses geek masculinity, where the traditionally important physicality is replaced with technological skill, while Jessica Elam and Nick Taylor (2020) suggest militant masculinity where the military tactics of surveillance (again, connected to the mastery of skill) play great importance in constructing hegemonic masculinity in esports. Voorhes and Orlando (2018) suggest the concept of neoliberal masculinity, where the deviations from traditional hegemonic masculinity with heteronormativity at its centre are allowed for marketability purposes.

How masculinity is performed in competitive *Overwatch* most definitely contains elements from these types of masculinity. Yet, something a little different appears, which comes together with framing *Overwatch* as anime. Numerous research has pointed out how the West tends to idealise and fetishise the East, particularly South Korea, in the context of esports while feminising the Asian player and presenting them in a manner showing they meet the criteria of idealised Western masculinity (Choi et al., 2019; Taylor, 2012; Zhu, 2018). The idealisation of the East is present in how *Overwatch* is framed as anime. There, however, masculinity is constructed through the ways usually used to diminish masculinity. Traits often considered feminine in Western society are no longer frowned upon, provided that men perform them, and become coded as a desirable element of masculinity. For instance, Article 4 shows that traits such as cute and adorable, usually considered feminine, are coded as a desirable masculine element amongst the fans and viewers when discussing professional Overwatch League player Jiri "Linkzr" Masalin. The influence of anime aesthetics on the desired masculinity is known as kawaii masculinity, where cuteness and boyishness become desired traits for men (Sun 2011).

How masculinity is constructed in competitive *Overwatch* disrupts, on the surface, the ever-present heteronormative binary of feminine-masculine predominant in contemporary society (Butler, 2011). However, this disruption does not seem to create more room for women (as I will discuss shortly). How femininity (for women) is coded remains stringent, while the performances of masculinity can contain queer elements and gender play. According to Tristan Bridges and C.J Bascoe (2014), this is typical of contemporary *hybrid masculinity*. Hybrid masculinity refers to how white, heterosexual men incorporate elements of femininity and subordinate the masculinity of their performance of masculinity to distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity. However, this subordination often only results in a kind of masculinity that differs in style from the dominant forms of masculinity rather than actually impacting the structural inequalities and balance of power.

This lack of actual impact is evident when looking at the women and their position in competitive *Overwatch*. In competitive *Overwatch*, women remain quasi-absent and narrated to the margins. There is the constant image of women being absent, while their presence is limited and highly regulated by the community. The acceptable ways to perform femininity (particularly when done by those identifying as women) echo the earlier research on women in gaming and esports. There is the stereotype of the "gamer girlfriend" (Butt 2016), who performs the affective labour of supporting the other (men players) and who is particularly conceptualised through playing the hero Mercy in *Overwatch*. There is no room for this woman in esports play; the best she can hope for is liminal acceptance within the player and fan community. Thus, women playing competitive *Overwatch* are pressured to be feminine and exist as objects of desire. Nevertheless, as soon as they do this, they are deemed not serious gamers or competitors but simply wanting attention or trying to take advantage of their gender (cf. Taylor et al., 2009; Ruberg et al., 2019; Siutila & Havaste, 2018).

Another way to acceptably perform femininity is to perform it minimally (not unlike how Taylor et al. 2009 describe it), as seen in the discussions around the only woman playing the Overwatch League, Geguri (see also: Choi et al. 2019; Cullen 2018). This is somewhat paradoxical but is best understood by looking at the already established lack or absence of women in *Overwatch* esports – rather than how they are present – as this lack allows women to almost be constructed as caricatures in the broad spectrum where masculinity can be performed: When nothing is coded as feminine, everything can be coded as masculine. Thus, given the lack of women at the top of competitive gaming, it is no wonder women viewers and fans find women's representation in esports important.

7 CONCLUSION

I posed three research questions at the beginning of this dissertation. In the next section, I will discuss each question individually and then formulate the conclusive remarks. This dissertation will conclude by spelling out this study's limitations and discussing possible directions for future research.

7.1 RQ1. How does the publisher attempt to define *Overwatch* esports through the broadcast production?

This research shows that presenting *Overwatch* esports as sports is central to the developer of *Overwatch* and maintainer of the Overwatch League, Blizzard Entertainment. Utilising familiar tropes in traditional sports, such as camera angles, player jerseys, hero narratives about players, and so on, is widely done at the Overwatch World Cup and in the Overwatch League. Thus, *Overwatch* esports are sportified in their representation.

However, although traditional sports appear to be the most utilised cultural frame through which the publisher portrays *Overwatch* esports, other frames can be detected. As will be discussed regarding RQ3, the fans and viewers of *Overwatch* often discuss *Overwatch* as anime, and the publisher sometimes inserts anime elements – such as the style of drawings in marketing clips – into *Overwatch* esports, particularly regarding the Overwatch League.

7.2 RQ2. How does the way *Overwatch* is portrayed by the publisher reconfigure gender and nationality?

The widely present sportification of *Overwatch* goes hand in hand with evoking the audience's national sentiment, particularly in the Overwatch World Cups' productions, where matters like national pride are constantly fore-fronted.

Nationalist narratives are used to foster fan engagement and help represent the esports event as "true sports". These portrayals also suggest *Overwatch* esports is sports at its core. Presenting *Overwatch* esports as sports also denotes a particular kind of masculinity: an athlete's hegemonic masculinity.

While women are not, at most times, categorically excluded from the *Overwatch* esports, their lack of representation and presence suggests *Overwatch* esports are an activity for young and white or Asian men.

7.3 RQ3. How do fans affirm, contest, and reconfigure the configurations of gender and nationality within *Overwatch* esports?

How gender and nationality occupy the *Overwatch* space is never wholly dictated by the developer and owner of the game, but the negotiating always happens on the axis of reception and production. This research shows that fans and viewers constantly bring new configurations of nationality and gender to *Overwatch* esports but are not immune to how the publisher portrays *Overwatch* esports. For instance, the nationality of a favourite esports player is important for the fans, suggesting that highlighting the players' nationality is a working strategy for fan engagement. However, the sportification – and highlighting nationality – of *Overwatch* esports is not the only framework through which gender identity and a sense of belonging are constructed. Regarding masculinity in *Overwatch* esports, anime and, consequently, kawaii masculinity play a significant role and contest the idea of the hypermasculine e-athlete who follows normative, mainstream hegemonic masculinity, showing that viewers and fans resist and reconfigure how the producer portrays gender and nationality by drawing from a larger array of cultural products and constructing their experience of *Overwatch* esports in relation to these products. The players, fans, and viewers do not only resist the configurations the publishers create, but women players, in particular, appear to engage in double resistance, where they resist how the publisher configures gender and the *Overwatch* community configures gender concerning women. They continuously seek ways to assert their presence in *Overwatch* community, constantly toeing the line of inclusion.

7.4 Conclusive remarks

My dissertation examined how competitive *Overwatch* was constructed as a sociocultural phenomenon amongst the players, fans, and media; how the publisher seeks to portray esports as a sport; what consequences this has for the performances and portrayals of gender and nationality; and how the fans and viewers affirm and contest these performances and portrayals.

By looking at the annual (held since 2016) Overwatch World Cup, Seasons 1 and 2 of the Overwatch League (launched in January 2018), the players, and the

audiences, I examined how nationality, gender, and their performances contribute to creating the structures of understanding and the prominent narratives amongst the different actors in *Overwatch* esports. Throughout the study, I have tried to remain sensitive because while commonalities across this field exist, there is no one audience or way to engage with *Overwatch* esports. Yet, examining how the producer portrays *Overwatch* esports and different relevant actors conceptualise and perform nationality and gender reveals several dispositions, presuppositions, and limits. I traced the official narrative the Overwatch League constructed (c.f. Koskimaa et al., 2021); how this has been retold in the mainstream media; and how the players, fans, and viewers understand, retell, challenge, and even change these narratives.

The research shows that while the publisher of *Overwatch* esports creates a particular kind of branding of esports as a sport, the fans and viewers are not passive receivers of meanings but constantly negotiate the meaning of *Overwatch* esports amongst themselves regarding the official narratives and by drawing from the much richer tapestry of cultural frames and phenomenon than mere sports. Particularly visible frames are anime and conventions of game culture, enriching how masculinity can be performed within *Overwatch* esports, resulting in a type of hybrid masculinity. The space for women, however, continues to be extremely narrow.

The dissertation was written over a five-year period. I started working on the first article with my co-authors in 2016, the results of which guided and helped formulate the rest of the research. Over the years, the research has changed and taken new forms, and some things could have been done differently, as discussed next.

7.5 Limitations and future research

As always, the research has its limitations. While addressing nationality and gender extensively, the research does not address ethnicity, colour, and sexuality and their intersections with nationality and gender as extensively – touched upon in Articles 3, 4, and 5. However, the author recognises these topics merit their own research. Furthermore, the research often focuses on women gamers or performances of masculinity, touching very lightly on nonbinary gender constructions. While these were not prevalent in the data[11] and absent during the research period from competitive *Overwatch,* this apparent absence does not mean they are nonexistent but have been even more hidden and marginalised and, as such, merit their own research.

Furthermore, the evident West-centrism of the research must be stressed. While the research looks knowingly at the phenomenon of competitive *Overwatch*

[11] In the survey data, three respondents chose the option “identify otherwise” when they were asked their gender. However, due to the small number of respondents selecting this option, this group was not discussed separately.

in the West (due to the language and scope of the study), we cannot fully separate this focus from the larger frame of West-centrism in research. We must remain transparent about the choices made. Finally, this research focuses on the reception of the Overwatch esports while looking at some of the production aspects, narrowing down some important ones contributing to the *Overwatch* esports. A need exists to look more closely at the different actors in the field.

Future research could focus on the other actors in the field, be it in the case of *Overwatch* or other any esports. A particularly fruitful direction could be the casters, who play a major role in negotiating what (particular) esports are and how they are portrayed to the audience. Another interesting direction would be ethnographic work amongst fan communities, as esports fans and fandom remains scarcely researched.

SUMMARY IN FINNISH

Väitöskirjassani olen pohtinut, miten kilpailullinen *Overwatch* on konstruoitu sosiokulttuurisena ilmiönä pelaajien, fanien ja median toimesta ja kuinka julkaisija pyrkii esittämään sen urheiluna. Olen lisäksi tutkinut, mitä seurauksia tällä on sukupuolen ja kansallisuuden performansseille ja kuvauksille ja miten fanit ja katsojat vahvistavat ja vastustavat näitä performansseja ja kuvauksia.

Tarkastellessani vuotuista (vuodesta 2016 lähtien järjestettyä) Overwatch World Cupia, Overwatch Leaguen (julkaistiin tammikuussa 2018) ensimmäistä ja toista kautta sekä pelaajia ja yleisöä olen tutkinut tapaa, jolla kansallisuus ja sukupuoli ymmärretään ja performoidaan *Overwatch* e-urheilun eri toimijoiden kesken. Tutkimustulokseni osoittavat, että vaikka *Overwatch* e-urheilun tuottaja kuvaa *Overwatch* e-urheilua ennenkaikkea urheiluna, fanit ja katsojat eivät ole passiivisia merkitysten vastaanottajia, vaan he neuvottelevat jatkuvasti *Overwatch* e-urheilun merkityksistä keskenään ja suhteessa julkaisijaan erilaisia kehyksiä hyödyntäen. Erityisen näkyviä kehyksiä ovat anime ja pelikulttuurin tavat ja normit. Tämä rikastuttaa tapaa, jolla maskuliinisuus voidaan ymmärtää *Overwatch* e-urheilussa, mikä johtaa hybridi-maskuliinisuuteen. Naisten tila ja mahdollisuudet performoida naiseutta ovat kuitenkin edelleen erittäin kapeat, kuten e-urheilussa yleensäkin.

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

"NOT ONLY FOR A CELEBRATION OF COMPETITIVE OVERWATCH BUT ALSO FOR NATIONAL PRIDE": SPORTIFICATING THE OVERWATCH WORLD CUP 2016

by

Riikka Turtiainen & Usva Froman & Maria Ruotsalanen, 2018

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"Not Only for a Celebration of Competitive Overwatch but Also for National Pride": Sportificating the Overwatch World Cup 2016

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Abstract
While the most popular forms of organized competitive digital gaming, also known as eSports, have begun finding their place within and in relation to both mainstream entertainment culture and the field of traditional sports, their history is one of struggling to be accepted as "true sports." Partly because of this history, great effort has been put into the *sportification* of eSports by presenting competitions in familiar ways adapted from traditional sports. In this article, we examine the process of sportification of eSports in the context of tournament broadcasts. We analyze the Overwatch World Cup 2016 tournament, comparing its final broadcast to the 2014 FIFA World Cup's final broadcast, looking for similarities and differences in the areas of broadcast structure, commentary and expertise, game presentation, game highlights and acknowledgments, teams and players, and audience.

Keywords
sportification, electronic sports, broadcasting, Overwatch, FIFA

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The most popular forms of organized competitive digital gaming, also known as electronic sports (eSports), have recently begun finding their way into mainstream entertainment culture. At the same time, eSports has also been searching for its place within and in relation to the field of traditional sports. In Finland, for example, the Finnish eSports Federation, Suomen elektronisen urheilun liitto ry (SEUL ry), was accepted as an associate member of the Finnish Olympic Committee in November 2016 as the first eSports organization in the world (International e-Sports Federation [IeSF], 2016; SEUL ry, 2016). Since then, several traditional Finnish sports organizations have also begun forming their own eSports teams and divisions (e.g., Hartikainen, 2016).

On various fronts, eSports has struggled with being accepted as a "true sports" (IeSF, 2016). To legitimize and enforce its image as an actual sport, great effort has been put into *sportification* of eSports—in presenting it in ways that are easily recognizable from traditional sports (Heere, 2018; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Thiborg, 2011). In this article, we examine the sportification of eSports in official tournament broadcasts, asking how the competition is framed as a sport in them. As our example case, we have selected Blizzard's Overwatch World Cup 2016, more specifically its last broadcast including the final match and bronze medal match. While many eSports broadcasts could have been applicable for our research topic and the analysis we conducted, we chose this one mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the authors were already familiar with the tournament and how it appeared to contain many elements of sportification. Secondly, it offered an interesting case where the competing teams were based on the nationality of the players rather than any other factor (i.e., eSports club), similarly to World Cup events in many traditional team sports. Having been released only half a year earlier, Overwatch was also a newcomer in the field of eSports, and the game's developers seemed to have invested in maximizing its eSports potential.

In our analysis, we compare the Overwatch World Cup 2016 final broadcast to the final broadcast of the 2014 *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) World Cup, aired by the Finnish national broadcaster, Yle. Our aim is to interpret similarities and differences between representations of traditional team sports and team eSports to decipher the ways in which the Overwatch World Cup 2016 is framed as a sports tournament in the broadcast. It is worth noting that our aim is not to evaluate whether eSports should be acknowledged as a sport or not (for that discussion, see Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012b) but instead to analyze the ways it is presented as such in our case example. Therefore, we are not intending a discussion about the philosophy of sport in the context of eSports (e.g., sport's relationship to play, games, and contests, and to the categories of contests that do or do not require physical prowess; see Guttmann, 2004) in this article. It is also worth noting that we use the term "traditional sports"—not to refer to ancient, uncompetitive sport forms but for other current, modern, mediated, and commercialized sport forms—to distinguish them from eSports. Finally, we note

that we are not analyzing eSports in general or Overwatch as a game but rather their representations in the broadcast.

Theoretical Background

In their research paper on the growing professionalism in eSports, Mora and Héas (2003) have used the concept of sportification to refer to the process by which a recreational activity achieves the status of a sport. In sport studies, sportification is established to denote the process of turning a physical activity into a sport. In that context, most researchers have referred to Guttmann's (1978) typology of modern sport. According to sportification theory, all sports develop along similar patterns toward increased specialization, standardization, rationalization, regimentation, organization, equalization, and quantification (Guttmann, 1978). Sport researchers have utilized this theory in several case studies concerning different modes of physical activity (e.g., parkour, break dancing, judo, and handball). In recent years, the discussion has expanded to look at the sportification process in various other spheres of society and social life—for instance, in popular culture and docusoaps such as *MasterChef* (Carlsson & Svensson, 2015). In this article, we use the term *sportification* to describe the process of presenting eSports as a sport. We are only applying the concept to situations where the sport-like presentation is active and intentional: It does not apply, for example, to coincidental similarities.

We approach eSports as a form of *media sport*. The current concept of media sport can cover all kinds of sport shown in the media (Turtiainen, 2012). However, some definitions may emphasize the roles of production, dramatization, and commodification of sport (e.g., Real, 1998). eSports is thoroughly mediated: The games themselves are a media form and played online, and the matches (generally played in a local area network) are always streamed online—in fact, it is not possible to spectate eSports without mediation (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Taylor, 2015).

One of the key factors in the growth of eSports has been the establishment of platforms such as *Twitch.tv*, which allow easy broadcasting and spectating of the games (Scholz, 2012; Taylor, 2015). Online streams have an essential role in both the presentation and consumption of eSports, and they are the primary way to follow the tournaments. Watching them in this way is significantly more common than following the games through television broadcasts or in person (Kaytoue, Silva, Cerf, Wagner, & Raissi, 2012; Taylor, 2012). Many of the players also stream their gaming, which allows them to earn additional income and to create and maintain large viewer bases outside the tournaments (Kaytoue et al., 2012). Because of the great importance of online streams in eSports, a more in-depth analysis is required of the broadcasts, their composition, and their content to create a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

The Two World Cups: Overwatch and FIFA

Overwatch is a team-based first-person shooter (FPS) game published by Blizzard Entertainment in May 2016. By November 2017, Overwatch had already reached 35 million registered users (Activision Blizzard, 2017). The game combines elements of traditional FPS games with Multiplayer Online Battle Arena games, emphasizing team play (Irvine, 2016). The game world is set in the near future, where a peacekeeping organization called Overwatch has been shut down after a war against omnics (robots). The playable characters, referred to as "heroes," fall into four categories: offense, defense, tanks, and supports. One of the four modes available in the game is competitive mode, and its rules are generally followed in Overwatch tournaments—including the first-ever Overwatch World Cup.

The Overwatch World Cup preliminary matches started in September 2016 with 51 different teams representing their countries. Sixteen of these teams were either directly invited or worked their way through the regional qualifiers to compete in the final tournament held at *Blizzcon*, an annual game convention organized by Blizzard Entertainment, from October 29 to November 5. In 2016, the convention had over 25,000 visitors, and all the games of the Overwatch World Cup were also live-streamed, attracting millions of viewers from around the world.

It is worth noting that the teams representing their countries in the Overwatch World Cup were not selected as teams in traditional sport World Cups usually are. Instead of each country and its local eSports organization selecting the representative team, teams were assembled largely by votes from the international Overwatch player community (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). The members were voted from Blizzard's own selection of players, including not purely those with top playing skills (as defined by their competitive rankings in the game) but also lower ranking players who were active in the player community, such as popular Overwatch streamers. When the original nominees were announced, some of the playerbase criticized the tournament, calling it a "promotional event" instead of an "actual high skill competition" (Competitive Overwatch, 2016). This was indeed Blizzard's intention: The company described the tournament as "a community-driven exhibition of Overwatch players from around the globe" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). As such, the aim of the tournament was not to compete for the honor of being the most skillful Overwatch players or national team in the world but instead to promote the game and showcase both skillful players and important community figures. This aim was further illustrated by the fact that there was no monetary prize offered in the tournament. In being primarily a promotional event for a commercial game, the Overwatch World Cup significantly differentiates itself not only from the field of traditional sports (see Heere, 2018) but also from eSports in general. This also makes it an altogether more interesting target for our analysis: Is sportification strongly present in the broadcast despite the tournament not being as much about the traditional values of sports competition, namely, finding the most talented team of players?

The international football competition for men's national teams, the FIFA World Cup, has long-standing traditions. The competition, organized by FIFA, has been played every 4 years since 1930 (except in 1942 and 1946 because of the Second World War). The current 32-team final tournament is preceded by a qualifying process that lasts more than 2 years, involving over 200 teams from around the world (Formats of the FIFA World Cup final competitions [1930–2010]). Since 1934, the qualifying tournaments have been held within the six FIFA continental zones (Africa, Asia, North and Central America and Caribbean, South America, Oceania, and Europe). For each tournament, FIFA decides the number of places awarded to each of the continental zones beforehand, generally based on the relative strength of the confederations' teams (*FIFA.com*, 2015a).

The 2014 FIFA World Cup took place in Brazil from June 12 to July 13, and the games played at 12 venues across the country. Each team played three group matches before the top two teams of each group progressed to the knockout round of 16 stages. A total of 98,087 hr of footage from the tournament matches was broadcast from Brazil. The in-home television coverage reached 3.2 billion people around the world, and the final match between Germany and Argentina reached 695 million in-home viewers with the total in- and out-of-home audience of the final match reaching over 1 billion. Additionally, there was more online coverage than in any previous FIFA World Cup, with 188 licensees offering coverage via websites, media players, and apps. An estimated 280 million people watched matches online and/or on mobile devices (*FIFA.com*, 2015b; Kantar Media, 2015).

Data and Method

We analyzed the official Overwatch World Cup 2016 final broadcast, including the gold medal match (South Korea vs. Russia) and bronze medal match (Finland vs. Sweden), as well as the 2014 FIFA World Cup final broadcast by Finnish national broadcaster Yle, including the gold medal match (Germany vs. Argentina) of the tournament. As the FIFA World Cup is played only once every 4 years, both tournaments were the most current available. For the FIFA World Cup, we were forced to pick a Finnish broadcast because of the limited broadcasting rights and our lack of access to international television content. "The universal language of football" consists of transmediated discourses and practices shared by a worldwide audience, which Finns are a part of, despite Finland never having played in a FIFA final tournament. The international FIFA television stream was transmitted through national broadcasters. The Finnish broadcast was localized at some level, and the Finnish audience also recontextualized the broadcast by commenting on its content online from their local point of view (Salomaa, 2017). There are some social, cultural, and linguistic differences that feed into representation when comparing international and national sports broadcasts. They remain, however, outside of the scope of our analysis, as our aim is to interpret the sportification of an eSports broadcast (its structure and presentation) in general, not delve into sociolinguistic detail.

We chose comparative thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) as our method for the broadcast analysis. All three authors first separately analyzed the Overwatch broadcast, taking notes on the perceived similarities and differences in the broadcast compared to traditional team sports broadcasts. A list of expected sportified elements, based both on earlier research on sports broadcasts and eSports as well as our own initial expectations, was constructed beforehand to support the observation process. During the analysis, additional elements were added based on our observations. The perceived sportified elements in the Overwatch broadcast were categorized under six themes: (1) broadcast structure, (2) commentary and expertise, (3) game presentation, (4) game highlights and acknowledgments, (5) teams and players, and (6) audience. Next, the authors analyzed the 2014 FIFA World Cup final broadcast, using the aforementioned analysis themes as well as the initial findings from the Overwatch World Cup analysis as a base for observations. The FIFA broadcast analysis further supported our initial findings and the six themes formed during the Overwatch broadcast analysis. In the following section, we will present our findings for each theme, describing the similarities and differences in the Overwatch World Cup 2016 final broadcast compared to the 2014 FIFA World Cup final broadcast, while also analyzing the similarities and differences of these individual examples compared to the general fields of traditional team sports and team eSports.

Analysis and Results

Broadcast Structure

In her groundbreaking study on eSports in North American and European contexts, published in 2012, Taylor (2012, p. 209) reflects how "while traditional sports have spent years refining the actual conditions of play (including rules) to suit broadcast, e-sports is in its infancy in trying to translate gameplay within a televised frame." Much progress has already been made since then, and in 2015, Taylor (2015) described how both major eSports organizations and game companies were extensively engaging in various media production practices. The Overwatch World Cup broadcast analyzed for this study was professionally produced and particularly aimed for audiences watching the tournament from afar. As our analysis will show, the spectator experience was not unlike that of watching a more traditional sports broadcast.

Concerning traditional sports, television broadcasts have trained people to concentrate their attention on specific things and watch sports in a certain way (Birrell & Loy, 1979). The structure of the Overwatch World Cup broadcast is very similar to that of televised sports, clearly following its form and functions (Barnfield, 2013). There is a pregame show with a studio host and expert guests, and the slot before the match includes discussion between these experts: assessing teams' strengths and weaknesses, introducing top players, and predicting results. The purpose of the

pregame interviews and replays of earlier performances in the tournament is to give a taste of the excitement to come and create a competitive atmosphere. It also functions to build narratives around the teams and players (the characters) and establish a sense of familiarity for the viewers (see also Ryan, 2006).

During the Overwatch live game coverage, the elements most comparable to traditional televised sports are play-by-play and color commentaries, “half-time” studio analysis, statistics, and highlights. Goldsmith (2013, p. 59) has used the term *wraparound sportv* to describe these common elements of contemporary televised sport. Again, the match is followed by postgame interviews, replays, and prize ceremonies. The postgame elements retell the events of the game, adding the elements of plot and mimesis to the chronicle, deepening the narration in ways which are not possible while the game is still happening, due to time and other limits (Ryan, 2006).

All these elements are also present in the FIFA World Cup broadcast. For the FIFA World Cup, more broadcast time is given to content outside the game, and there is an additional 1.5-hr pregame studio before the match even begins. To build atmosphere, premade clips of the teams, including player interviews, are shown, and the previous performances of the players are analyzed in detail. Video clips from the 1990 FIFA World Cup final match (also West Germany vs. Argentina) are also shown, and old statistics examined, placing the current game on the historical continuum of the sport.

Commentary and Expertise

In the Overwatch broadcast, the role of an expert is primarily given to the analysts and casters of the tournament but also the reporters who introduce and interview the players. In traditional sports, analysts and other recognized experts are mostly former or current athletes, coaches, or other officials in the field, and the Overwatch experts have similar backgrounds. Likewise, in the FIFA broadcast, the analysts and experts in the studio and in Brazil are former football players and coaches, current sports journalists, and casters. As a rule, the experts in sports broadcasts are required to be entertaining personalities and therefore good characters for TV. What is considered relevant in televised sports is not only what is said in the broadcast but also who is saying it (and how): The use of the accredited experts in broadcasting is a time-honored device, having originally developed as a solution to the problem of establishing impartiality (Hargreaves, 1986; Rowe, 2004).

Sitting at the analysts’ desk in the Overwatch broadcast studio, there is always a group of four: three men and one woman. The studio and its experts are presented in a manner very similar to traditional sports studios (Figure 1). The analysts are even dressed in a way familiar from traditional sports broadcasts and their experts (see also Kolamo, 2018). In the FIFA broadcast, the experts are all men. Sports and sports expertise are strongly gendered. The Finnish national broadcaster Yle hired a female expert for the broadcast of EURO 2016 (men’s football championship of Europe

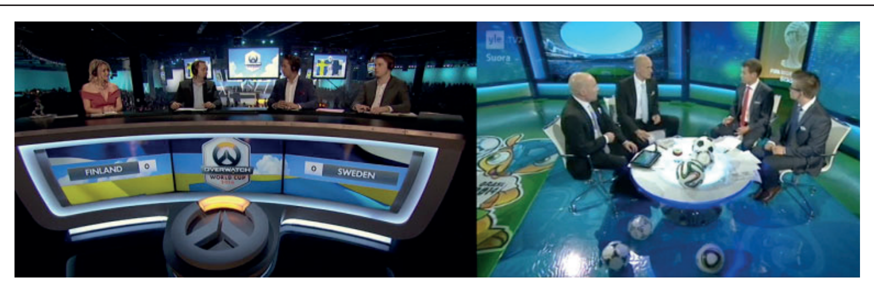

Figure 1. The World Cup studios: On the left, the Overwatch World Cup 2016 broadcast bronze medal match Sweden–Finland, and on the right, the 2014 FIFA World Cup final match broadcast Germany–Argentina (Yle TV2, Finland).

organized by UEFA): Top coach Marianne Miettinen was introduced as an analyst in the studio and as a voice-over during the games. This caused a social media storm among viewers who thought a female analyst lacked competence and credibility concerning men's football. The feedback posted on social media contained direct hate speech (Koivuranta, 2016). The Overwatch World Cup studio host and analyst Rachel Quirico (Seltzer) has also discussed the difficulties she and other women face in the eSports industry and gaming in general (*Growing the participation of women in eSports*, 2015; *Women in eSports*, 2015). Like traditional sports, eSports too is an arena for performing, enforcing, and maintaining hegemonic masculinity. This has been described as "geek masculinity," "nerd/geek masculinity," and "neoliberal masculinity": A new form of hegemonic masculinity born from a combination of traditional masculinity, athletic masculinity, technological expertise, and gaming performance (Lockhart, 2015; Taylor, 2012; Voorhees, 2015; Witkowski, 2012a).

The four casters in the Overwatch broadcast are all well-known eSports casters with experience from various games and tournaments. Taylor (2012, p. 230) has pointed out that for the tournament casters, "part of their legitimacy comes from being known as dedicated gamers, from being committed to game culture and avid in their love of gaming." A sportscaster differs from a sports analyst by providing a running commentary (play-by-play commentary as a voice-over) regarding a sporting event in real time. Casters are rarely on-screen during the broadcast in traditional televised sports, but in eSports, they are a visible part of the broadcast and have played a prominent role in the development and professionalization of eSports. Due to the mediated nature of eSports, casters are sometimes even more visible and may even have more screen time than the players (Scholz, 2012).

The commentary produced during live sports coverage on television characteristically involves objective reporting of the game as well as subjective statements evaluating the state of the play. Sports broadcasts are "doubly encoded": In sports commentary, the representation is constructed by the speaker as well as the visual reconstruction of the original event (Barnfield, 2013; Marriott, 1996). Perhaps

somewhat comically, live broadcast commentary practically describes for the viewers what they are seeing (Rowe, 2004). The commentary of an eSports match shares these functions of both presenting and evaluating the game (see also Rowe, 2004). During the games, the Overwatch casters speculate on the possible next moves and changes in the hero setups of each team, discuss the maps being played and the challenges they present, and share small pieces of information about the players and teams and their backgrounds such as discussing Taimou from Finland playing against the Swedish members of his home team EnVyUs in the bronze medal match. The FIFA commentary, on the other hand, contains plenty of historical references: statistics and memories from the previous encounters of "the two giants of the football family" (West Germany and Argentina) in the World Cup final (1986 and 1990). The stadium is bustling with "football legends" as the caster picks the ex-players out of the audience, like David Beckham and Lothar Matthäus taking a selfie before the extra time starts. The tempo of a football match allows more space for these kinds of less relevant details and background information to be present in the FIFA broadcast compared to the Overwatch broadcast (see also Kolamo, 2018).

In their commentary, the Overwatch casters utilize game-specific jargon: Terms such as "ultimate," "Nano Boost," and "Mei wall elevator"—referring to the actions and tactics available for the heroes in the game—are constantly used, and thus, the audience is expected to be at least somewhat familiar with the game and its terminology to be able to fully follow the commentary. In traditional sports, this kind of context-specific jargon is called "sportugese" (Rowe, 2004; Tannenbaum & Noah, 1959). Similarly, during the final FIFA World Cup match, the caster uses football jargon as he, for instance, describes "Schweinsteiger's scissor tackle," says a player "sends a pass into the box," and mentions a substitute bringing "fresh legs" to the field. In the Overwatch broadcast, some expressions familiar from the commentary of traditional sports, such as commenting on how "both teams had a really poor defense, they were both completely ran through," are also present in the commentary, but general sports vocabulary and expressions seem surprisingly rare. Although at least once during the broadcast, a direct comparison is made to a situation from traditional sports: "The way Finland's been playing, it reminds me of watching an ice hockey game where a team's on a power play, and they just keep passing instead of taking shots." After the lost bronze medal match during an interview, Zappis, the captain of the Finnish team, also states, in his native language, "tori peruttu" (the square [celebration] is canceled), referring to a common way of celebrating sports victories in Finland. Along with the commentators, the eSports players also have adopted practices of sport discourse (re)production, which is one of the ways in which the players actively take part in the sportification process (see also Witkowski, 2012a).

Game Presentation

According to Rowe (2004, p. 179), a sports broadcast has its own *visual grammar* (see also Boyle & Haynes, 2000; Wenner, 1989; Whannel, 2002; Williams, 1977).

This grammar is the key element adapted to eSports broadcasts in their sportification process and can be seen, for example, in how things such as replays are presented in a very similar manner in the Overwatch and FIFA broadcasts. The dramaturgy of a traditional sports broadcast also involves lots of *spectacle segments* such as close-ups, instant replays, and slow-motion during the live coverage (Kolamo, 2013).

Different angles and points of view are central visual aspects of traditional sports broadcasts. The final match of the 2014 FIFA World Cup is played at the world-famous Maracana stadium that carries a lot of symbolic value for football fans. In the beginning of the match, the playing field is presented from a bird's-eye view, and the Overwatch tournament maps are shown in the same way before each game in the corresponding broadcast. In traditional sports broadcasts, the spectators can only see the view chosen by the broadcast team and the director, which—especially in team sports—leaves a lot of action outside the screen (Birrell & Loy, 1979; Boyle & Haynes, 2000; Hargreaves, 1986; Rowe, 2004; Wenner, 1989; Whannel, 1992, 2002; Williams, 1977).

In the Overwatch broadcast, the game is mostly streamed from the first-person perspective of a player (more common), or from a spectator perspective, not focusing on the point of view of a single player but instead the general area of action (less common). This way of displaying the game differs from traditional team sports broadcasts, which are never filmed from the perspective of a single player, and from playing the game itself, which can only be experienced from a first-person view. In football broadcasts, the focus of the camera is usually on the ball—apart from special moments, for instance, when the TV audience has a close-up view of an injured player. In the FIFA broadcast, the injuries are actually a part of the watching experience, in contrast to the Overwatch broadcast, in which the "injuries" are more of a technical kind—like when the game is momentarily paused during the bronze medal match between Finland and Sweden because of technical issues.

In eSports, the audience is usually able to see more about the state of the game than its players are. This information asymmetry is one of the key differences in the way the game is presented to the audience in eSports versus traditional sports (Cheung & Huang, 2011). During the Overwatch matches, the broadcast shows the direct gameplay stream but modified to display the information required to make the viewing experience exciting and enjoyable (for a contrary example, see Witkowski, 2012a). The audience is always able to see, for example, the hero compositions of both teams, including all the heroes' current hit points and Ultimate statuses.

Another major difference in the Overwatch broadcast compared to traditional sports broadcasts is that in the former, the players and the audience are seldom shown during matches. Rarely, one player is displayed on the broadcast screen, and both teams are shown every time a game ends, but apart from that, the players themselves are left invisible and are only displayed through their in-game heroes. Again, in contrast to traditional team sports, possible referees are entirely hidden from cameras. In the FIFA broadcast and televised team sports in general, the live audience has a major role. Spectators in the stadium reflect an image of sport-related

emotions from celebration to sorrow (Kolamo, 2013). In the FIFA broadcast, the camera also picks up the referee repeatedly after his decisions, making him a media target together with the players, coaches, and audience.

It is worth noting that in the Overwatch broadcast, the game is presented in a mechanical manner, almost completely taken out of its narrative context. While Overwatch and its fictional universe have a rich narrative, which can be explored through the heroes' voice lines and the game maps—and is further expanded by comics, short animations, and stories beyond the game—the fictional universe is largely ignored or played out in the World Cup. The narrative context is only rarely brought up in the broadcast: in a trailer shown before the matches, in a person dressed as a game character during the award ceremony, and in the occasional remarks from the casters about the stories behind the tournament maps. While at first glance it might seem odd that the narrative context and the (story)worldliness of Overwatch is largely ignored in the World Cup, it can be seen as a part of the sportification itself. Huizinga (1949) has noted that in the professionalization of play to sport, there is a tendency to lose a part of the sacred quality play has. This kind of demystification can thus be seen as an element common among different kind of forms of play which become institutionalized sports. McLuhan (1964) makes a similar observation when he discusses games as a form of mass media and cultural expression: He notes that there is something inherently contradictory about the professionalization of play into sports, as it turns play into a job for a specialist, while games as a popular art form otherwise offer us a way of participating in the full life of society.

Game Highlights and Acknowledgments

Showcasing the game highlights in the form of previews and recaps is a vital part of any sports broadcast, and eSports is not an exception (Kolamo, 2018). In the Overwatch broadcast, there is plenty of reminiscing about previous matches as well as speculating on the results of future games. The discussion is focused on individual players as well as the various play styles of different teams and the strengths and weaknesses related to them. For example, the casters note that Sweden has "probably the most balanced team," and that they "should have performed better than they have so far." Similar discourse is present in the FIFA broadcast, where the casters note that Argentina has difficulties executing their game tactics. In both World Cups, replay videos from particularly important game situations are shown in these situations and analyzed in a manner familiar from traditional sports broadcasts (Figure 2).

In the Overwatch broadcast, two types of statistics are shown between individual games: "Hero Use Stats," presenting all the relevant numbers (damage done, kills achieved, number of deaths, etc.) from one hero played by one player in the previous game, and "Head to Head" (team vs. team) numbers from the previous game. As these statistics are shown on the screen, the casters usually comment them. This is a common way to share information in televised sports in general (Figure 3). In

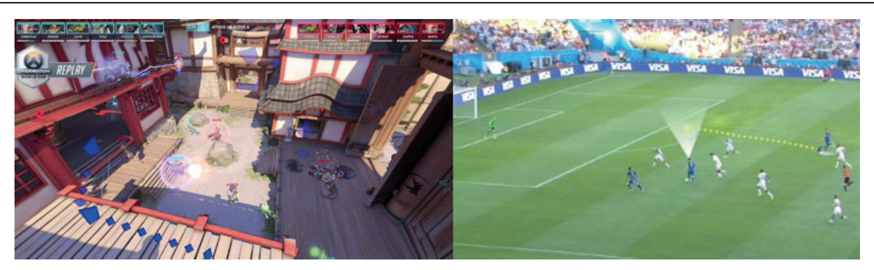

Figure 2. Game analysis: On the left, the Overwatch World Cup 2016 Broadcast Bronze Medal Match Sweden–Finland, and on the right, the 2014 FIFA World Cup final match broadcast Germany–Argentina (Yle TV2, Finland). Notice the similar use of arrows in both presentations.

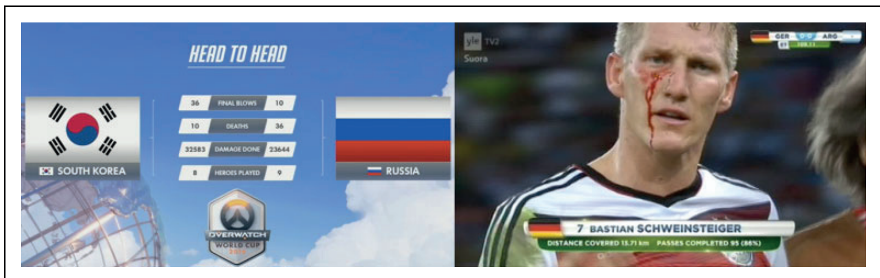

Figure 3. Statistics: On the left, the Overwatch World Cup 2016 broadcast gold match Russia–South Korea with head to head statistics, and on the right, the 2014 FIFA World Cup final broadcast Germany–Argentina representing one player's personal statistics (Yle TV2, Finland).

traditional team sports, in addition to head-to-head-like statistics, all-time records and high scores (between different players and league teams or national teams) are usually mentioned in the broadcasts. At least so far, there seems to be a lack of these kind of general statistics in eSports—probably at least partly related to the constant patching, which induces changes in the games, greatly affecting the power of individual characters and team compositions and making it difficult if not impossible to compare individual player performances between various patches. In the FIFA broadcast, statistics also show other interesting details not directly related to game points—for example, that the German midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger runs almost 14 km during the match.

In addition to the gold, silver, and bronze medals received by the top three teams in the Overwatch World Cup, there are smaller, yet also valuable, acknowledgments made to individual players after each match. These are supported by the World Cup sponsor T-Mobile with its Most Valuable Player (MVP) Twitter vote. During and

between the games, the sponsor ad for the match MVP vote is regularly shown on the screen, and it is also frequently brought up by the analysts and casters. In this nomination, the broadcast is again following the example set by the traditional team sports, where MVP is an institutional recognition (Kershnar & Feit, 2001). The traditional MVP ceremony is also a part of the FIFA broadcast, with Lionel Messi recognized as the best player and Manuel Neuer as the best goalkeeper of the tournament. The different kinds of trophies, medals, and other rewards shown and discussed during the broadcasts contribute to the creation of a sport show atmosphere and are an important part of the sports broadcast as a performance, creating a sense of festivity and anticipation (Randhawa, 2015).

Teams and Players

While the game itself of course matters, the players are often brought to the forefront of eSports media productions, acting as narrative hooks for the audience (Taylor, 2012). As with the broadcast experts, the Overwatch players are also presented in a way familiar to us from traditional team sports, from the way they enter the competition area (by walking—or by running like team South Korea —to the “stadium” via a tunnel just like Germany and Argentina in the FIFA World Cup) all the way to their outfits (Blizzard-sponsored World Cup uniforms). Similar to traditional sports in World Cup context, the Overwatch players are not representing themselves as individual eAthletes or their “home teams,” and as such, they are not allowed to wear their usual team uniforms or any sponsor logos not provided by Blizzard. The difference is, that instead of national eSports organizations, these outfits are provided to the teams by Blizzard, and by wearing them, the players are, in addition to representing their countries, promoting both the game and the company.

Before and after the matches, the players shake hands with their opponents as in traditional team sports. Although the players are not shown a lot—in fact, hardly at all—during the actual games, they are constantly talked about throughout the broadcast. The players are referred to by their in-game nicknames (gamer tags) and never by their real names. Player nicknames (like Lionel Messi alias *la Pulga*) are also used in traditional sports media and sports broadcasts, but in eSports, the players are only known by their nicknames. In fact, game names pose such an importance in the eSports world, which even the casters, analysts, and reporters are generally known as and referred to by their gamer tags instead of their real names. However, when the players or game experts are shown on-screen in the broadcast, both their game names and real names are visible to the audience.

As the teams are representing their home countries, nationalism is visibly present throughout both World Cup broadcasts. Before the Overwatch final match begins, reporter Alex Mendez (Goldenboy) proclaims: “Here’s the thing: It has all come down to this. Three hundred players across 50 countries playing not only for your entertainment, not only for a celebration of competitive Overwatch, but also for national pride.” The topic of national pride (or potential shame) is also frequently

brought up by the casters and analysts. Nationalism is not generally as strongly present in the world of eSports (see also Kolamo, 2018), where the teams often include members from various nationalities. It is, however, a common feature in traditional sports. A major international event, such as the FIFA World Cup, is almost inconceivable without national flags flying, national anthems playing, and athletes competing in national uniforms (more about nationalism in sports, see Rowe, McKay, & Miller, 1998).

In traditional team sports, each team member usually plays a certain role in the game: In football, for example, there is the goalkeeper and the different types of defenders and forwards, each player focused on a specific role and place in the field. In the Overwatch World Cup, while the players could change their roles as they wished during the game (within the limits set by their team's strategies), most players have a hero or a hero type they are strongest at: For example, players who are particularly good at playing offensive heroes, such as Taimou (Finland), and players who excel on certain heroes such as Miro (South Korea) on Winston. Similar to traditional team sports, certain players are highly elevated in the broadcast commentary, which presents them as the heroes of their teams—and, at the same time, of their nations (about construction of mediated sports heroes, see Berg, 1998; Boyle & Haynes, 2000; Whannel, 2002). Russia's Shadowburn is one of the Overwatch players praised by the casters, who describe him as a "next level Genji player," stating that "if you can handle Shadowburn, you can handle Russia." During the commentary of the FIFA broadcast, Germany is usually mentioned as a team, but regarding Argentina, the casters highlight the role of Messi, stating things like "Messi is with the ball against the slow German defenders who are forced to just run around him." These kind of "virtuoso" players who are able to "somehow do 'more' with the field and situation at hand" than other expert players in similar situations, can be found in eSports and traditional sports alike (Witkowski, 2012a, p. 100).

The Audience

While the official data of the Overwatch World Cup broadcast audience are not available, there have been some studies focusing on the eSports audience and viewership on a more general level, arguing that eSports broadcasts are mainly watched by those who play the game themselves (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2016)—a notable difference compared to traditional sports audiences. In a survey conducted in 2015 among 888 people who watch eSports online, the respondents were 93% male and their median age was 22 (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). The FIFA World Cup, on the other hand, attracted audiences from children to seniors from all over the world (the largest audiences were in China, Brazil, and the United States), and 61% of the television audience was male (Kantar Media, 2015). The question of (e)sports broadcast audiences is closely tied to how the sports are presented. However, in this study, we are not analyzing the assumed broadcast audience but instead focusing on how the World Cup audiences were presented in the broadcasts.

In eSports, the roles of the live audience and the viewers watching the broadcasts somewhere else are, if not reversed, at least different compared to traditional sports in many ways. While in many sports the less significant games are mainly observed by local audiences and not broadcast to a larger audience, in eSports the situation is the opposite: The significant games have a live audience (in addition to being broadcast), while the less significant ones are usually "merely" broadcast. To some extent, the presence of a local audience can be linked to the growth of eSports: The more popular or important the matches are, the more likely they will attract (and be organized for) a larger live audience. Historically, this has not always been the case: As with many traditional sports, eSports tournaments started as local occurrences, taking place in arcade halls, workplaces, homes, and LAN parties (Taylor, 2012). Following first the development of the Internet, and then the various streaming platforms, eSports began to be primarily followed online. This also facilitated the growth of the industry itself, as it not only brought the games to larger audiences but also enabled matchups between skilled players who before moving online would mainly play locally (Scholz, 2012; Taylor, 2012).

Online form also greatly affects audience participation. As eSports matches are often followed from distance, audience participation happens mainly through the interactive chat during the live-streamed events. The audience participation in chat includes comments on the game as well as "spamming" the names of the favorite players and different emoticons or words: For instance, the "kappa" emoticon when something funny happens in the game, or the word or emote "pogchamp" when a particularly skillful play is performed. The constant repetition of emoticons and words in the chat could be argued to serve a similar function to a live audience chanting songs or performing waves and *tifos* (fan-performed choreographies) in traditional sport games, and they are a significant part of the experience of watching a tournament stream live from afar. Audience participation in chats is a rather new phenomenon among traditional team sports, although, for instance, the Women's Rugby World Cup 2017 had matches live-streamed on Facebook, and interactive chat played an important role in the broadcasts. Live chat was also available in the Overwatch broadcast but unfortunately had been removed from the recordings we analyzed.

As mentioned before, traditional sports broadcasts involve spectacle segments such as close-ups—but the players on the field are not their only targets (Kolamo, 2013). Cameras are picking out sports fans in their carnival outfits by cutting and zooming into the spectators' gestures and facial expressions. Television broadcasts are showing how "authentic and true sports fans" behave and position themselves in relation to the game itself and other fans but also the camera. In the Overwatch broadcast, the audience does not have as visible role as in the FIFA broadcast where the atmosphere at the stadium appears carnivalesque. But on the rare occasion when the camera is picking out the Overwatch audience, it is presented in the same way by concentrating on reactions such as cheering for a good performance. The live audience is also equipped with props used by traditional sports audiences, such as

thundersticks. However, the audience does not appear to be waving the flags or wearing the colors of their national team in style of traditional sports audiences—which is also in a stark contrast to the way national pride is otherwise emphasized throughout the broadcast.

Conclusions and Discussion

We observed similarities in the Overwatch World Cup 2016 final broadcast compared to the 2014 FIFA World Cup final broadcast in the areas of (1) broadcast structure, (2) commentary and expertise, (3) game presentation, (4) game highlights and acknowledgments, (5) teams and players, and (6) audience. The Overwatch broadcast was clearly built following the structure of traditional sports broadcasts, which is a distinct element of sportification and a significant result of this study, and the broadcast was also following the conventions of traditional sports broadcasts in many individual elements under our analysis themes. Nationalism was a particularly strong element constructed and emphasized throughout the broadcast under many of the analysis themes, and we argue that nationalism and locality play an important role in both current and future sportification of eSports.

The differences in the Overwatch broadcast compared to the FIFA broadcast were largely related to the nature of the game as a digital and commercial product as well as to the Overwatch World Cup as a showcase tournament—the primary feature of which was to promote the game product and the company behind it. At the same time, this made it a particularly interesting target for our analysis, since as the results show, sportification was strongly present in the World Cup despite its nature as a showcase tournament for a commercial product. Of course, the inherent nature of eSports games as commercial products is perhaps the key distinguishing factor between them and traditional sports (Karhulahti, 2017)—and one that must always be taken into consideration when studying the similarities and differences between the two forms of sports.

It is also worth noting that eSports does not merely follow in the footsteps of traditional sports forms and their media presentation, but in addition to reinforcing the structures and practices of traditional sports, eSports challenges them (Witkowski, 2012a), representing all "the possibilities for (and limitations of) new forms of sports in this digital media age" (Taylor, 2012, p. 2). Furthermore, despite being the focus of this study, the sportification of eSports does not extend only to the media presentations of the sports, but it covers all "the extensive socio-material practice of play," as Witkowski (2012a, p. 12) puts it, including the embodied practice and performance of "doing sports" by playing (Witkowski, 2012b). Indeed, the mere act of "playing games competitively, in front of a crowd, represents the legitimisation of gaming as a spectator sport" (Taylor, 2015, p. 115).

Our study is particularly timely, since in January 2018, Blizzard has just taken its next step in sportificating Overwatch by launching the inaugural season of the Overwatch League—the first major global professional eSports league with city-

based teams, structured similarly to traditional team sports (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017). The central limitations of this study are related to our limited data: We only analyzed one broadcast of both World Cups. However, in our analysis, we were able to recognize many similarities in the two broadcasts, as well as highlight elements in the Overwatch broadcast familiar from traditional sports broadcasts in general, demonstrating the efforts put into presenting the Overwatch World Cup as a sport. As such, this study may be read as a starting point for a wider range of future research looking into the intersections of eSports and traditional sports. Based on this study, the significance of localizing eSports with the current emphasis on national or city-based teams could be one potential focus for future studies. Another important perspective could be to focus on the audience: For whom are eSports broadcasts constructed and who are currently watching? As the popularity and significance of eSports will continue growing, and the variety of digital and traditional sports and phenomena related to them will continue merging, there will surely be a need for further studies exploring these questions, among many others.

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II

"THERE ARE NO WOMEN AND THEY ALL PLAY MERCY": UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLAINING (THE LACK OF) WOMEN'S PRESENCE IN ESPORTS AND COMPETITIVE GAMING

by

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"There Are No Women and They All Play Mercy": Understanding and Explaining (the Lack of) Women's Presence in Esports and Competitive Gaming

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we explore women's participation in esports and competitive gaming. We will analyze two different types of research material: online questionnaire responses by women explaining their reluctance to participate in esports, and online forum discussions regarding women's participation in competitive Overwatch. We will examine the ways in which women's participation – its conditions, limits and possibilities – are constructed in the discussions concerning women gamers, how women are negotiating their participation in their own words, and in what ways gender may affect these processes. Our findings support those made in previous studies concerning esports and competitive gaming as fields dominated by toxic meritocracy and hegemonic (geek) masculinity, and based on our analysis, women's room for participation in competitive gaming is still extremely limited, both in terms of presence and ways of participation.

Keywords
Gender, esports, hegemonic geek masculinity, toxic meritocracy, Overwatch

INTRODUCTION

> *"Why do the female humans always play the female characters?" Acayri wondered soon thereafter. "Like, they're always playing Mercy."*
>
> *"They can't play games and be good at them —" Joel responded.*
>
> *"That's true, so they just pick the hottest girl characters," Acayri said.*

The previous is an excerpt of an article published on a digital media site Mic on May 11th 2017 (Mulkerin, 2017). In May 2017, a competitive Overwatch player Glisa

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uploaded a public video (Fractions of a Penny, 2017) of her recent game experience with a team of three men players previously unknown to her. After hearing Glisa's voice on the team voice chat and assuming her to be a woman, the team members spent the whole 16-minute match verbally abusing her: telling her that she, as a woman, had no right to voice her opinions, saying they assume her to be "ugly", and proclaiming they were "raping" her with their comments. Deciding to upload the video and make it public, Glisa emphasized that it was "not just for entertainment", but instead "to give people a look into how women are treated online" (ibid.). The video received hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube and made it to a few other media sites as well.

The reason we are highlighting this particular story here is not because it is unusual – in fact, it is distressingly common for women gamers to experience such behavior while playing online, and perhaps the most surprising thing about the matter is that the player targeted by the harassment stood up to it and decided to bring it public. What we find interesting in the excerpt is that it aptly summarizes so many of the prejudices women players are facing in competitive Overwatch: how it is generally assumed that women only play women and support heroes (Mercy in particular), that women are bad at gaming, and that they prioritize cosmetics (being "hot") over gameplay.

These prejudices and the continued harassment targeted at women gamers are widely known and well documented, particularly ever since the wide-spread harassment campaign known as Gamergate (e. g., Mortensen, 2018). At the same time, there seems to be a strange myth actively upheld within gaming cultures and communities – the competitive ones in particular – about women not existing there in the first place. As women gamers as well as game researchers, we are, also on a personal level, well used to the repeated "jokes" about there being no women on whichever particular game community (or the internet in general), constantly being referred to with male pronouns in game, and our team mates in the game voice chat being much more comfortable assuming us to be fifteen year old boys than thirty-something years old women.

While some notable women gamers have made it to the top of the sports in their chosen games, women's participation at the professional level of competitive gaming remains scarce. And while women esports professionals cannot be rendered invisible in the way the women playing competitive games as a past time hobby often are, they too face gender-based prejudice and harassment (Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009).

In this paper, we examine the complicated relationship between women and competitive gaming: the way women seem to be seen not present at all and, at the same time, present in very limited and particular ways. Our aim is to disentangle the ways in which women's presence (or lack thereof) in competitive gaming is constructed in the ways it is being discussed – both by women gamers themselves and other gamers talking about women gamers. For this purpose, we are analyzing two different types of research material: game forum discussions from a competitive game community and online questionnaire responses from women who play digital games. Through this process, we wish to deepen the current understanding and open further discussion on the very narrow space currently available for women – in terms of presence, visibility, and roles of participation – in competitive gaming cultures. We will also place this discussion in the wider game cultural and academic discussion concerning women's position in gaming, competitive gaming in particular, starting by looking at the previously presented theoretical concepts related to the topic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There has been a variety of previous research concerning esports, a notable part of it approaching esports from a cultural perspective, contextualizing esports in relation to game culture and sports culture, for example. Because of the apparent lack of women in the field of competitive gaming, most studies concerning esports, no matter which academic discipline or methodological approach they entail, and no matter if they have been focusing on the players themselves or other participants, such as the audience, have essentially been studies about men and boys participating in this activity. This of course has not been left unnoticed by the researchers conducting the studies, and many have brought up the elements of hegemonic masculinity they have encountered while studying esports (e. g., Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2012).

The concept of geek masculinity was first introduced by T. L. Taylor (2012) in her groundbreaking study concerning esports, where she pointed out that "[t]he construction of masculinity is central to understanding the nature of gender and professional computer gaming". Even though geek masculinity has had the opportunity to offer alternative forms for masculinity, it has often instead ended up blending in with hegemonic masculinity, thus transforming and enforcing the hegemonic masculinity in the context of geek gamer culture (Lockhart, 2015; Taylor, 2012). Esports, particularly, is a field where traditional athletic masculinity is combined with geek masculinity, enforcing a new form of hegemonic masculinity, sometimes referred to as hegemonic geek/nerd masculinity. In the context of gaming, this can be also viewed as a continuation to what Mia Consalvo (2012) has described as toxic gamer culture, "a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position". Gerald Voorhees (2015) has described similar phenomenon through the concept of neoliberal masculinity.

A recent study by Ruvalcaba et al. (2018), focusing on women's experiences in esports through peer and spectator feedback, comparing their experiences to those of men, showed that women were more likely to be targeted with sexual harassment and comments on their appearance than men particularly while streaming their gaming. The authors argued that experiences such as these may discourage women from participating in esports, or even have a negative effect on women's gaming performance due to stereotype threat (ibid.). This is a significant issue related to esports, since streaming is a very central practice related to it.

In his recent book, Christopher A. Paul (2018) has suggested gaming having an issue with "toxic meritocracy", describing how gaming's "meritocratic norms limit the potential audience for videogames and structure how players and designers interact", and suggesting it to be another cultural structure excluding women (and other minorities) from gaming. Paul argues that the meritocracy in gaming ignores the structures preventing certain groups of people from participating and leads to those who succeed to falsely "believe they have attained their status through the quality of their effort, a compelling ground on which to build the impression that they are simply better than others are" (Paul, 2018). In esports tournaments and competitive gaming in general, the players are competing on their skill, but there is a long way to travel before getting to that point, and for some players that road may be filled with obstacles – or completely blocked. In other words, women are not missing from competitive gaming because they would essentially not be able to possess the required skills to succeed, but because there are many limits to the possibilities for them to even begin acquiring those skills in the first place, and even when they are playing at the same level than men, they are not considered as equally credible competitors (see also: Cullen, 2018).

Even though esports is growing to be an ever more popular form of media sport and mainstream entertainment, with a total revenue estimated to exceed $900 million in 2018 (Trefis Team, 2018), a few women have broken the glass ceiling of participating in the most remarkable (and lucrative) leagues and tournaments. Kim “Geguri” Se-yeon from South Korea was the first (and so far, the only) woman to join the Overwatch League in the team Shanghai Dragons in February 2018. In her commentary on Geguri’s role in the field of (Korean) esports, Amanda L. L. Cullen (2018) writes about how she is considered a feminist icon by some, and primarily perceived as a woman competitor, while Geguri herself has found her gender to be irrelevant for her career. Cullen refers to Geguri as a “(post)feminist icon in esports”, describing her struggle to maintain “control over her own narrative”. While it is important for researchers to acknowledge the gendered structures in game culture and esports, as well as the experiences told by women and other gamers in marginalized position, it is equally important for researchers to recognize these gamers not as representatives to a certain marginalized group or assumed identity (see also: Shaw, 2014), but indeed as highly skilled individuals competing at a professional level.

In her study concerning the archaeologies of gender in videogame histories, Laine Nooney (2013) suggests that instead of asking “Where are women in game history?”, we should ask “Why are they there in the way that they are?” Instead of desperately searching for the existence of women in the various contexts of game culture, or focusing our attention to their absence, we should look at the structures which define the access to the culture, its intangible and material spaces. In the context of competitive gaming and esports, instead of trying to fix the lack of women participating by “adding them on” (Nooney, 2013), we should be looking for the structures that are limiting and enabling participation, for why and how are women (not) participating.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We are building on these previous studies and concepts, exploring their presence in current day through looking at how (the lack of) women in competitive gaming is talked about by the community and the women gamers themselves. While we are looking at competitive gaming and esports in general, we focus especially on one particular game: Overwatch. Overwatch is a team-based first-person shooter (FPS) game published by Blizzard Entertainment in May 2016, with 35 million registered users in November 2017 (Activision Blizzard, 2017). Overwatch has been played competitively from the start (the competitive mode was added in the game within a month from its release), and it has also been played as an esport from the beginning, including the annual World Cup tournaments organized by Blizzard in their annual game convention Blizzcon (Turtiainen, Friman, & Ruotsalainen, 2018). The Overwatch League (OWL from now on), launched in January 2018, is the first major global esports league with city-based teams. The first season’s OWL Grand Finals event held June 27–28 sold out the Barclay’s Center in New York and was watched by millions of global viewers on TV networks as well as streaming platforms (Activision Blizzard, 2018). We selected Overwatch as our point of focus in this study because it has a widely popular and constantly growing competitive scene. The competitive gaming culture surrounding Overwatch also presents many particularly timely examples related to women’s position in esports and competitive gaming. Furthermore, the developer of Overwatch has from the beginning on marketed Overwatch as an “inclusive” first person shooter, targeting thus also the audience who does not traditionally engage with shooter games and having created a wide roster of playable heroes with variety of genders and sexual orientations (Graft, 2017).

Our aim is to not only analyze how women are perceived by others in the context of competitive gaming, but also to give a voice for the women themselves. This is why we are analyzing two types of research material: game forum discussions regarding a competitive game community and online questionnaire responses from women who play digital games. By combining two different types of research materials, we wish to gain better understanding on how women in general voice their participation to competitive gaming and how they discuss about potential obstacles to it, as well as gain deeper understanding about women's position in one particular competitive gaming community, that of Overwatch.

Our first set of research material is a part of a larger online questionnaire concerning the gaming, gamer identities, and participation in gaming culture of Finnish women, conducted in December 2016. The questionnaire was answered by 737 Finnish self-identified women who play digital games at least occasionally. In this paper, we focus only on its three questions concerning watching and participating in esports: 1. Have you ever watched electronic sports (competitive play of digital games)? (733 respondents), 2. Have you ever participated in gaming tournaments? (733 respondents), and 3. If you have not (participated in gaming tournaments), have you ever considered participating? Why? (511 respondents). The women who replied to the online questionnaire were quite active gamers in general, spending more time playing digital games than average Finns, and playing a variety of game genres on many different platforms. Of the questionnaire respondents answering this question, almost a half (47.06 %) had at some point followed esports either through an online broadcast (32.2 %), from television (27.29 %), in person (10.1 %), or some other way (2.05 %). However, only 6.55 % of the respondents had ever participated in any esports tournament themselves in any role (audience included).

Our second set of research material consists of discussion threads gathered from the former official Overwatch discussions forums (the United Stated version) maintained by Blizzard Entertainment, the developer of Overwatch. The forum was closed on the February 20th, 2018, when the currently active, new forums were introduced. From the old forums, we gathered all the discussion threads from the forum section "general" which mentioned one of the following keywords or keyword combinations: "Overwatch League"/"owl" together with "female"/"women"/"woman"/"girl"/"grill", "Geguri", and "Mercy" together with "female"/"women"/"woman"/"girl"/"grill". The data was gathered in February 2018. The earliest posts are from May 2016 and the latest from February 2018. While these forums are currently closed, they can still be partially found online in "read-only" mode. For this reason, we have avoided using direct quotes from the forum data, as this might make the discussants recognizable.

For both sets of research material, we performed a close reading and applied thematic analysis (Guest, Macqueen, & Namey, 2012) on the selected questionnaire replies and forum discussions. Analyzing the questionnaire responses, we categorized the different types of reasons the women used to explain their reluctance to participate in esports. For the forum data, we categorized the posts and, as a result, defined the three most popular discussion themes related to the topic of women and competitive gaming (as defined by the search terms we used during the data gathering), selecting the posts under these themes for a further analysis. In the messages posted under these three discussion themes (spanning across several discussion threads), we then looked at the ways in which those discussants identifying as women players discussed about their position and experiences in gaming as well as how those who did not identify as women or in any way disclose their gender discussed about the women in gaming. Furthermore, we also aimed to trace the consistent themes and tropes which were present in the discussions and examine how those were used to create different kinds of narratives and imaginaries as well as used as tools of negotiating inclusion

and exclusion. In the following section, we will analyze first the questionnaire responses, then the forum discussions, to find how the lack of as well as specific kind of presence of women in competitive gaming or esports is explained by both the women themselves and the community discussing about them.

ANALYSIS

"Being a Woman in Esports Is Like Pouring Gasoline on the Fire": Women's Reasons for Not Participating in Esports

In the online questionnaire, 511 women answered the question: 'If you have not [participated in esports tournaments in some role], have you ever considered participating? Why?' Of the 511 respondents, 69 women (13.5%) wrote they had considered or could consider participation in gaming tournaments as competitors. Other respondents gave various reasons for not having considered participation, the most common reasons being ones directly related to the games played as esports and playing games competitively, such as dislike for competitiveness (113 respondents / 22.1%), not being interested in the games or genres played as esports (64 respondents / 12.5%), and not considering oneself skilled enough to participate in tournaments (57 respondents / 11.2%). Interestingly, there were also reasons given that did not really have anything to do with the games or playing them, and although these kinds of reasons were significantly rarer, they were still something that were repeated in multiple responses. In this study, we are focusing particularly on these responses, which we placed in two categories: reasons related to the nature of the esports community and reasons related to gender.

In the questionnaire responses, some women said they had not considered participating in esports because of the perceived nature of the community. Not all of the responses were very elaborated: for example, one respondent simply replied with "because the community is what it is", without any further explanation. One respondent wrote she did not "have the will to develop a skin thick enough to endure that shitstorm". Another one told she had witnessed harassment related to competitive gaming, and that it was one of the reasons she did not consider esports to offer any addition compelling enough to her gaming "to cross that threshold". A couple respondents brought up their perception that the negative atmosphere is maintained by men, one of them saying she had heard that "the sports are filled with chauvinist boys" and another that while she had occasionally considered participating in esports, "the gamerhardcore men would just ruin it anyway".

The women who had not considered participating in esports because of their gender expressed various views and feelings related to esports being reserved for men. One respondent simply replied with: "I am old and a woman, I do not fit in there" and another that "as a woman, I feel insecure about going to gaming events". Some respondents felt that as women competitors, they would be seen as representing their gender: one respondent explicitly wrote that "I would be scared of the pressure coming from the audience regarding my gender" and another how she "would not want to be on display as a Woman Gamer". A few women described they would assumedly be facing negative reactions, comments, and treatment because of their gender if they would participate. One respondent even described being a woman in esports as "pouring gasoline on the fire".

As mentioned earlier, 13.5 % of the women answering the question said they had considered participating in esports. However, gender could be seen as a limitation for participation even in some of these responses. Some women described how they had considered participation but were afraid of "the harassment women gamers

unfortunately still experience". One respondent brought up that her appearance would "certainly get criticized a lot". Some respondents assumed their skills would be under special scrutiny because of their gender, which also raised the threshold of participation even higher. As one respondent said, "I doubt my abilities and possibilities to develop to be good enough before a tournament, because, as a woman, I feel the need to show everyone that we should not be underestimated". This quote once again highlights how women playing competitively are often viewed as representatives of their gender – and some of them may even consciously assume that role, willingly or not.

It is important to note that even though we were able to find comments explicitly mentioning gender as a reason to not participate, these were likely not the only reasons affected by gender, but simply the ones in which it was visibly present. In fact, in light of previous studies shedding light on the complex relationship between gender and gaming, gender may very well play a part in the responses concerning dislike for competitiveness, lack of interest towards the types of games typically played as an esport,and feeling inadequate in regards of player skill.

It is also worth noting how some respondents brought up that they would like to see more women as professional players. One respondent even brought up that she could participate if she could be certain that there would be other women present in active roles, and that she "would not have to fit in any box".

Altogether, the questionnaire replies presented here supported the perception of esports and game culture being toxic to women (Consalvo, 2012) and governed by hegemonic (geek) masculinity (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2012). Women competitors are often seen as representatives of their gender rather than merely players, which was visible in the responses in two ways: the women wished to see more other women participating in tournaments in active roles, and, at the same time, they felt extra pressure about participating as a woman, which lead to a higher threshold for participation. For some women, being a woman competitor seemed to signify a chance for proving women can play skillfully and competitively and succeed, while some refused to be put on a "display as a Woman Gamer" (see also: Cullen, 2018).

From Non-Existent Women to Mercy Mains: Discussing Women Gamers on the Overwatch Discussion Forums

From the Overwatch forum data, we examined three most popular discussion themes related to women and competitive gaming, spread around multiple discussion threads. We chose the Overwatch forums rather than some other online discussion forum as they are maintained by the developer of the game and are thus inviting and easy to find to everyone playing Overwatch, unlike platforms such as Reddit which can be more exclusive and tend to have more defined userbase.

The first discussion we examined was about the lack of women in the OWL. When the OWL's inaugural season launched in January 2018, there were no women players in any of the twelve teams that were part of the league. It was only later in February when Geguri was signed to the Shanghai Dragons that OWL got its first woman player (e.g., Webster, 2018). Before this, multiple discussion threads were started in the Overwatch forums to address this lack. The second theme we analyzed dealt with the signing of Geguri and the reactions it evoked. While analyzing these two themes our aim was to understand how the lack women in the OWL was discussed, what kind of reasons were given for it amongst the player community, and finally how Geguri's signing was discussed in relation to these reasons.

The third popular discussion theme we found circulated around women "Mercy mains" – a consistent imaginary amongst the players which claims that women players would only play one hero in Overwatch, Mercy, and would be unable and unwilling to play any other heroes. Analyzing this theme, our aim was to uncover how women are discussed and treated in the everyday gaming practices and how this resonates with the way the lack of women on the top of the gaming is discussed.

"No Women in the OWL"

The discussants speculated several, sometimes contradicting, reasons for the lack of women players in the OWL. The most common reason speculated was that there are currently not many women players that would be good enough to play in the OWL. Moreover, most discussants agreed that women do need to be as good as men to be part of the OWL, while few did suggest some type of affirmative action or quotas in order to bring women to OWL. Many also argued that Geguri is good enough to be in the OWL and expressed their discontent for the fact that she had not been signed by any of the teams. There were some different opinions as to why Geguri had not been picked up by any of the teams: some argued that multiple good players had been left out and Geguri's gender was not the reason she was not picked up, also quoting Geguri herself on this, while others argued that Geguri's gender had been at least partially the reason why she had not been signed.

Some discussants also pondered why so few women are currently good at Overwatch. The reasons suggested can be separated to two broad categories: to gender-essential claims which assigned the lack of women in esports to women's biology or to some other difference from men and to those which assigned the reasons to culture or environment.

The gender-essential claims tended to use sexist and populist rhetoric, claiming that there are less women in competitive gaming due to biological differences. Discussants using these tended to argue that women lack certain qualities that men have, qualities that enable someone to become a high-level gamer (see also: Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009). Women were considered essentially less aggressive, having poorer reaction times, and having not as good spatial awareness than men, to mention some examples of these types of arguments. It was also argued that women tend be more nurturing than males and less interested in competition. Some discussants would simply use vague phrases such as "that's how women just are". Those who argued for the biological differences also tended to vaguely refer to some scientific research, but without giving any actual sources. On the contrary, a fairly recent study by Ratan et al. (2015) with a considerable sample size (16,821 participants) exploring gender differences in player skill in *League of Legends* found skill differences to be negligible between women and men who had played an equal amount of matches, and the main difference found was that the women were less confident with their own ability than the men, implying that the perception of women's player skills are formed more by social and cultural structures than their actual capability.

It was also seen that women were more interested in being "cute" or "gaining attention through showing skin" than showcasing their skill in the game while streaming. Streaming appears to be one of the activities related to play were women are heavily gendered. Study conducted by Nakandala et al. (2016) about women streamers on *Twitch.tv* suggests that women experience harassment and gendering during streaming: their analysis concludes that women streamers' chats tend to contain more gendered language and the messages they receive from the viewers are more often objectifying than those that men streamers receive. Similarly, the

messages the men streamers receive are more often game related than those received by women streamers.

Those discussants who claimed that women are not well presented in esports due to their physiology or biology or some other essential quality were, however, clearly a minority. Most discussants argued the lack of woman is due to cultural or other kind of environmental reasons.

The most prevalent reason suggested amongst the discussants was that men simply have been playing games and particularly FPS (first person shooter) games longer than women, which puts them into an advantageous position. This is also suggested by research (Ratan et al., 2015). Some discussants would expand on this and speculate that FPS games have traditionally been hostile environments for women, which has not encouraged them to participate and consequently get better at FPS games. It was also noted that Overwatch is a somewhat atypical FPS game: it has number of heroes which do not require skills such as aim (aim can be seen one of those elements that construct gamer capital as it acquired through years of playing games) and it has variety of women heroes to play. It was seen that this has encouraged people who do not generally play FPS games to play Overwatch

Overall, the discussants appeared to be sensitive to different kinds of reasons which would explain the lack of women in the highest-level play. While some did indeed suggest gender-essential reasons, many more brought up the structural and cultural reasons, including the harassment women encounter in everyday gaming.

Geguri Signed to the OWL

In February 2018 it was announced that South-Korean off-tank player Geguri had been signed by the team Shanghai Dragons, making her the first woman to join the OWL.

When the news about Geguri's signing were announced, multiple discussion threads were started in the Overwatch forums. Many of them addressed Geguri's signing as a positive event and multiple discussants stated that she deserves to be in the OWL. While some discussants expressed joy that she had become the first woman signed to the league and an inspiration for other women, many were eager to point out that she was signed, not because of her gender, but because of her skills (see also: Cullen, 2018). Some discussants also argued that this furthermore proofs that women can make it to the highest top of the competitive play if they are just good enough in the game – an assumption in line with what has been called toxic meritocracy (Paul, 2018). Few discussants even noted that maybe Geguri's signing will finally put an end to the threads about "no women in Overwatch League" in the Overwatch Forums.

While some discussants wanted to downplay the role of Geguri's gender in her signing and the discussions surrounding it, her gender remained as a vocal point of discussions. Somewere concerned that her gender would single her out and she would get bullied and harassed because of it. Others expressed their concern that she would have to perform not just well, but exceptionally, to prove that women can play at the highest level. Some even suggested that signing Geguri might be a publicity stunt made to silence those questioning the lack of women in the OWL.

Overall though, it was seen that Geguri was signed because she is a skilled professional. While Geguri's gender was commented, there were also many discussants who rather or also discussed about her gameplay: as an Overwatch player, Geguri is known for her Zarya (one of the off-tank heroes in the game), and it was

speculated if she can play other heroes well enough at the high-level. Her play was also praised and the link to her Twitch.tv streaming site shared. It is also worth noting that while the study of Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) has shown that women are more often subjected to comments regarding their looks while streaming, in the discussions regards Geguri her looks were rarely commented or mentioned at all.

"Why Do All Women Play Mercy?"

As pointed out in the introduction of our paper, amongst the players of Overwatch there is a consistent imaginary about women only playing one of the heroes in the game, Mercy.

Mercy is one of the playable heroes in the Overwatch, angelic by her visual appear and support by her role. Her task is to keep her teammates healed up and she can also occasionally resurrect them, bringing them back to life in the midst of the fight. In many ways, her role can thus be seen that of "affective labor", assumed to be taken on by women players (see: Butt, 2016; Ratan et al., 2015). Amongst the Overwatch players, Mercy is largely considered as one of the easiest playable heroes in the game. This is because playing Mercy requires no aim, which is often seen as the hallmark of the skill amongst the players – even though it is easy to argue that aim is not the only skill required in team-based shooter like Overwatch. She is, as mentioned, also consistently connotated with women playing the game. This setting is by no means unique to Overwatch but rather common across team-oriented game genres. For example, in their study on the MOBA game League of Legends, Ratan et al. (2015) found that many women players were "compelled, pressured, or otherwise directed toward playing the Support role that, though requiring no less competence than other in in-game roles (and arguably more), is nonetheless seen by many players as subordinate to, and less desirable than, the role of ADC [the damage-oriented role]".

In the material gathered from the discussion forums, we examined all the threads which mentioned Mercy and female/woman/women/girl/grill. We furthermore distinguished, on one hand, how those identifying as women and as Mercy players discussed about why they play Mercy, and, on the other hand, what kind of reasons other discussion participants offered for why they think many women play Mercy or why they think the general assumption of many women playing Mercy exists.

Those who identified as women and as Mercy players gave three main reasons for playing Mercy. Firstly, they would play Mercy because nobody else in the team would pick a healer – so they were "flexing" i.e. filling for the needed hero role for the good of the team (a practice that could be considered a form of affective labor). This would also lead to the expectation of them playing Mercy in future. Secondly, some said that Mercy as a hero appealed to them due to her background story: Mercy is a pacifist amongst the soldiers, a doctor, and out to do good. Few also mentioned that they were drawn to Mercy due to her visual design: "blond", "angelic", and "feminine" were some of the adjectives mentioned. This can be seen as a way to negotiate one's femininity in an activity that is often regarded as very masculine (see also: Walkerdine, 2009).

Thirdly, there were reasons related to Mercy's gameplay design and her role: some discussants noted that they had not played any FPS games before, so playing Mercy gave them a hero to play they could feel they were good at and useful for the team while playing her. Others pointed out that they enjoyed playing support and taking care of their team: few echoed the discussions about women's nurturing nature and how it is their biology to care rather than compete, thus highlighting the way playing

Mercy can indeed be a form of affective labor. This, however, was a minority of the discussants.

There were also some discussants who identified themselves as women but pointed out that they never played Mercy or that they disliked playing her, in contra of the popular idea of “all women play Mercy”. They would challenge this idea and point out that they enjoy playing for instance heroes that require precise aim. Some of them pointed out that they are, however, consistently told to play Mercy while being suggested that as they are women they are not able to play anything else. In a similar manner, a number of discussants who identified as male wrote that they do play a lot of Mercy and while doing so, are often assumed to be female or queer by their co-players. Mercy thus functions as a boundary: femininity and queerness on one side and masculinity on the other, Mercy marking the “other” for that part of the gaming community upholding values of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity.

Amongst those who did not identify as woman or Mercy player, the idea that Mercy is played by “all” women as they cannot or do not want to play anything else, was very prominent. It was suggested that women play Mercy because they cannot, due to their biology or physiology, play heroes which require skills such as aiming, and are thus only able to play Mercy Many of these discussants also argued that women play Mercy because she appeals to their nature by being caring and nurturing as well as anti-violent. A different line of argumentation for the apparent popularity of Mercy among women was that women play Mercy because they have historically not played so much FPS games and have thus not acquired the transferable skills needed to play aim-based heroes as effectively as men.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the women’s online questionnaire responses, gender was explicitly mentioned as one of the reasons preventing them from participating in esports. Based on these responses, toxic meritocracy (Paul, 2018) seems to apply to esports, at least in some ways, considering how the women answering the questionnaire had so many things to consider, so many obstacles in the way of their participation, related to their gender. Likewise, hegemonic (geek) masculinity (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2012) was seen strongly present in esports at least by some respondents, who considered it as a field reserved for men. Experiences of esports culture (or game culture in general; see Consalvo, 2012) toxic to women was present in the responses as well, as some women brought up how women competitors must face gender-based harassment, such as comments on their appearance. A previous study by Ratan et al. (2015) has suggested that the social climate hostile to women and the stereotype that women do not belong in or are not skilled at the game are likely to be central factors in what they call the systematic gender gap in competitive games. It is worth noting that because of these negative attitudes faced by women in competitive gaming culture, gender affects the ways women are seen as players and competitors – both by themselves and others. Because of this, gender may also be a part of the reason for not participating in esports and competitive gaming even when it is not explicitly mentioned as such.

Women who play competitively and professionally are often considered as representatives of their gender rather than individual players (see also Cullen, 2018). This was mentioned in the questionnaire responses, in which some women described experiencing extra pressure regarding the need to display high level of skill in competitive play because of their gender. Interestingly, for some women it was important to see other women participating in esports in active roles, but at the same time they generally did not wish to participate as “Woman Gamers” put on display.

Examining women's position within the competitive gaming culture of Overwatch through forum discussions shows that when discussing about lack of women in the OWL, at the very top level of play, the discussants assigned a number of reasons for the lack of women, including both gender-essential and cultural or environmental. Overall, the discussants were more likely to look at the latter to explain the lack of women. However, when examining the forum discussions in relation to the popular idea amongst the players, that of "all women play Mercy", the discussants, mainly other than those who identified as women and Mercy players themselves, did tend to argue that women play (only) Mercy because of their assumed physiological or biological qualities. It might then be that these types of gender-essential misconceptions play more prevalent role in everyday play-practices. At the same time, for women playing Mercy can be seen as one of the ways to negotiate belonging to the player community: playing Mercy, a hero which is still a very useful hero and needed for the team, but which creates no "threat" to the male dominated culture – as Mercy players can be ridiculed as low skilled players – becomes a position of subordination which is seen as preferable and acceptable for women players to take and women players are continually suggested to take this position. It is thus a position in which women can be, if not fully accepted, tolerated. Mercy thus functions as one of the narrow locations where women can be present in games, and yet they simultaneously remain quasi absent as one cannot claim a full "gamer citizenship" (nor aspire to become a professional gamer) through solely playing Mercy, who remains ridiculed as an easy hero by part of the players, marking the hero and her player as feminine, queer, and other within the community.

In this paper, we have explored the ways in which women's (lack of) presence and participation in competitive gaming and esports is being constructed in the ways it is being discussed by women gamers as well as those talking about women gamers. Through our analysis of the women's online questionnaire responses regarding participation in esports and the online forum discussions related to competitive Overwatch, we have been able to draw some outlines for what could well be described as women's almost impossible position within the competitive gaming culture. In the forum discussions related to competitive Overwatch, women are simultaneously being written out of existence and written into existing in extremely limited ways, their possibilities for participation determined by and their active presence interpreted through their gender. In the online questionnaire responses, women are describing their lack of will to participate in esports, because of their gender and for various other reasons, while at the same time hoping there would be other women present, and, most importantly, that the environment would be safe for women to participate. While our analysis is based on limited data and largely focused on the competitive gaming culture surrounding one particular game, our findings resonate with those made in previous studies regarding women's position in competitive gaming and esports. It is clear that more research is required on the significance of gender in participating in competitive gaming and esports. Based on this study, discussions within the competitive gaming cultures and communities, as well as women's own thoughts and experiences regarding participation in competitive gaming seem fruitful areas for further exploration in order to increase our understanding on this topic.

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III

"I NEVER GAVE UP": ENGAGEMENT WITH PLAYABLE CHARACTERS AND ESPORTS PLAYERS OF OVERWATCH

by

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“I Never Gave Up”

Engagement with Playable Characters and Esports Players of *Overwatch*

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ABSTRACT

Esports phenomena have grown rapidly in recent years, and so has research on the topic. Some of the research has also addressed esports fandom (see e.g. Taylor 2012). Nevertheless, studies comparing and contrasting how players and fans engage with the game and the esports based on that game are scarce. This study compares and contrasts how players and fans engage with playable game characters and esports players. The paper draws on previous research in fan studies, sports fandom and esports to examine the relationships of players and fans of the videogame *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016) with the fictional heroes of the game as well as with their favorite professional players in the newly started Overwatch League. We analyse how these relationships are articulated by fans and players, and pay attention to emerging similarities and differences.

The findings show that personality is deemed important for engagement with both, game characters and esports players. In addition, gender and sexual orientation emerged as important factors. By contrast, nationality was deemed important for engagement with esports players, but not with player characters. Further research should concentrate on the connections between esports and identity politics, as well as player characters and identity construction.

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CCS CONCEPTS

• Information systems~Massively multiplayer online games • Social and professional topics~Gender • Social and professional topics~Sexual orientation

KEYWORDS

Game Characters, Esports, Esports Players, Fans, *Overwatch*

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1 Introduction

Esports have been on the rise in the past years and have also caught the attention of the academia. Esports have, for example, been studied as a form of media sports as well as a growing new business, and additionally, have been used as an opportunity to study high-achieving players. Some of the research has also addressed esports fandom (see e.g. Taylor 2012). Nevertheless, studies examining the players’ and fans’ relationship to both a videogame and its fictional world as well as esports based on that particular videogame are scarce. Our research addresses this gap by examining the relationships of players and fans of the videogame *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016) with the fictional heroes of the game as well as with their favorite professional players in the newly started Overwatch League. In essence, we are examining the relationship between game fandom and esports fandom.

The two types of fandom have traditionally been researched separately. Fandom studies has been concerned with fans of fiction and music, while sports fandom has been a somewhat separate area of interest. Our study approaches these two phenomena with similar data and methods. We collected discussion forum data, and conducted a survey in order to analyze the ways fans discuss their favorite game characters and professional players. This data allows us to examine, how fans and players articulate these relationships, and identify the emerging similarities and differences.

The analysis of these relationships is informed by theories of audience engagement with fictional characters (e.g. Phelan 1989; Phelan, Rabinowitz, Warhol et al. 2012; Smith 1995; Smith 2011) as well as fan studies (e.g. Booth 2010) and the study of sports fandom (e.g. Crawford 2004). The results of this study will contribute to the emerging field of study on game fandom in addition to esports research.

1.1 *Overwatch* and Overwatch League

Team-based online multiplayer first-person shooter *Overwatch* was published in 2016 by Blizzard Entertainment. By 2017 it had

gathered over 35 million active accounts (Activision Blizzard 2018), won game of the year award and 2018 it won the esport game of the year award. Placed somewhere in the distant future, *Overwatch* brings us the heroes of a former squad known as the "Overwatch". The squad's task was to ensure peace and protect people across the globe from the robotic "omnics", as well the enemies of this former squad and its allies. All of them – former members of Overwatch, its enemies and omnics – together form the diverse pool of playable heroes: from an omnic (robotic) monk to genius gorilla raised in space *Overwatch* offers a large variety of different heroes to be played. This is also visible in the gender division of the heroes as there is a fairly equal balance between male and female heroes – while the robotic omnics remain a minority. Different sexual orientations are also present, albeit these only come visible in the comics related to game – *Overwatch* is designed as a transmedial product, and its story unveils mainly on the comics and shorts animations related to the game, not in the game itself. Furthermore, the game presents a number of different ethnicities and nationalities as part of its character roster. Blizzard has also stated that *Overwatch* was designed to be "inclusive", so the design choices have been conscious ones.

Overwatch is described as team-based first person shooter, but its playable heroes can also perform multiple other kinds of abilities than just shooting: depending on the hero, one can, for example, heal or damage through auto-aim beam and for instance "boop", i.e. push enemies off the map with, certain abilities. Similarly to the diverse hero design, the multiplicity of different abilities can be seen as attractive to a diverse player-base, even to those who do not have previous experience in playing shooter games. Thus, regardless of being a first-person shooter (FPS) game, it provides opportunities also for players not skilled in aiming. Indeed, the game has gathered many "casual" players and players new to FPS.

Since the open beta, *Overwatch* has had an active competitive scene, but it was in early 2018 that *Overwatch* as an esport gained momentum with the launch of the Overwatch League (OWL). OWL is a global esports league, which had 12 teams in its inaugural season (20 as of now). What sets OWL apart from many other esports leagues is that, following traditional sports, the teams represent different cities rather than established esports organizations. While the league is international, majority of the teams represent cities in USA. OWL is a franchised league, in which it furthermore follows traditional (USA based) team sport leagues. OWL is also fully owned by Blizzard, the owner and developer of *Overwatch*.

2 Theoretical background

While there are many overlaps between game cultures and fan cultures, there is still relatively little research bridging this gap between fields. While game studies has often foregrounded interactivity between players and game, interactivity is also emphasized in the study of fans (e.g. Booth 2010). Fan studies has for long demanded for fans' self-identification in order to call them fans. Even though not all players or esports spectators identify as fans (e.g. Wirman 2007), the lens of fan studies can be applied to research of game communities. In recent years fan studies approaches have also been applied to communities and phenomena traditionally outside its scope, such as audiences of classical music. Definitions of fandom have also been updated. For example, Cornel Sandvoss defines fandom as a regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular text (Sandvoss 2005). Simultaneously, there has been a call for fandom studies approaches also from inside game studies. T.L. Taylor (2012, 188) has emphasized the importance of studying fandom for understanding gamers and game culture, e.g. play experience and identity formation.

Sports research is another important theoretical background for this study. *Overwatch* as an esport is marked by sportification, the process of reaching the status of sports (cf. Mora and Héas 2003). Sportification can also refer to a way elements from traditional sports are implemented as part of the representation of esports (Turtiainen et al. 2018). Furthermore, elements from traditional sports have been used as a way to legitimize esports and construct esports as a hypermasculine activity (Taylor, Jenson and de Castell 2009). Our data suggests that both media and fans continuously draw parallels between esports and sports and 52% of our survey respondents indicated that they see esports as a "sport amongst other sports". Thus, it makes sense to take into account theories from the study of sport fans and fandom, particularly when examining how favorite players are discussed. This is all the more fruitful as research on sport fans is often quite separate from the study of popular culture fandom.

In fandom studies, the affective relationships of fans with certain cultural markers as well as the hierarchy formed by the structure and intensity of these relationships within the fandom are understood as building blocks of a constructed, performative and ever-changing identity (Grossberg 1992, 58–59; Booth 2010, 20, 60). Fans continuously observe and construct parallels between themselves and the object of their fandom thus making fan objects extensions of themselves, functioning simultaneously apart from and part of themselves (Sandvoss 2005, 96–97, 102–103). The constructed nature of this process shows for example in research on British football fans, which shows how fans of the same team can build differing, even contradictory meanings, of the same team, as "winners" or "losers" based on their individual self-reflective connection to the fandom (Sandvoss 2005, 105).

According to Crawford (2004), being a sport fan is often tied to locality and nationality – fans are often fans of the local team or/and the national team. Sports fandom is also perceived as a predominantly masculine activity and women can have hard time negotiating their positions in often quite hierarchical sports fandom (Crawford 2004). According to Taylor, Jenson and de Castell (2009) women face similar difficulties while participating in esports and the world of esports is often described by terms such as neoliberal masculinity (Voorhees 2015), hegemonic masculinity (Taylor 2012), and toxic meritocracy (Paul 2018), referring to the obstacles women and minorities face when trying to enter to the world of esports and the norm of the esport player as white or Asian young male.

3 Data and Methods

For our analysis, we have utilized two different datasets. Firstly, we have used data gathered from three different discussions forums: The formal official *Overwatch* forums (the United Stated version) maintained by Blizzard (closed in February 2018); the current official *Overwatch* forums (the United Stated version) maintained by Blizzard and subreddit (i.e. category) r/competitiveoverwatch on the Reddit discussion forum. Secondly, we have utilized survey data with 135 respondents gathered in August and September 2018.

This paper and its focus is a part of larger, ongoing research on *Overwatch* and Overwatch League as well different practices, communities and cultures surrounding them. As so, the survey questionnaire was designed based on the preliminary analysis of parts of the forum data. Designing the questionnaire also drew from earlier research on character engagement (Välisalo 2017) as well as authors' experience working with massive reception study projects: the *Hobbit* research project and the *Game of Thrones* research project.

The forum data has been gathered in a number of ways. First, the data from old Blizzard *Overwatch* forum was gathered from the former official *Overwatch* discussions forums maintained by Blizzard Entertainment, the developer of *Overwatch*. The forum was closed in February 20, 2018, when the new forums were introduced. From the old forums, we gathered the discussion threads from the forum section "General" with number of search words. The data was gathered in February 2018. The earliest posts are from May 2016 and the latest from February 2018. This data mainly helped us to design the questionnaire. Second, another search was conducted in the current Blizzard *Overwatch* forums with search word "favorite", "favourite", "fan" and "fandom" but only discussion threads, which clearly discussed about favorite heroes or hero fandom were gathered. This search targeted posts from March 1, 2018 to August 1, 2018. The third forum data is gathered from the subreddit r/competativeoverwatch, which mainly hosts discussions about the Overwatch League. The search targeted all the posts up to 1.8.2018. Search words used were "favorite", "favourite", "fan" and "fandom", but only discussion threads, which clearly discussed about favorite players or favorite teams were gathered. The selection of search words was based on daily reading of all the forums since the beginning of 2018.

In addition to the forum discussions, we analyzed data from survey. The survey data was gathered in August and September 2018 through opportunistic recruitment. Both those who play or/and watch Overwatch League were invited to answer. From the 135 respondents 42% identified as female, 56% as male, and 2% as other. Respondents were from multiple nationalities, but the majority were Finnish (48%) and the second largest group were Americans (24%). All of our respondents had played *Overwatch* and 112 respondents (83%) had watched OWL.

As our method of analysis, we utilized close reading and thematic analysis (Guest, Macqueen and Namey 2012) on the forum data and applicable sections of the survey. For the forum data, we used data-driven coding using Atlas.ti software.

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4 Character Fandom

At the time of the survey, *Overwatch* had 28 playable heroes. Almost all respondents, 98.5%, chose a favorite gameplay-based hero, and 91.0% chose a favorite lore-based hero. While both percentages are high, it is notable that clearly fewer respondents mention a favorite lore-based hero than a favorite gameplay-based hero. The choices were dispersed across different heroes with only two, Torbjörn and Wrecking Ball, not chosen by anyone in either question. The latter can be explained by Wrecking Ball being a new hero at the time, launched in July 2018.

There seems to be a gendered difference in which favorite characters were chosen. Reinhardt, a hypermasculine armored character in tank role, was the most popular lore-based hero in our survey, but barely any female respondents chose him. Male respondents chose Reinhardt most often as their favorite lore-based as well as gameplay-based character. Male respondents were far more likely to not have a favorite lore-based hero than female respondents.

Mercy was the most popular gameplay-based hero among the respondents identifying as female, but there was no clear preference amongst females in regards to a favorite lore-based hero. Even though there is a common perception that men tend to have more experience with aiming as they on average have played shooter games more and longer, it is notable that the player does not need to aim to play either Reinhardt or Mercy.

Respondents were asked why they chose a particular character as a favorite, and instructed to choose all the relevant options. The options for lore-based and gameplay-based characters were almost the same, with altogether ten options in common, with additional two options available for lore-based favorite heroes.

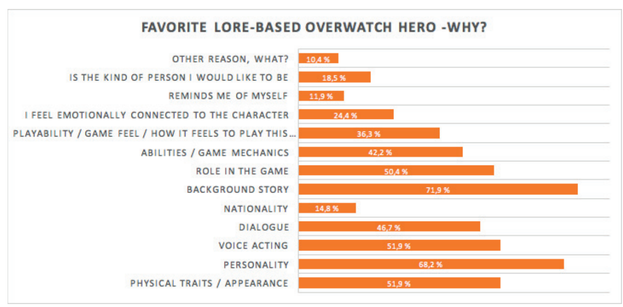

Figure 1: Reasons for choosing a favorite lore-based *Overwatch* hero.

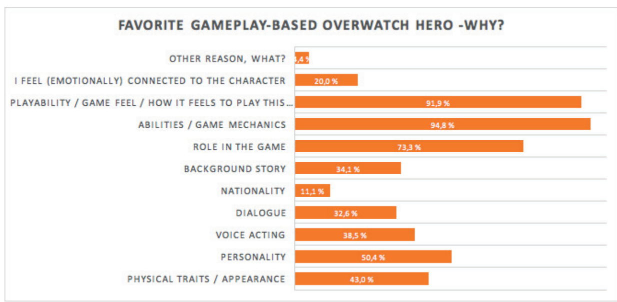

Figure 2: Reasons for choosing a favorite gameplay-based *Overwatch* hero.

Even though all available reasons for choosing a favorite hero appeared in responses to both questions, the prevalence of particular options differed quite expectedly between them: almost all respondents (94.8%) chose "abilities / game mechanics" as a reason for their gameplay-based favorite, and most (91.9%) mentioned "playability", while a large majority (73.3%) also chose "role in the game" (see Figure 2). Respondents also had the opportunity to mention other reasons in their own words. Most common reasons here for game-play-based heroes were also related to their abilities, for example a particular mechanic, such as rocket punch for Doomfist. Most common reasons for choosing lore-based favorites (see Figure 1) were "background story" (71.9%) and "personality" (68.2%).

There were two additional options for lore-based favorites chosen by some respondents: "reminds me of myself" (11.9%) and "is the kind of person I would like to be" (18.5%) (see Figure 1). The open text answers provide additional descriptions for these choices, and include mentions of gender and sexual orientation. Forum discussions also reveal further personal nuances of character engagement: values, such as Mercy's pacifism and Doomfist's belief in war as a vehicle of positive change, are discussed as reasons for liking or disliking characters. This phenomenon is in previous studies described as allegiance to a fictional character (Smith 1995, 96).

Character abilities, manifested as mechanics, are not always distinguishable from character's personality and appearance in discussions on favorite or least favorite characters on the official *Overwatch* forum discussions. This provides background for interpreting survey responses and understanding why, for example, one in three respondents mention playability, which can be considered an element outside the narrative world, as a reason for choosing a lore-based favorite hero. Analysis of individual survey responses also shows that some options were chosen particularly often by the same respondents for both, lore-based and gameplay-based favorites: "physical traits / appearance", "personality", "voice acting" and "role in the game". This indicates that the so-called mimetic elements of a character (Phelan et al. 2012, 113), elements that make a character human-like, were important for engagement with a game character, whether the character was deemed important for its narrative or gameplay features.

Alterations to game characters are meaningful for players, which is evident in how character alterations gave rise to emotional accounts on the discussion forum. Discussions did not express only resistance to change, even though changes to the playable hero Mercy were discussed widely, but also contentment or desire for change: "I never gave up. When Reaper was trash, I never gave up. I always kept fighting for a buff. And what kept me going was not meaningless trust in someone else, or worthless love. It was faith in myself, and in Reaper." These affective articulations further demonstrate how character mechanics are interwoven with the player's emotional response to the character and the game.

5 Player Fandom

For the preparation of the survey and designing the questions, we analyzed discussions from Reddit's subreddit Competitive Overwatch, in order to see how favorite players are discussed and what kinds of reasons discussants gave for someone being their favorite player. From the discussions, nine different reasons emerged: the team the player is in, the history of the player (many of the OWL players have experience in competitive *Overwatch* pre-OWL, having played in pre-OWL teams and tournaments), a personal connection to the player, the place the player is from, player's gameplay, the hero the player plays, the player's personality, the player's stream, and knowing the player from other games. Based on these, we designed the survey questions to further explore the reasons for choices of favorite player.

In the survey, we had two questions related to favorite player: Firstly, we asked the respondents to name their favorite player. Here the Finnish players were highly presented, most likely due to large amount of Finnish respondents. This also indicates that nationality is a factor when choosing favorite player. Secondly, we asked with multiple-choice question "Why is this player your favorite?"

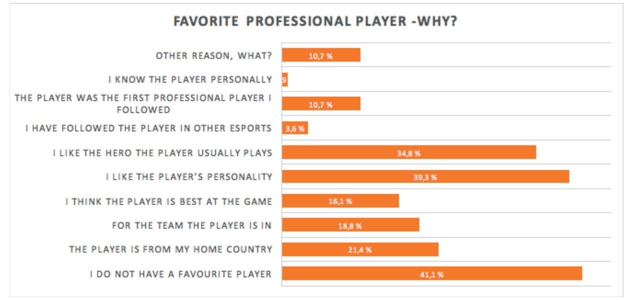

Figure 3: Reasons for choosing a favorite professional *Overwatch* player.

Altogether 113 of our 135 survey respondents indicated that they watch or have watched Overwatch League. Out of those, 59% chose a favorite player. All of the respondents who indicated that they watch all the OWL games also chose a favorite player. The three most common reasons for "why is this player your favorite" chosen from given options were players personality (39%), the hero the player plays (35%) and the nationality of the player (21%) (see

Figure 3). The respondents were encouraged to choose as many reasons as they see fit.

When examining the reasons given for option "other reasons, what?" the gender of the player was given as a prominent reason: number of respondents indicated that Geguri, the only female player in OWL, was their favorite player and often singled out her gender as one of the reasons for that. One respondent wrote, "She is brave to be a woman in exports and rise above all the bullshit that female gamers go through. She is awesome for representation and shows other girls they can be pro gamers too". Another respondent articulated: "First female player in *Overwatch*, and I respect that greatly".

Another reason to arise from the "other reasons" was player's sexual orientation. In September 2018, when the responses for the survey were gathered, one player in OWL was openly gay. One response describes the meaning of this for the fan's own identity: "Because he's gay like me. (I'm not joking)".

6 Comparing Fandoms

When examining the reasons for favorite character and favorite players, there are overlapping factors: In both cases, gender as well as sexual orientation are deemed important – this came up in the open-ended questions. Personality, that of the favorite hero or that of the favorite player, was also deemed very important in both categories. Another major reason for someone being a favorite player was also the hero they played.

Clear differences emerged as well. While *Overwatch* heroes represent different nationalities – for instance, Reinhardt is German, and Mercy is from Switzerland – the nationality of the favorite hero does not appear to play a significant part in the ways fans choose their favorite hero. By contrast, nationality emerged as an important reason for choosing a favorite player. These results highlight the importance of bringing together the different research traditions in fandom - that of popular culture and that of sports - in order to understand the complex relationships fans forge with their favorite heroes and players. In the same vein, it needs to be asked why race nor ethnicity did not emerge as significant factors, even though previous literature suggests otherwise (i.e. Fletcher 2010; Young 2014). *Overwatch* also has a diverse cast of heroes from different ethnicities and races, while Overwatch League players are mainly white and Asian. It is worthwhile to note that this result might be influenced by the limited sample of this survey.

Furthermore, the survey indicated a difference between engagement with fictional characters in games and other media. Few respondents chose options related to identification with the game characters ("reminds me of myself" and "is the kind of person I would like to be"). This clearly differs from a previous study on film characters, where for the audiences of *The Hobbit* fantasy film trilogy the most common reason for choosing a favorite character was empathy or sympathy for the character (Välisalo 2017), most often expressed as finding the character "relatable" or "identifying" with the character. While similar reasons were present in the *Overwatch* survey data, they were chosen considerably less often.

7 Conclusions

In our paper, we presented results from our study on how players and fans of *Overwatch* and Overwatch League engage with playable heroes and esports players respectively. We analyzed how they articulate the reasons for their choices of favorite heroes and players to determine if there are similarities in their modes of engagement. We started the research by doing preliminary analysis of forum discussions and further implemented a survey.

We discovered that there are some significant overlaps, but also differences. Gender and sexual orientation emerged as important factors for engagement with both, the playable characters and esports players. We also found implications that there are differences in engagement with playable characters depending on the player's own gender identification. By contrast, nationality was important for engaging with esports players, but not with playable characters. These results show that some identity markers are more important for engagement with fictional characters than engagement with esports players thus demonstrating the diversity of engagements with the fan object in the culture surrounding *Overwatch*.

We found that mechanical and narrative elements of characters are intertwined in players' engagement with them. Further research combining traditional game studies approaches with study of media audiences and fandom studies is needed to delve deeper into the differences and similarities in engagement with fictional characters in different media. This will enrich the understanding of player's relationship with player characters and avatars.

Given how important nationality of the players is for *Overwatch* esports fans, it is noteworthy that the nationality of the playable heroes does not hold the same importance. It must be asked, if this is because characters' nationalities reside in the fictional world of the game where other narrative elements take precedence, or if the sportification process of esports emphasizes the importance of players' nationalities in esports fandom, similarly to traditional sports fandom.

Further research should concentrate on the connections between esports and identity politics, as well as player characters and identity construction. For instance, the significance of gender as well as sexual orientation needs to be further researched by building on existing literature. Examining the connection of these forms of engagement to player mentalities might also prove fruitful.

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IV

"OVERWATCH IS ANIME" - EXPLORING AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMPETITIVE GAMING

by

Maria Ruotsalainen & Tanja Välisalo, 2020

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

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

Keywords
Esports, *Overwatch*, anime

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

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

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

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

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

DATA AND METHODS

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

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

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

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

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

DEFINING ESPORTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

***OVERWATCH* AND *OVERWATCH* ESPORTS**

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

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

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

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

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

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

OVERWATCH ESPORTS IN THE UNITED STATES MAINSTREAM MEDIA

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

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

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

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

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

OVERWATCH AS ANIME

When entering to The Novo, a theatre in Los Angeles Downtown which hosts the home games for two OWL teams, Los Angeles Valiant and Los Angeles Gladiator, the first impression is a mix of a small con[2] and that of a sports event: A man marketing Budweiser Light looks for participants over 21 years of age to offer them VIP badges which include free drinks, and at the same time cosplayers dressed as *Overwatch* heroes are having their photos taken with fans. There are also a number of participatory activities - a booth where one can play *Overwatch*, artists that will draw participants as their favorite *Overwatch* heroes, and a stand where one can get their battletag name embedded in a badge designed in accordance to the colors and the logo of the home team Los Angeles Valiant. There is also a small shop which is filled with different regalia for fans to buy: team jerseys, OWL hoodies, key chains, and so on, similar to conventional sports merchandise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tumblr communities[4], but its use here is an example of how particularly anime characters are used in the discussion and commentary around *Overwatch* esports.

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

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

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

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

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

CHALLENGING THE "SPORTS NORMATIVITY": MASCULINITY IN *OVERWATCH* ESPORTS

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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ENDNOTES

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

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

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

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

V

"KKONA WHERE'S YOUR SENSE OF PATRIOTISM?" - POSITIONING NATIONALITY IN THE SPECTATORSHIP OF COMPETITIVE OVERWATCH PLAY

by

Marko Siitonen & Maria Ruotsalainen, 2022

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CHAPTER 6

“KKona where’s your sense of patriotism?”: Positioning Nationality in the Spectatorship of Competitive Overwatch Play

Marko Siitonen and Maria Ruotsalainen

This chapter analyzes the discursive construction of nationality and ethnicity in the context of the *Overwatch World Cup 2019* and especially among the discussions of the world cup’s spectators on the live-streaming platform Twitch. Drawing on the positioning theory and the concept of banal nationalism, our study demonstrates how esports fans are active negotiators and co-creators of the esports discourse. The analysis illustrates what kind of role nationality and ethnicity take in this environment, in other words what they come to mean for those participating in the discourses defining them.

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Nationalism and Esports

In this study we follow Billig's (1995) conceptualization of nationalism, which forefronts the banal forms of nationalism alongside so-called hot or heated nationalism. Billig argued that the way nationalism is traditionally understood in research literature is by references to the extraordinary—for example to extreme right-wing movements or the creation processes of new nation states. As a counterpoint to these approaches, Billig introduced the concept of banal nationalism, which refers to the many ways in which nationalism is made into being and upheld through repetitive everyday phenomena. This includes the way nationalism is normalized, and embedded into our everyday life through media, symbols, and texts. In short, it is socially constructed in everyday social interaction. While banal nationalism can appear mundane on the surface, it can become heated or hot nationalism fast (Billig 1995). We furthermore align with Anderson's (2006 [1983]) conceptualization of nations as imagined communities, socially constructed sources of a sense of 'us', and something that keeps on being adapted and transformed by its stakeholders through communication.

Banal nationalism is particularly visible in sports and sports coverage, where national symbols such as flags are constantly displayed in order to enhance and normalize the sense of national belonging (Billig 1995). The relationship between nationalism and sports is a well-studied phenomenon. Several studies have shown how sports has been used as a tool in nation-building and evoking the nationalist sentiment (Bowes and Bairner 2019; Crawford 2004; Hong 2013, King 2006).

In the context of esports and competitive gaming, nationalism and its displays have been less studied, nor has competitive gaming always been understood through the lens of sports. The concept of esports itself was only introduced in around 1999 (Wagner 2006) and debates concerning whether esports is truly a sport continue to this day (cf. Hallmann and Giel 2018; Taylor 2012; Witkowski 2012). Some of the competitive gaming communities also resist the term 'esports' as it is seen to commercialize and 'tame' the activity of competitive gaming (Ferrari 2013). However, some notable esport events like the World Cyber Games, launched in 2000, have framed themselves similarly to traditional sport competitions, and thus aimed to evoke a sense of national belonging from the viewers as well as the players (Taylor 2012; Szablewicz 2016). In more recent years, the first Overwatch World Cup, held in 2016, utilized a similar formula. Turtiainen et al. (2018) note that nationalism was a particularly strong element in the construction of the tournament broadcast. They argue that

the event was *sportified* in many of its aspects, meaning that it drew from the representation of traditional sports (cf. Heere 2018; Jonasson and Thiborg 2010; Thiborg 2011). This was visible for instance in the display of national symbols and the way the event was narrated by the casters (Turtiainen et al. 2018). Similarly, Szablewicz (2016) highlights how in China esports operates as a state mandated spectacle whose primary function is to display nationalism and ideology.

Nationalism in esports has also been studied from the viewpoint of individual actors, such as fans and spectators. For example, Välisalo and Ruotsalainen (2019) point out the importance of nationality of favorite Overwatch esport players for the fans. Zhu (2018, 130) draws attention to the way masculinity, nationality, and ethnicity intersect in esports, paying particular attention to how 'Asian' players are constructed as both feminine and physically inferior to 'Western' players in discussion boards. Given these previous studies, it is clear that nationalist sentiment can be present in esports, but more studies are needed on the topic in order to understand the ways esports operates to reproduce the mechanisms of banal nationalism. In this study, we address this question by examining the way nationalism and its intersections with ethnicity are discursively constructed by esports viewers in the context of a large, international tournament.

Positioning Theory

Concepts such as nationality or ethnicity should not be understood as something abstract located within individuals' minds, but rather as being progressively negotiated by actors who engage in discursive practices. Here, we focus our analysis on so-called *positioning* (Davies and Harré 1990), which may be understood as a conceptual tool for facilitating linguistically oriented analysis of social episodes. At its heart, positioning is a process wherein people negotiate 'rights' and 'duties'. These are defined as "shorthand terms for clusters of moral (normative) presuppositions which people believe or are told or slip into and to which they are momentarily bound in what they say and do" (Harré et al. 2009, 9). Both nationality and ethnicity are examples of such 'clusters'. We may position ourselves as well as others, and any so-called first-order positioning may be contested (second order positioning). Overall, positioning can be seen as being constructed as layers upon layers, where ongoing positioning may be related to positioning that occurred before, in a wholly other discursive practice (Harré and Van Langenhove 2010).

Positioning theory utilizes the concept of jointly produced storylines or unfolding narratives as something through which we make sense of who

we and the others surrounding us are. It is through these stories that we learn to separate ourselves and others into social categories, and further allocate meanings to those categories. Social encounters may develop along multiple, interlinking storylines, and actions people take may carry multiple meanings and tie into multiple storylines simultaneously (Harré et al. 2009). For example, in the context of this chapter, the grand storylines could be those of (e)sports, media events, nationality, and ethnicity, all intersecting with one another.

Positioning theory has also been used to understand the issue of cultural stereotyping (Van Langenhove and Harré 1994). Instead of seeing cultural stereotypes as relatively stable cognitive models, a positioning viewpoint shifts the focus on stereotypes as social constructs. By making stereotypes public within a conversation, actors use them as rhetorical devices in the process of positioning. In the realm of discourse online, for example, Devlin (2016) illustrated how participants on Russian online political message boards used national or ethnic insults drawing on stereotypes as a way to construct the cultural other and to demarcate boundaries between 'us' and 'them'.

In this study, we use the tenets of positioning theory as a kind of analytical lens that helps us understand the construction of banal nationalism in the context of esports. The premise of our study is that concepts such as nationality and ethnicity are ultimately mental constructs that need to be not only imagined, but also 'modelled' into being (Anderson, 2006 [1983]). Often, this is done via communication acts that appear mundane or ordinary (Billig 1995). These premises fit well with the idea of jointly produced storylines inherent to positioning theory. As a discursive approach, positioning theory instructs us to focus our attention to those instances, where the self, others, and relationships with other people are made visible (constructed) in actual social interaction.

Our study contributes to the emerging work on how nationality and ethnicity are made visible and relevant (discursively constructed) in online contexts, here specifically within the realm of esports. More specifically, our analysis focuses on the *Overwatch World Cup 2019* and the live discussions of the world cup's spectators on Twitch. We chose this particular event for our analysis since earlier research has demonstrated both the national elements in the broadcast (Turtiainen et al. 2018) as well as the importance of nationality for the fans of Overwatch esports (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019). Our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How are nationality and ethnicity constructed in the production of the 2019 Overwatch World Cup?
RQ2: How do Twitch audience members discursively co-construct storyline(s) related to nationality and ethnicity?

Over the next paragraphs, we briefly introduce Twitch as a context of social interaction. Then, we present our method and describe our analytical approach, before moving on to the findings.

Twitch as a Platform

Twitch (www.twitch.tv) has been a forerunner in shaping the so-called live-streaming culture. As Johnson and Woodcock (2018) point out, Twitch has had a marked impact on the video game industry on the whole, enabling new marketing strategies as well as new forms of digital economy. In early 2021, Twitch had reached an average of nearly three million concurrent viewers, with close to ten million monthly streamers (https://twitchtracker.com/statistics). While most of the content of Twitch comes from individual players or streamers, the platform has also been a major actor in helping live-streaming esports scale up to the kind of media entertainment it is today (Taylor, 2018).

An integral part of the way Twitch spectators interact among themselves as well as with streamers is its chat function. The Twitch chat combines text with graphical icons called emotes (also: emoticons or emojis). Emotes have a textual label, but the way they normally are presented in the chat are as small images (Image 6.1). Some emotes are only visible in other than text format with a browser extension such as *Better Twitch TV* (BTTV).

Many of the emotes used on Twitch, such as generic smileys, are similar to the ones used across other digital communication platforms. However, some of them are either specific to Twitch, or have originated there, and can be considered to be internet *memes.* Internet memes are here understood as units or building blocks of culture (Shifman 2013), which are collectively negotiated, remixed, and recirculated in social media discourse (Milner 2016).

Gillespie (2010) argues that platforms such as Google and YouTube are the "the primary keepers of cultural discussions as it moves to the internet" (p. 348) which means they also face questions of responsibility on how these discussions evolve. Gillespie further asserts that by branding

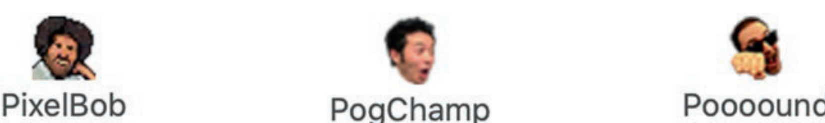

Image 6.1 Examples of Twitch emotes in their graphical and textual format. (Source: https://www.twitchemotes.com)

their service as 'platform', a term that suggests technical neutrality and progressive openness, these companies seek to diminish this responsibility. Following Gillespie's framework of platform politics, Ask et al. (2019) note that initially Twitch was committed to this neutrality in their approach to the user-created content, but once they were acquired by Amazon.com in 2014, more strict guidelines started to appear. Amazon has shown signs of taking responsibility for what kind of discussion happens in twitch. For example, the popular 'pogchamp' emote was changed once the person it previously displayed became associated with opinions furthering violence (Kelly 2021).

Nevertheless, most of the responsibility of what kind of discussions take place in individual Twitch channels is still left in the hands of channel moderators. Since it is well-known that Twitch chat may include harassment such as sexism (Nakandala et al. 2017), and racism (Gray 2016), tournament broadcasters of the Overwatch World Cup 2019 included chat moderation. Twitch moderation typically includes both human moderators and automated algorithms. Algorithms for example time-out or ban users using words that have been black-listed and delete messages containing these words (Cai and Wohn 2019). Moderators and the moderating guidelines hold considerable power on what can and cannot be said in the chat and this also influences who gets to participate in the discussion and who is excluded (Grimmelmann 2015).

Overwatch World Cup 2019 as a Setting

Overwatch World Cup 2019 was the fourth of its kind. A total of 28 national teams participated in the tournament, which was organized between October 31 and November 2 as part of Blizzcon in Los Angeles, USA. Blizzcon is an annual convention of the game publisher Blizzard Entertainment that centers around the publisher's games. While all World Cup matches were played in the Blizzcon or its vicinity, the preliminary

qualifiers and the group stages were not played in front of a live audience. Throughout the tournament all the matches were broadcast live on Twitch. During the first days there were five overlapping streams (cf. channels) due to a number of games being played simultaneously. Due to the way spectatorship is split among multiple channels, it is impossible to accurately tell how many viewers the 2019 World Cup had. Still, one indication of the popularity of the tournament is that the semi-final that we analyze later on in this chapter gathered approximately 146,000 viewers on the official stream.[1]

Data and Analysis

Studies drawing on positioning theory usually follow a social constructionist epistemology, and can be grouped under the broad umbrella of discourse analytical research interested in 'locally' negotiated meanings (Harré et al. 2009). Our study, which is interested in the discursive co-construction of nationality and ethnicity in the context of esports, adopts a similar analytical stance.

The data of our study consists of the public Overwatch World Cup 2019 Twitch broadcasts and the live chats connected to them. Both authors of this chapter as well as one research assistant followed the tournament live, and recorded matches and their chats as they were being played. In the end, we had 11 recordings totaling 500 minutes of video footage. We also gathered the chat logs of each recording in text format with the help of an automated tool *Chatty* (https://chatty.github.io/), which is freely available online.

As a first step of the analysis we engaged in a round of so-called data reduction (Guest et al. 2012). After deliberation we chose to focus on two matches. First, we chose the USA versus South Korea semifinals match for the reason that it had the highest number of viewers in the entire tournament, and featured a team from the country where the tournament was organized (USA). Another reason for including this match was that both USA and South Korea have a long history or rivalry in the context of the Overwatch World Cup. Second, we chose the Finland versus The Netherlands group stage match. Since most of the tournament games came from the group stage, this match represented a 'standard' match. It was played between two teams that did not rank high in the overall predictions, had fewer viewers, and therefore represented a less 'heated' match-up in the tournament. As an added benefit, the authors could understand

both countries' languages and cultural context well enough to catch up on the more subtle meanings possibly hidden in the chat.

The USA versus South Korea match recording was 127 minutes long. The log file of the chat for this match was 206,312 words long. The Finland versus The Netherlands match recording was 48 minutes long. The log file was 30,794 words long.

The analysis was conducted by both authors. We began the analysis by watching and re-watching the matches, as well as closely inspecting the log files. During this initial critical reading, we engaged in continuous discussions on the types of positioning we could identify in the data. We took a multimodal approach (Kress 2010) to our analysis. In the case of Twitch, there are several modes, such as writing, images, speech, and moving image, that together act as the building blocks of the social event. For the purpose of our analysis, the way different semiotic modalities interact or are combined is of importance. For example, we concentrated on how text and images join together to create new meanings. This kind of interaction is called inter-modality, or intersemiosis (O'Halloran 2011).

As Gee (2010, 117) argues, no discourse analysis is ever based on all the features present in a text, but rather aims to focus on the aspects of data that are relevant in the context and for the given task. Of course, the choice of what to include as relevant is ultimately a matter of theoretically informed qualitative interpretation. Due to the vast scope of the data, it was not feasible to 'code' every single line of chat or emote posted by the tournament viewers. Instead, based on our initial reading, we focused on those passages that included discursive positioning of the self or the other, and where this positioning was linked to nationality or ethnicity. After a further round of critical reading and discussions, we settled on four themes that pervaded the data and through which we can explore the discursive construction of nationality and ethnicity in the context of esport viewership. Over the next section we will explore these themes further. First, we will show how the visual and symbolic environment of the tournament sets the stage for the discursive construction of nationality. Second, we discuss the use of ethnically loaded memes as focal points, around which positioning occurs. Third, we explore how 'the other' and, therefore, the self are explicitly constructed. And fourth, we show how national languages may be used as a tool for in-group positioning.

Findings

Visual and Symbolic Positioning of Nationality

In line with an earlier study of the Overwatch World Cup 2016 (Turtiainen et al. 2018), our analysis shows that nationality was constructed through a variety of means during the tournament. These include the use of national flags in the visualization of the matches, using standardized jerseys with flags, as well as narrative means, such as the way the teams or players are presented in video highlights. The broadcast, especially after moving from online-only matches to those played in a physical setting, used similar tropes as traditional sports in setting the stage. An example of this comes from the beginning of the match between the USA and South Korea that was played in front of a live audience. After the Korean players were already seated, team USA entered the stage with the audience waving US flags and chanting "USA, USA". Simultaneously, the chat reacted to the scene, as if echoing the live audience's chanting. On top of loud, pompous music, the caster was shouting: "Put your hands together for … the Unites States of America!". Finally, the US team was seen entering the arena with their captain carrying a large flag over his shoulders (Image 6.2).

During tournament gameplay, nationality was continuously being enforced by presenting national flags on the screen both beside the team names as well as underneath the battle tag (nickname) of individual players (Image 6.3). In addition, in-game characters of playing teams were dressed in special 'skins' (cf. player uniform), allowing the whole team to be uniformly colored. This kind of extra layer of positioning by the tournament broadcasters is made even more relevant when one imagines the event without them—for example, most players' battle tags are not easily retractable to their nationality, and the in-game characters are also otherwise identical on both sides. Without such cues, a random viewer entering the match would certainly not be able to make out who is playing whom.

Throughout the tournament, spectators also made use of the possibility of including national flags into the Twitch chat. Combined with specifically highlighting nationality in messages such as "go USA from FRANCE", this allowed spectators to reflexively position themselves while simultaneously positioning others. Put together, this type of banal nationalism (Billig 1995) contributes to the jointly produced storyline of nations battling each other.

Image 6.2 Team USA entering the arena

Image 6.3 Visual cues constructing nationality during the gameplay broadcast

While the broadcast clearly utilized national tropes and symbolic means similar to other established sports, most of the audience involvement was not as straightforward to decipher. Instead of a uniform, non-contested

storyline, the audience could be seen as fluctuating between affirmative and ironic or counter discourses concerning nationality and related concepts such as ethnicity. Over the next section, we will explore a key example of such a discourse—the construction of ‘Kkona’.

The Ambivalence of Ethnically Loaded Memes

In addition to nationality, also ethnicity was a relevant theme in the data. An interesting example of multimodal discursive construction of ethnicity comes from the way the meme known as ‘Kkona’ was used by the spectators (see examples below for the graphical representation of Kkona). ‘Kkona’ was a recurrent message/emote in the chat during the USA versus South Korea match, featuring over 4000 times in the chat log. The origin of the emote is a picture of a US American long-time streamer whose on-screen nickname is Kkona. The emote itself was removed from Twitch in 2018, but its use in textual format continued, and at the time of the tournament, the emote was included in the browser extension *Better Twitch TV*. Kkona is generally understood to refer to a stereotypical American “hillbilly” or “redneck” (Urbandictionary.com 2020; Levvvel.com 2020). Throughout the chat, Kkona was used both for reflective first-person positioning of the self, and interactive positioning of the other. The positioning of the self is visible in chat lines such as:

- “Let’s go brothers, In God we trust ”
-

-

The use of ‘brothers’ and ‘my boys’ suggests that the speakers align themselves in the same in-group as the US players, and use Kkona as a tool of self-positioning. In the first quote the use of the sentence “in God we trust”, the official motto of the USA, further strengthens this. The second quote demonstrates the use of Kkona in relation to Donald Trump, who

was the president of the USA at the time of the tournament. In the chat, Kkona was also often used with proverbs and punch lines widely connected to Trump (such as "Make America great again").

The third quote above has the number '7' following the text Kkona, which adds a possible racialized dimension to the use of the meme. Number seven, which can be seen as a graphical representation of an arm doing a military salute, can also be read as referring to a banned emote, 'Trihard7' (Image 6.4). This emote became notorious after it was spammed in the Twitch chat during a *Hearthstone* competition every time an African-American player Terrence "TerrenceM" Miller was shown in the camera (see, e.g., Fletcher 2020). Utilizing the number seven with the emoji Kkona can be read as a form of defiance for the ban of Trihard7. Unlike Trihard7 in the case of TerrenceM, Kkona in our data was not spammed for any particular player but rather in connection with anything related to the USA. In effect, Kkona constructs and refers to a particular kind of (white) American identity, thus being both ethnically and nationally loaded.

Throughout the chat, Kkona was also used in a sense that can be interpreted as ironic. For example, when the live audience was shown in the stream, and some members of the audience were seen holding flags of South Korea, the chat erupted with comments such as:

- "why are all these Americans waving Korean flags"
- " where's your sense of patriotism?"
- "those Korean fans look suspiciously American "

There appears to be a sense of ridiculing the idea of national belonging here and perhaps even the way the event itself is constructed to evoke national belonging. The third quote includes the 'Kappa' emote. The Kappa emote generally stands for indication of irony or sarcasm (Dictionary.com 2020). Its inclusion here suggests that while there clearly is

Image 6.4 Trihard7 emoji

nation-building at work among spectators, there are also levels of irony or sarcasm related to this.

The ambivalent meaning of Kkona was further visible in the way it was utilized as a tool for building counter discourse to that offered by the official stream. An example of this comes from the US versus South Korea match, where between games the Twitch stream displayed advertisements. Among the advertisements of technology, game, and phone companies commonly seen in similar broadcasts, there was also a recruitment video by the United States Air Force. The video states that today "planes are piloted from the other side of the world" while showing video footage of a soldier sitting in front of two screens in an army base, almost as if playing a video game. Overall, the video uses glorifying language in describing members of the US air force, including statements such as: "We are not just pilots and engineers, we are pioneers", and "Join us and be the future". While audience reactions to most ads in the chat data was rare, or simply signaled boredom, the comments to the recruitment video showed a different level of attention, including comments such as:

- "SOME OIL NEEDS TO LIBERATED "
- "MAKE LOVE NOT WAR! THIS IS PROPAGANDA FOR USA"
- "Killing children "
- "Join us and you too can bomb innocent civilians "
- "HELP US COMMIT WAR CRIMES "

Here, Kkona continues to be associated with the USA, but takes on a much more condemning tone. While during the gameplay Kkona was often added to chants of "USA, USA" when team USA was performing

well in the game, here it becomes connotated with practices of "liberating oil", "bombing innocent civilians", and "committing war crimes". While it is clear that it is a particular kind of US Americans who are being positioned here, it is not clear who is doing the positioning—the use of Kkona in this context could be seen as either interactive or reflexive positioning. When looking at the way chat participants use Kkona throughout the match, multiple ways of using the emote are revealed: In some cases those who in other instances use Kkona in a positive way turn it around in this particular situation; in some cases those who in other instances cheer for USA (without Kkona) use Kkona here negatively, perhaps to signify a kind of 'American' they do not want to identify with; and some of the cases remain highly ambivalent, allowing multiple interpretations of the use of Kkona.

Positioning the Other

The context of the World Cup, where teams representing nationalities were in competition with each other, provided a clear framework for conceptualizing 'the other'. This basic setup was also reflected and reinforced in the chat. For example, in the US versus South Korea match, messages positioning Koreans included such as:

- Haksal looks cute
- haksal is my waifu
- KOREA OP OP OP
- lol carpe is op

In the above excerpts, both 'haksal' and 'carpe' refer to the player tags of players in the Korean team. This kind of positioning of the Koreans is akin to the way Zhu's (2018) description of how Asians are often perceived within 'Western' esports communities. According to Zu, Asians are othered through both feminization and roboticization (2018). This was visible in the chat through physical description of Asian players ("tiny Asians" "cute") and framing them as 'OP' (Overpowered), a term used to describe powerful videogame characters, strategies, and so on. Another

theme that was visible in this type of positioning was the so-called fetishization of Korean players and South Korea as the promised dreamland of esports (Taylor 2012). In the chat the skill of the Korean players was often the focal point of how they were positioned.

In addition to positioning Koreans as players, the chat included messages positioning their fans. Again, this kind of positioning often evoked certain existing stereotypes and concepts, such as referring to kpop (Korean pop-music) fandom or the concept of ‘weabu’ or ‘weeb’, which is often used to describe a Western person obsessed with Japanese culture or Asian popular culture at large:

- “KOREAN WEEBS ”
- “kpop fans”
- “tiny asian fanboys in chat”

At the same time, the chat also positioned the American fans as a distinct group. This kind of positioning was, again, done mostly with the help of negatively loaded descriptions, such as the stereotype connecting US Americans with junk food and obesity:

“KR is so ba … wait let me take a breath KR is s … i need to take another one give me another burger ”

In the Finland versus The Netherlands match, there was an interesting case of positioning Finns as the ‘exotic’ other by both the casters and the chat participants. The casters began the segment by speaking about Finns and wondering what Finnish people do in their spare time: “I believe they fish. They fish and they complain about the cold”. They then moved on to discuss a particular Finnish player, ‘Taimou’, spending time in his home country, roaming the countryside, and going “Full on Kkona, the Finnish version”. The chat then picked up on the discussion, including messages such as:

- "they ski and sit in saunas "
- "we drink and complain:)"
- "The Finnish Summer is the best day of the year!"
- "turpa kiinni " [translation: shut up]
- "finnish are not vikings"
- "Finland is its own thing, apparently they're more closely related to Asian cultures"

This kind of discourse can be seen as including both interactive and reflexive positioning, which together outline the storyline of 'Finnishness'. It resonates with the widely circulated myth of Finns being distinct from other (West) European national groups, as well as the myth of their taciturn and reserved communication style (for a critical review of the myth, see Olbertz-Siitonen and Siitonen 2015).

In-Group Positioning by Using National Languages in an International Chat

While the official streams were broadcasted in English, and the vast majority of the messages posted in the chat used this language, there were also occasional messages in other languages present. This was especially apparent in the Finland versus The Netherlands match, where both teams came from countries where English is not an official language. In this match, the chat included a number of messages such as "Min hart kan dit niet aan" ("My heart cannot take this"), and "hyvä pojat hyvä meno" ("good job boys, good going"). It is perhaps noteworthy to add here that moderators allowed the use of national languages in the chat. This is not to be taken

for granted on channels that are aimed at an international audience, and where, for example, English is used as a lingua franca.

Using a playing team’s national language can be seen as a prime example of first-order positioning in this context. Even though the posters may be aware of the likelihood of the majority of the international audience not understanding what is being said, using the national language of one of the playing teams effectively positions them as a member of the same in-group as the players.

Some of this kind of first-order performative positioning (Harré and van Langenhove 2010) where spectators used languages of the playing teams utilized memes. Spectators evoking memes in playing teams’ national languages could be seen as engaging in a kind of double in-group positioning. Not only does one need to understand the language in question to participate in the construction of the meme, but one also has to be versed in a specific subculture. For example, in parts of the match where the opposing team was dominating, some apparently Finnish spectators posted “FIRST WE GIVE THEM SIIMA, THEN WE _PULL_ MATTO ALTA”. This combination of English and Finnish could be roughly translated as “First we cut them some slack, then we pull the rug from under them”. While the idiom “to pull the rug from under (someone)” can be used in both Finnish and English, this particular version of the meme deliberately combines both languages. It originates from the context of another popular game, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*, and specifically the Finnish team ENCE.

Positioning theory argues that whenever someone positions themselves, they inevitably imply a positioning of ‘the other’ as well. At times, this parallel nature of positioning was even clearer than normally, a kind of challenge or gauntlet thrown down at the perceived adversary. For example, at the point in the match between Finland and The Netherlands where The Netherlands was leading 2–0 on a best of five match, the theme of colonization started appearing in the chat:

-
  “Kolonisatie 66% compleet ”
-
  “ Colonised ”

- "G E K O L O N I S E E R D "

Messages such as these utilize both the national language as well as the history of the nation in question to intentionally position participants into in- and out-groups. These messages are also connected to a meme playing with the colonial history of The Netherlands. We can see a similarity to how Kkona is used, where in-group members formulate an ambivalent message concerning their own group or position.

Overall, while not abundant in the data set, the use of national languages in an international (English language) chat was a consistent discursive tool that participants used to engage in intentional and deliberate positioning. Here, a parallel may be drawn to other contexts such as international business, where there is often a shared (third) language, but people may still opt to use their mother tongue in certain situations as a symbolic tool with which identification and community may be strategically constructed (e.g., Lauring 2008).

Conclusions

This study contributes to our understanding of how esports producers and viewers discursively construct nationality and ethnicity in the context of esports. From the visual presentation to the way the audience reacts, the whole production may be seen as following familiar tropes related to constructing nationality in the context of sports (Billig 1995; Bowes and Bairner 2019). However, the analysis also shows that this construction was not uni-dimensional, nor uncontested. Often, the contents of the chat could only be interpreted as being ironic and even producing a satiric counter discourse to that offered by the tournament organizers, similar to what has been witnessed in the field of contemporary politics and activism (Day 2011). For example, the pompousness often related to emphasizing nationality was ridiculed in many ways by the spectators. Also the case of 'Kkona', and the way the colonial history of The Netherlands was used by chat participants, illustrate how the same messages may be used both for reflexive and interactive positioning, and to simultaneously affirm and undermine existing storylines related to nationality and ethnicity. In several instances the audience could be interpreted as occupying a position of first and foremost belonging to player culture(s), and only secondarily

belonging to a national or ethnic group. We argue that this kind of behavior is connected to a broader tradition of 'trolling' prevalent in-game cultures (Cook et al. 2018). Here, provocative messages can be seen as a kind of 'bait' or challenge to other participants. The ability to understand and use memes signifies the boundary of the in-group, with those who become offended or do not understand their use being left on the outside (Manivannan 2013). This also functions as a way of constructing a normative order amongst spectators which is furthermore strengthened by practices such as spamming the chat with memes, thus possibly hiding the individual messages which do not follow the established use of memes.

While the setting of the World Cup emphasizes nationality as a key category for grouping participants, our analysis shows how ethnicity may also become relevant. From the way the South Korean players and fans were characterized to the way Finnish players and Finns in general were discussed by the casters and the chat, our analysis shows that when positioning nationality, the question of ethnicity is never far behind (Bairner 2015; Rowe et al. 1998).

Finally, our analysis highlights how national languages were used as a tool for first-order self-positioning. In an international environment where English is used as lingua franca, the use of other languages carries a message in and of itself. As Brubaker (2013) argues, language may serve as a kind of central category in establishing societal inclusion and exclusion, inherently intertwined with ethnicity and nationhood. This finding works as a reminder of the importance of language for nation-building (Anderson 2006 [1983]).

Our analysis of language in use contributes to the literature on how online contexts such as Twitch allow people to locally negotiate new social practices, or what one could call digital literacy in its broad, action-oriented meaning (see, e.g., Barton and Hamilton 1998). Understanding, let alone participating in, the discourse surrounding the World Cup requires a certain level of digital and game literacy (cf. Milner 2016 on literacy required to participate in memetic discourse).

Our study also serves as a reminder of the kind of challenges that interpreting memes represent. Since memes are constantly evolving and being negotiated also from situation to situation, the interpretation relies heavily on contextual cues and knowledge. We also witnessed how memes that were originally constructed to operate in a visual mode may continue to exist in another modality (text), once they have become established enough.

As always, our study has its limitations. When large competitions such as the Overwatch World Cup are streamed to the public, there are always several unofficial streams that accompany the main one, often with multiple languages. It would have been interesting to follow the Korean, Finnish, and Dutch streams of the event in addition to the mainstream where the official language was English. This could have opened the door to other kinds of analyses, such as comparing the positioning done in the 'national' streams against the main channel. However, due to practical reasons such as language proficiency, and the way smaller streams are easily lost in the multitude of Twitch programming, we ended up focusing on the official streams only. Future studies could explore the way smaller, linguistically or nationally oriented streams may interact, or whether there are apparent differences in their discourse.

Note

1. It must be mentioned here that the Overwatch World Cup 2019 was played under the influence of a public debate related to Blizzard Entertainment as a publisher. The debate began in October 2019 in another one of Blizzard Entertainment's games, *Hearthstone*, where a tournament winner and two hosts were suspended from the esports scene for voicing out support for the then ongoing demonstrations in Hong Kong. This caused a public backlash against Blizzard Entertainment. Most of the chats we recorded included messages related to the situation in Hong Kong. These ranged from the simple "Free Hong Kong" message to a variety of often humorous alterations similar to what have been observed in other contexts such as Reddit (Dynel and Poppi 2020). Since this event and the related messages represent rather 'heated' nationalism instead of the everyday positioning we wanted to focus on in our study, we decided to leave them out of the focus of this study.

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