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# "Sexuality does not belong to the game" - Discourses in *Overwatch* Community and the Privilege of Belonging

*by* Tanja Välisalo, Maria Ruotsalainen

## Abstract

Players can experience a sense of belonging to videogames and the transmedial worlds surrounding them. There nevertheless exist ongoing negotiations over who has the right to belong to these spaces. Multiple works addressing related issues have highlighted that white heterosexual men still maintain the position of power in the majority of game communities (e.g., Consalvo, 2012; Paul, 2018). This position can translate into an ease of belonging while others can find themselves struggling for the right to belong.

We examine the transmedial world of *Overwatch*, an online game, as a place of belonging and non-belonging. Since the game's launch, two characters have been revealed as queer. In contrast, a third character is considered a gay icon by fans, even though there is no official narrative supporting this. We analyze discussions around these cases using rhetoric-performative discourse analysis (Palonen & Saresma, 2017), an approach originally developed for research of political populism. In addition to similar affective and persuasive rhetoric in both contexts, politics have become an inherent part of online and fan communities (Dean, 2017), making this approach even more apt.

Our analysis makes visible how belonging and non-belonging are constructed in *Overwatch* communities in relation to gender, sexuality, their intersections and also to identities such as "player" and "fan." We take into account ongoing design choices in the game's development and analyze how the complex structures of production and reception interact with these discourses. Discussions analyzed here expand beyond *Overwatch*, touching upon highly politicized issues of gender and sexuality in games, the right to be represented and the current political climate in Western countries, and reenact divisions present more broadly in media discussions. Our findings also show how characters function as a nexus for these political debates and as limits and horizons for belonging.

**Keywords**: belonging, homosexuality, representation, *Overwatch*, MMO, discourse analysis

## Introduction

*Overwatch*, a team-based first-person shooter (FPS), was published by Blizzard Entertainment in 2016. Characters play an important role in *Overwatch*, each with their own personality and backstory, which are revealed through transmedial storytelling and are meaningful to the players. Since the game's launch two characters, Tracer and Soldier: 76, have been revealed as queer, and the reveals have been followed by intense discussions among the game communities. Some discussants have been vehemently against what they termed as introducing sexuality in the game, while others have expressed joy for the diversity of representation the reveals added to the game. Ultimately, the heated discussions appeared to be about who gets to belong in *Overwatch* -- as a character or as a player.

By following these discussions, we examine the transmedia universe of *Overwatch* as a place of belonging and non-belonging through online player discussions. *Overwatch* is a rich transmedia universe; consisting both of official products (including the game, comics, animated shorts, written short stories, toys, collectibles and esports) and of the fan produced content (such as fan art and fan fiction). We situate our examination in the axis of production and reception, thus we take into account several ongoing design choices in the development of the game, as well as the players' and audiences' choices in how they engage with *Overwatch*. Through our analysis, we aim to answer the following research questions: How is belonging constructed through playable characters in *Overwatch*? Who is privileged in *Overwatch* communities? What is the influence of design and production?

## Theoretical Framework

Players can experience a sense of belonging to games and the transmedial worlds they are part of (Pietersen et al., 2018). There nevertheless exist ongoing negotiations and struggles over who has the right to belong to these spaces, particularly if we understand belonging as not merely being present (and thus having access to) but to function akin to the concept of identity. Meanwhile, according to Probyn (1996) belonging "captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fueled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state" (cf. Lähdesmäki et al., 2016, p. 19). When belonging is understood in this kind of highly affective way, having a sense of belonging can be a constantly shifting, contested and intensive experience which is always relational to the location of belonging and to those one belongs with. This also makes it a vulnerable state which can be more easily attained by some than others -- who might yet long for it.

As Lähdesmäki et al. (2016, p. 236) show, belonging is commonly understood in connection to "place, space and boundaries" and in relation to "geographical, social, and temporal spaces." In our data, spaces include mainly digital spaces (especially the game itself and online discussion forums), but also physical spaces. These spaces have become marked as places for the players, that is, known, occupied and inhabited (Ricoeur, 2004). They are also marked by particular norms, albeit contested, and by uses of language (gamer slang, memes, game-related terminology). Cornel Sandvoss (2014, p. 115) has argued that since "both texts and places are *socially constructed through symbols, discourses and representations* … places are also always texts." When understanding each of these *Overwatch* related platforms as texts, "the process of selecting between the fields of different texts and paratexts becomes crucial to the formation of meaning among different audience groups" (Sandvoss, 2014, p. 117).

Multiple scholarly works have addressed related issues and highlighted that more commonly than not white heterosexual men still maintain the position of power in the majority of game communities (e.g., Consalvo, 2012; Paul, 2018). This position of power can translate to feeling at home and an ease of belonging while those not part of the dominant group can find themselves struggling for the right to belong on their own terms.

While fans of games generally fight with game developers, companies and journalists over who has the right to create meaning and value, whether the games are successful or not (cf. Navarro-Remesal, 2017), the struggles also take place in the game communities themselves. Games have long been made for a certain audience in mind: that of white, young, heterosexual men and the content of games has long reflected that -- themes such as war, which is traditionally coded masculine, and characters adhering to traditional masculinity have been often favored by game developers (Kirkpatrick, 2016). While there have been some forms of LGBTQ representation in videogames from early on, this has usually centered around individual characters; particularly common has been having one LGBTQ characters in an otherwise heterosexual gameworld and often the attitudes of other characters towards the LGBTQ characters have been hostile or

demeaning (Shaw et al., 2019). The developer of *Overwatch*, Blizzard Entertainment, also has a problematic past with their management of LGBTQ players and communities in their other hit multiplayer game, *World of Warcraft* (Pulos, 2013). In 2006, Blizzard Entertainment banned a player from advertising an LGBTQ guild, claiming that this would make the player a target of harassment, thus insisting that sexuality has no place it the game, whilst heteronormative sexuality has always been part of the game (Pulos, 2013). After a backlash from the players, Blizzard eventually changed their policy and stance towards LGBTQ guilds (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018). Furthermore, whilst the developers' stance towards LGBTQ communities has varied from hostile to indifferent in the past, there has always been ways LGBTQ players have carved space for themselves in *World of Warcraft* (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018).

In the past ten years, more diversity has started to emerge, and queer content has also become part of game narratives. For instance, in the *Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) there is a same-sex relationship between the main character Ellie and another character Riley, and this relationship is central in the expansion pack *Last of Us: Left Behind* (Naughty Dog, 2014). According to Daniel Sipocz (2018), both the characters and the story are well developed and create positive representation. Blizzard Entertainment has also radically shifted its stance in relation to LGBTQ players and communities, for instance by establishing a queer-friendly server in *World of Warcraft* (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018).

Another prominent example is *Undertale* (2015), which includes a nonbinary protagonist referred with they/them pronouns and romantic queer storylines. However, the reception of *Undertale* has also demonstrated that the presence of LGTBQ content in games does not necessarily mean that the game is read through that content. Bonnie Ruberg (2018) argues that *Undertale* has been straightwashed in its reception, by the community and game critics often focusing on aspects other than the queer elements in the game. This includes the praise of innovative mechanics rather than narrative [1], praise of *Undertale's* nostalgic appeal, which defines the game as "gamer's game," (Ruberg, 2018, 3.9) thus effectively whitewashing the audience as well, and presenting the game as fundamentally comical, which also invites to laugh at the game's LGTBQ characters (Ruberg, 2018).

Intertwining of political discourses and pop culture discussions underlines engagement with popular cultural texts as new forms of citizenship (Sandvoss, 2014). Player communities are not essentially political, but become politicized over these struggles over belonging (cf. Dean, 2017). Playable characters function as the focus and a vehicle for these politicized negotiations of belonging in our data. In game studies, an understanding of characters as "sets of capabilities" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, pp. 97-98) or "cursors" (e.g., Newman, 2009) has often been foregrounded, but game characters do also have representational power (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Schröter & Thon, 2018), and this dimension of characters is central to these struggles over belonging.

## Data and Method

This article is part of a larger research project on *Overwatch* focused on how the players of *Overwatch* and the viewers of *Overwatch* esports engage with its transmedial world. In our previous research, we found that sexual orientation of game characters as well as esports players was important for the respondents' engagement with them (Välisalo & Ruotsalainen 2019). In order to examine how this is connected to how players construct belonging in *Overwatch*, we gathered discussions from the official *Overwatch* forums and from the discussion forum Reddit.

We gathered discussions around three different topics:

- **In 2016, *Overwatch* character Tracer, who is also on the cover of the game, was revealed to have a girlfriend.** In *Overwatch*, stories are not told in the game itself, but in different transmedia expansions, all together creating a transmedial world (Blom, 2018). In December 2016, Blizzard

published a web comic *Reflections*, which depicted the holidays of some of the *Overwatch* We are also introduced to Tracer's girlfriend, Emily, and see Tracer kissing her. *Overwatch* officially revealed its first queer hero. Soon after, designer Michael Chu (2016) confirmed in Twitter that Tracer identifies as lesbian. We examine related discussions from the official *Overwatch* forums.

- **In 2019, Soldier:76 was revealed to have been in a relationship with a man.** In January 2019, Blizzard published an online short story *Bastet* in which Jack Morrison (later known as Soldier:76) reminisces about the past during a mission and talks with another playable character, Ana, about his ex-partner Vincent while gazing at a photograph of them together. Thus, through *Bastet* Blizzard revealed their second queer character. Later, designer Michael Chu (2019) confirmed in Twitter that Soldier:76 is gay. We examined discussions from the official forum related to the event.

- **Character Symmetra's role as a gay icon.** The subreddit r/symmetramains describes itself as LGBTQ friendly, and discussants consider Symmetra a gay icon. We examine discussions where the players reflect on their sexual orientation and their relationships with Symmetra.

It is worth noting that the Tracer and Soldier:76 reveals gained major media attention (Parshakow et. al. 2022) that we as researchers were aware of. However, the conceptualization of Symmetra as gay icon has rather been a quiet undercurrent, constructed amongst the players.

The analyzed data was gathered on three different occasions. First, the data concerning Tracer was gathered from the previous official Blizzard *Overwatch* forum, which was closed on 20 February 2018. The discussions were gathered from the "General" section of the United States versions of the forum. The United States version of the forum was chosen because it was considerably more active than the European version of the forum. The data consisted of one big megathread (1020 pages in pdf format) that hosted the discussions about Tracer's sexuality at the time. This data was gathered on 7 February 2018, and contained messages posted between December 2016 and February 2018. This data was gathered with search phrase *Tracer & lesbian*.

The discussions on the second topic, one concerning Soldier:76, were gathered from the current official Blizzard *Overwatch* forums; the United States version. The data was collected between 25 March and 26 April 2019, with the following search phrases "soldier" & "gay"; "soldier" & "lgbt"; "soldier" & "reveal." This data included 37 discussions (441 pages). The data concerning the third topic was gathered from two locations: official Blizzard *Overwatch* forums, the United States version and Reddit's subreddit r/symmetramains. This data consists of 11 discussions (430 pages) in total. The discussions were collected in February 2020. The data was purposefully collected from two different discussion forums: when reading the discussions on the official Blizzard *Overwatch* forums, we would occasionally run into mentions of Symmetra as a gay icon. This notion was rarely expanded upon, but it nonetheless seemed important to the discussants. By exploring it further using data gathered from r/symmetramain discussions, we were able to understand the phenomenon better and give voice to the players who saw her as their icon and were usually sexual or gender minorities.

Since our data is mainly collected from discussion forums, our analysis is limited to how belonging is articulated there. It is also important to note that not all players are involved in the forums, not to mention active in them, and it is possible to play the game without knowledge of the debates related to the fictional world of the game. It is also possible to play the game without engaging with the character's background stories, which are told through different transmedia expansions. Therefore, our findings are limited to players who have at least some knowledge of the stories told outside the game itself, and who participate in discussions on the aforementioned online forums. Nevertheless, these discussions reflect the discourses emerging around the game more generally.

As our method of analysis, we apply rhetoric-performative discourse analysis (Palonen & Saresma, 2017). Rhetoric-performative discourse

analysis is an approach originally developed for the research of populism and politics. This approach understands political discourses as inherently saturated by affects and persuasive rhetoric, but it also considers the role of rhetoric as not limited to persuasion, but rather sees rhetoric, like Palonen (2019, 3) puts it, as "topology, logics." What this means is that words, speech and other forms of persuasion (including material things such as buildings) do not merely address "things," positions and identities in the world, but rather construct them with differing and sometimes contradicting forms of logic (Palonen 2019). Here it also becomes evident that rhetoric-performative discourse analysis draws from Butler's (1990) definition of performative as something that constructs identities through repetition and from the viewpoint of post-structuralist discourse theory. Thus, when applying rhetoric-performative discourse analysis, the focus is not only on the discourses, but also on the logics or topologies used to construct these discourses and the meanings these discourses bring into existence through repetition (Palonen 2019).

It is also worth noting that when examining discourses revolving around games, not politics nor political discourses, similar trends of persuasive rhetoric can often be found; together with constructing the constitutive difference which defines the abstract "us" from others. Indeed, it has become increasingly hard to separate fiction, politics and performance, as politics have increasingly become an inherent part of online and fan communities and politics has adapted more performative approaches (Dean, 2017). This makes the chosen method of analysis all the more apt.

In practice, the data was analyzed in Atlas.ti software using data-driven coding, meaning that the codes were generated during the coding process as opposed to using a pre-existing coding scheme. This meant that the data was read through repeatedly as new codes emerged in the process. The codes were then reviewed, and redundant codes were removed or merged with existing codes. Individual codes were then grouped to form broader topics. The codes and code groups were then used to identify individual discourses. Exploring the re-occurrences and proximities of different code groups revealed how the discourses were structured, and what kind of relationships and dynamics existed between different discourses.

## Analysis

Analyzing the discussions, we identified several different discourses. These discourses were further grouped into five categories (see Table 1). Many of the discussion entries included expressions of discourses from several different categories. We named the categories as follows: (1) consumer, (2) authenticity, (3) auteur, (4) LGBTQ representation and (5) resistance discourses. These categories are based on how the discussants argue their comments related to the three cases related to non-heterosexual characters in *Overwatch*: the reveal of Tracer's sexuality, the reveal of Soldier: 76's sexuality and the position of Symmetra as a queer idol. We will first describe the discourses in these categories and analyze how they construct belonging in *Overwatch*. We will then describe what kind of understanding about the game characters, games and their functions in culture these discourses are based on.

| Discourses | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| Consumer discourses | <ul><li>**Game** as service</li><li>**Character:** narrative dimension inferior to mechanics</li><li>**Players:** A hierarchy of players</li></ul> |
| Auteur discourses | <ul><li>**Game** as art</li><li>**Character:** narrative dimension emphasized</li><li>**Players:** should respect and yield to the designers</li></ul> |
| | <ul><li>**Game** as entertainment; game as</li></ul> |

| | |
|---|---|
| Authenticity discourses | a transmedia production<br>• **Character:** narrative dimension and narrative cohesion emphasized<br>• **Players:** implied differences in interpretative skills |
| LGBTQ representation discourses | • **Game** as art/entertainment; games have a function in societal discussion<br>• **Character**: tool for self-representation<br>• **Players**: divided |
| Resistance discourses | • **Game** as art/entertainment<br>• **Character:** tool for self-representation; narrative and simulation intertwined<br>• **Players**: divided |

Table 1.

## Consumer Discourses

In the official *Overwatch* forum, a popular topic of discussion relating to the reveals of queer characters was speculation and appraisal on the reasons behind these reveals. Those expressing dissatisfaction repeatedly argued that Blizzard did it to placate or gratify the most vocal audiences.

> If you don't play the game anymore, and only ask for more lore. Then my demands should be met before yours. Call it selfish, whatever. Blizzard should be putting the people who PLAY their game at top priority. Blizzard should focus on pleasing the people who hadn't given up on their game, rather than the people who only come here every now and then for lore. (Soldier:76 discussion)

Here, the game is framed as a service and active players are framed as good customers whose loyalty should be rewarded by investing resources into what is valuable to them. This and similar comments construct a hierarchy between different groups around the game: loyal players, for whom "lore" -- that is, the fictional content of the game -- is not important, and those, who are interested in the lore, and do not even necessarily play the game. The position of loyal players is constructed using strong rhetoric, which at the same time works to build a normative category of the ideal community member. Creating a hierarchy between different groups promotes one mode of participation in the game, playing it, as more valuable than other modes of engagement.

> just presume they're [characters are] all gay, they keep the fandom happy with it... the people who just think about what the characters do in bed but don't actually play the game. (Soldier:76 discussion)

In this and a few other comments terms "fan" or "fandom" are used as a negative label. It is important to note, however, that this understanding of "fans" is not prevalent in the broader *Overwatch* community, but is used in a negative manner in this particular discursive context.

In a parallel discourse, it was argued Blizzard made the reveals to gain media attention, essentially using them as a marketing tool to attain new players. Players again appear as discontent customers, who are not getting the updates they deserve, but are instead neglected in favor of potential new customers. These discourses construct a community hierarchy where active long-time players are at the top. A few comments also infer the reveals as disrupting a previously balanced situation, as in the following comment on the Tracer reveal.

> What you guys may think is constructive or destructive may not be the same for many of your customers… And if the ones in authority pander to a certain side then you have inequality. (Tracer discussion)

All these consumer discourses deliver a picture of players as customers, who are somehow wronged by Blizzard through the reveals of non-heterosexual characters. Commentators simultaneously underline how they can see through the game company's (to them) condemnable motives and see the result as a decline in game quality. Consumer discourses also create a hierarchy of content. Discussants argue that players are more interested in changes and additions to the game that make the actual gameplay better and feel let down by "only" getting lore. Narrative content is thus seen as inferior to other additions to the game. In terms of characters, this rhetoric elevates their abilities over their personality and backstory. This ultimately serves to devalue queer content and queer readings (cf. Young, 2014).

**Auteur Discourses**

Auteur discourses approach the game as a work of art with a specific creator or creators. The concept of authorship in digital games can seem paradoxical, since commercial games can have hundreds of people working on them, but if authorship is recognized, it is often the lead designer who is seen in that role due to their creative control, similarly to a director in cinema (Stein, 2015, pp. 9, 11). As auteur theory in film studies forefronts the director (Sarris, 1968), so do auteur discourses in our data forefront the game's lead writer Michael Chu. Auteur discourses arise as counter-discourses to those criticizing the reveals of characters' homosexuality. They appeal in their argumentation to the game's designers and developers, and in the case of Soldier:76, specifically lead writer Michael Chu -- this is likely due to him confirming the character's sexual identity in a Twitter post (7.1.2019). These auteur discourses argued a sentiment that the designer has the ultimate power over the game, and players have no right to demand anything or complain about the content.

> [Because] you're not the writer. If you want to make something happen you create your own stories and characters instead of expecting the writer to do it for ya. Make a name for yourself like what this writer is doing… (Soldier:76 discussion)

This and similar comments around the reveal of Soldier:76 underline the authority of the designer. They are in direct contradiction to consumer discourses foregrounding the players instead of considering the game, at least its fictional content, as the domain of its creators. Here, the designer's role is presented as that of an artist, beyond commercial demands. Any attempt by the players to influence design choices is seen as inappropriate or out of place.

> Michael Chu writes characters he likes to write. They aren't forcing it. It's whinebois who forced writers, artists and other creatives to self-censor for centuries, not evil SJWs pushing their agenda… (Soldier:76 discussion)

Here, the attempts to demand changes to the game are linked to censorship, thus framing the game as art and any attempts to influence it as condemnable. However, many of these comments do not express an opinion for or against the reveals themselves, but rather attempt to argue for ending this kind of discussion altogether. The designer's power is seen as ultimate, and the designer's authority over their work as unquestioned. Thus, discussion over whether the reveals were good or bad, or if they can be accepted, is deemed unnecessary. An optional and more appropriate outlet for criticism is described in a few of the comments:

> Or did you ever thought the writer probably has an attraction for that than just doing it solely for you? You wanna change it? Grab a pen and start your fan fiction or sit here complain expecting something to magically entitlement happen for ya. (Soldier:76 discussion)

The commenter offers fan writing as an option for creating a more agreeable character portrayal. This is an intriguing comment considering that fan fiction has historically been the place for fans to create storylines and character interpretations that challenge the often-heterosexual normativity of the official stories. The process of excluding LGBTQ characters and themes from mainstream fictional

content, and pushing it to the boundaries of media audience practices, is here being reversed.

In auteur discourses, the power over who gets to belong to *Overwatch* is simultaneously bestowed on the designers through the kind of characters they choose to write, but also taken by the commenters by labeling certain discussions as not desirable in the game community.

**Authenticity Discourses**

Authenticity has been a recurring theme in discussions of popular culture and its reception (e.g., Frith, 2007; Kytölä & Westinen, 2015; Amey, 2018). The reveals of queer characters are discussed in our data at length in terms of authenticity, which is here understood as both fidelity to what is already known about the characters, as well as the overall coherence of the fictional world of *Overwatch*.

> The problem is that they made him gay for the sake of being gay. He's a bland character, it doesn't make him any interesting. No backstory to his life, nothing we know of him now, when suddenly "I'M GAY Why? To cater to LGBT community? Work on other stuff first? Like, sure, always happy to see more representation of LGBT, sure. But why now? Why him? It doesn't make sense, it was just shoehorned into the comic ffs! (Soldier:76 discussion)

> I am also a straight heterosexual guy who saw Soldier 76, who was formally the Commander of Overwatch and was now this, "battle-hardened" guy who now lurked behind the scenes to "get the job done." It didn't matter that he was straight, gay, or have any sexual orientation whatsoever. I liked him, because he was all about BATTLE. What they did here, is literally like having a movie for Transformers and saying "Oh hey, Optimus Prime is gay." I can see Zen being gay, hell even junkrat, and Roadhog, could totally see it. But Soldier 76?? SOLDIER 76??? Hello? (Soldier:76 discussion)

These comments echo many similar ones arguing that Soldier:76 being homosexual is not consistent with what is already known about the character. The latter comment considers heteromasculinity as part of the character's core, something that should be left untouched. The perceived conflict between Soldier:76 as a stereotypical heterosexual hypermasculine hero and his newly revealed homosexuality was a source of highly affective reactions such as this one. This is where male and female characters are clearly judged differently since similar discussions are not present in the Tracer data. Another discourse, sometimes interwoven with this one, objects to how the reveal was written.

> It was unfitting. I don't even think Ana does that with pharahs photos, so the fact soldier is doing that with his ex boyfriend from decades ago is super weird. (Soldier:76 discussion)

> I just want to say wouldn't it feel much better if the reveal was more like Tracer's? where we have an entire comic about her, and then we see her GF and that stuff, Soldiers reveal while good, it feels a bit...dunno...random? like, its a comic about ana, not about him, i would much prefer to see it in a comic about Soldier. (Soldier:76 discussion)

These comments criticize the plausibility of the revelation in terms of both the character and the scene, and also evaluates it in relation to other fictional characters and their storylines, thus, the context of the larger fictional world of *Overwatch*. The latter quotation also makes a note of how the reveal was made in terms of production -- in a comic about another character. This is a recurring discussion topic: questioning not just *how* the reveal was made in the narrative, but also *where* the reveal was made. Since the reveal was not part of any transmedial content focusing on Soldier:76 specifically, it is considered as less authentic. This shows that authenticity of new content in the transmedia universe is not judged only on the rules of the fictional world, but also on the production logic of the transmedia extensions. Similarly, discussions of authenticity around the Tracer reveal are repeatedly linked to production. There the main interest is on authorial intent, whether the reveal was designed in advance or not.

Those defending the authenticity of the reveal remind others that Blizzard had promised to bring homosexual characters into the game (e.g., Higgins, 2015), thus appealing to the company as a higher authority. In the case of Soldier:76, the character was already seen looking at a photograph of two men in the *Reflections* web comic, and for many, this was proof that the reveal was pre-designed well in advance, and thus, consistent with existing information about the character.

In discussions related to both reveals, there were also arguments against pre-design, and some of these comments include alternative explanations to the scene revealing Soldier:76's past relationship.

> Straight dudes take pictures together ALL THE TIME though... It's just this world that we live in just like to pre-assume. (Soldier:76 discussion)

This comment exemplifies the discourse that denies the reveal, altogether offering alternative interpretations aimed to exclude queer readings of earlier events. Indeed, this is an example of *straightwashing* the game content through player reception (Ruberg, 2018).

Authenticity discourses, whether focusing on how the reveal was made in terms of the narrative, storytelling, or transmedia production, appear to forefront the text over any human subject, but essentially they posit the power of authority to those claiming to know *Overwatch* best, which means the writers of these comments themselves; almost positioning them as quality controllers.

### LGBTQ Representation Discourses

LGBTQ representation is obviously important for all the discussions analyzed here. However, certain discourses related specifically to representation and its relationship to games and game characters are particularly prevalent in the data.

> I'm an lgbt+ person myself. I won't go into too much detail but, just know that seeing Tracer have a girlfriend made me happy. And what's wrong with things making people happy? Especially things from a piece of fiction they really enjoy! That's why I don't get a lot of people saying "who cares! It's not real!" well, yeah but characters are made for you be invested in and to relate to. Otherwise, fictional stories and worlds be boring and sterile. (Tracer discussion)

This comment exemplifies the use of characters in constructing belonging in *Overwatch.* Queer characters are thus seen as important means of identification and minority representation in the game. This is often intertwined with the discourse about Blizzard caring about representation. In discussions about Soldier:76, this discourse was backed up by Blizzard's previous statements and actions, especially the Tracer reveal. The discourse shares similarities with the consumer discourses in how it portrays the ideal relationship between Blizzard and its players, but even more it appeals to Blizzard's societal responsibility and is thus rooted in understanding games as having a societal function.

It is also noteworthy that while many embraced the importance of queer characters, there were also discussants who identified as queer and, consistent with earlier findings (Shaw, 2012), highlighted other practices and actions that would be more important for them, such as moderation of pejorative and offensive language used by other players while playing the game.

A prevalent counter-discourse to the importance of LGBTQ representation focused on condemning what was seen as sexualizing the game characters.

> I feel like [Tracer] kissing is kind of sexualizing a video game character itself. I mean she's an fps character, not usually much room for that to come up. (Tracer discussion)

This discourse was unique to the Tracer discussions and did not appear in the case of Soldier:76. This is another indication of how male and female characters are viewed differently in this regard. This

discourse enforces a framing of heterosexuality as neutral and non-sexual and homosexuality as "too" sexual, something better left ignored (cf. Platt & Lenzen, 2013). It also disregards any notion of representation in games as important in itself. Some discussants say it outright:

> Doesn't annoy me, just think that sexuality should be left out of games, it doesn't make any difference honestly. Feels more natural to let the players think what they want. (Soldier:76 discussion)

This comment argues that leaving (homo)sexuality out of the game creates space for fans' own interpretations. It is an example of another representation-related discourse: sexuality does not belong in the game. This discourse denies the significance of sexuality of the fictional characters, and can also be seen as another, though more subtle, form of straightwashing (Ruberg, 2018). While some of the comments in this discourse were from those not happy with the reveals, even more were from those claiming to be indifferent.

> I'm not offended by this, since I don't really care about the age, looks, gender or sexual preference of game characters. They are characters in a video game. Why do people make a big deal about Tracer's girlfriend, I really don't know. I honestly think people are just so lonely or make too much out of the games they play. (Tracer discussion)

The latter comment and similar others echo geek, fan and player stereotypes, where individuals deeply engaging with popular culture are seen as immature and insecure loners, who in the case of *Overwatch* use the game as a mental crutch; something to get them through their lives (cf. Jenkins, 1992; Williams, 2005; Young, 2014). Thus, players interested in characters' sexualities or lives beyond the actual gameplay are framed in a negative light, and different from those with more mature ways of engagement. These comments disregard the notion of other functions or meanings for game characters besides their immediate use in the game.

> Was it really necessary to introduce a characters sexuality when it has no bearing on the game, how is tracers sex life in anyway relevant? Are we going to start seeing Republican McCree? Democrat Lucio? What about an Atheist Soldier76 I play games to escape politics and the conflicts of the world, not to [immerse] myself in them, but it seems people don't share that same view. (Tracer discussion)

These comments parallel homosexuality with other traditionally sensitive topics such as religion and politics. Many more outright consider homosexuality as a current political topic and as such too sensitive to be discussed in games.

> I don't want to deal with the whole ISIS/Gender equity etc while playing overwatch ...also gender/sexuality is deeply political at this point in time, you can't even separate some political parties and their views on sexuality. (Tracer discussion)

> Personally, I find it extremely pandering. As though Blizzard is trying to be hip and cool and trendy so they make one of their signature characters gay/bi. I consider it pretty tasteless and forced, but hey, its 2016, year of the special snowflake. (Tracer discussion)

This discourse of homosexuality as too political for games is also apparent in comments where those approving of the reveals are described as "liberals," "social justice warriors," or "snowflakes." These terms are particularly present in the discussions from 2016 relating to Tracer reveal. At the time these labels spread widely as part of Gamergate debates and later on as part of the alt right movement (Bezio, 2018), and when used in discussions over Tracer they carried with them meanings from other contexts, labelling those demanding representation as "snowflakes," overly sensitive and immature -- a term also used by the American political right to "attack political correctness" (McIntosh, 2020, p. 85), or "SJWs" or "social justice warriors," only focused on identity politics over all else (Massanari & Chess, 2018).

**Resistance Discourses**

While Soldier:76 and Tracer are queer characters created by the designers, Symmetra, is hailed as a "gay icon" by players. This interpretation of the character is particularly present in the Reddit subreddit r/symmetramains and is constructed in numerous ways.

> Gay icons are not necessarily gay. She's an underdog, sassy, and graceful. For lack of a better word she is fabulous. She is a QUEEN. Just look at her 'take a seat' emote. My favourite voice line of hers is when she gets a solo kill and says 'Perfection!' (Symmetra discussion)

> Symmetra is such an icon and so many of us who play Symmetra are lgbtq. She appeals to so many aesthetics in the community! And also playing Symmetra is relatable to the lgbt experience lol. (Symmetra discussion)

The last comment here refers to her gameplay. Symmetra's, what could be called "queer game mechanics" (Engel, 2017), do not follow the traditional FPS mechanics where aiming skills are crucial. Instead, particularly the older iteration of Symmetra did not rely on aim in order to do damage. Symmetra's gameplay mechanics can thus be seen as somewhat deviant and simultaneously accessible for those who have not acquired masses of particular kind of "gamer capital" through playing classic FPS games (cf. Consalvo, 2007). This serves to invite also players without a background in FPS games -- traditionally hostile spaces for minorities (Nakamura, 2012) -- to play a dps (damage per second) hero. This furthermore highlights Symmetra's presence as "other," alternative and queer -- not only within the *Overwatch* transmedia expansions, but also within the game itself.

In addition to Symmetra's game mechanics, the discussants focus on two other aspects about Symmetra as a gay icon. First, many of them identifying as queer mentioned being drawn to Symmetra because she is considered an underdog in the game: a rarely picked dps character who is often seen as somewhat "gimmicky" or even weak. She is portrayed as being on the autism spectrum and thus facing particular challenges while making her way in the world. Second, Symmetra is constantly referred to as the Queen, describing her looks and attitude, and she is named by many discussants as a gay icon comparable to Madonna or Judy Garland. These discourses are antithetical to the consumer discourses in how the discussants position themselves in relation to the game company. Where consumer discourses position players as customers who expect and deserve different levels of service from Blizzard, resistance discourses position Symmetra players outside of these communities and beyond these dynamics.

Simultaneously, some discussants in the *Overwatch* forums are actively against Symmetra being a gay icon, arguing that this has not been mandated by the developers. Aforementioned auteur discourse is used here to counter the unofficial queer reading, as with Tracer and Soldier:76 it was used to support the official queer reading. This goes hand in hand with attempts to regulate and contain the space where queerness can exist in *Overwatch*: the threads discussing queer heroes and representation in the official *Overwatch* forums are often falsely flagged as offensive by other players and thus locked by administrators. Consequently, discussion then happens elsewhere, like in the dedicated subreddit. There, the discourses of Symmetra as a gay icon also outright oppose the auteur approach, rejecting the game's official LGBT representation.

> Sym is a gay icon more than tracer or Soldier(lol) will ever be. I am a straight male and I am fine with being associated as a gay guy. (Soldier:76 discussion)

In this and similar comments, playing Symmetra and framing her as a gay icon thus appear as ways of resisting the heteronormative masculinity in game culture. It also makes visible how playing Symmetra can expose players to harassment from other players, thus making the struggle to belong all the more arduous.

## Discussion

Different discourses around the non-heterosexual *Overwatch* characters build different understandings of who is allowed to belong to the game. Arguments against the plausibility of the story revealing

Soldier:76's homosexuality attempt to write out gay Soldier:76 as someone not real, not belonging to the *Overwatch* canon. Similarly, lesbian or bi-sexual character Tracer is portrayed as an oversexualized version of herself. In these discourses of authenticity and representation, homosexuality -- and in the case of Soldier:76 specifically homosexual masculinity -- is framed as something deviant and not belonging to games. An opposing discourse frames LGBTQ players as a group needing and demanding to be represented in the game in order to belong and understands non-heterosexual characters as a part of this process.

The understanding of Symmetra as a gay icon is a form of resistance to the possibilities of identification and queer-friendly space seemingly provided through Soldier:76 and Tracer. Through Symmetra discussions, power dynamics are changed by framing the sexuality of game characters as dependent on player interpretation rather than mere designer choice. Even more, resistance is aimed at a more general *Overwatch* community, which is perceived as heteronormative and hostile to queer players by Symmetra fans and players. In the Symmetra Reddit community, LGBTQ players are empowered through their own character interpretation of Symmetra. Their own community, its practices and their belonging to *Overwatch* is structured through belonging to the community of Symmetra fans. Here, players are creating a self-sustaining queer representation and are simultaneously carving out a space for queer players to belong to. These practices by LGBTQ players, where they create a space for themselves, are not new. They have existed for a long time with games such as *World of Warcraft*, where players have attempted and also succeeded in creating alternative and safe spaces to play (Sihvonen & Stenros 2018). However, as this space in *Overwatch* is mostly separate from the official or mainstream gamespaces, and while fans and players can switch between places such as discussion boards and the game, they might not always be able to construct their immediate space of play with similar parameters. Those playing Symmetra constantly encounter hate from other players -- thus enforcing her status as the underdog, but they also make players aware of these decisions when negotiating belonging. Do they play Symmetra and strengthen their belonging to the community surrounding her? Or do they cave in and play characters they are expected to play to fit in?

Consumer discourses articulate belonging in even more directly. They attempt to define different members of the *Overwatch* community as belonging to the game in varying degrees. Belonging to the community of *Overwatch* players is a privilege gained by investing resources, such as time and money. In these discourses, the player is a customer who can expect and demand things from the company. The discussions construct right and wrong ways of answering these demands, and lines are drawn based on who has the right to make these demands and whose voice should count the most, or at all. "Players" are juxtaposed with "fans," in order to create a division and hierarchy between "real" players interested in gameplay mechanics first, and "fans," more interested in narrative, whose ways of engaging with the game are not seen as valuable. Traditionally, appreciating game mechanics is constructed as masculine and part of authentic "gamer" identity, while interest in fictional content and game graphics are seen as feminine "fluff" (Kirkpatrick, 2016). These discourses are not only related to constructing belonging on an individual level, but they are also competing over which group forms the "real" *Overwatch* community or the one that matters most. The active subject and authority of good or bad design choices in these discourses is the player or player community.

Other mechanisms of constructing belonging in the game are related to giving and taking power over meaning-making. The fictional world, its characters and their integrity are the focal points of these auteur and authenticity discourses, rather than players and their needs. The active subject is the expert, in auteur discourses the designers or in authenticity discourses the knowledgeable fan. While the "auteur" designer doesn't have to prove their expertise directly (only through their work), the fans need to make their case by presenting evidence and building their argumentation based on their knowledge of this

work. Thus, these discourses are used to construct belonging in a group of experts, either as players or fans. Players are considered experts with extensive knowledge of the game who engage deeply with it, while fans are experts that know enough to respect the "auteur" expert as someone with the final authority over *Overwatch*, and who demand the same respect from others as well. Utilizing fan studies approaches, these discourses can be seen as manifestations of affirmational fandom, with its focus in "how things really are," as opposed to transformational fandom, where things are imagined differently like how Symmetra is considered a gay icon (Jenkins et al., 2014; obsession_inc, 2009).

Negotiations over the right to belong in *Overwatch* are also interconnected with other cultural spheres and their similar struggles. As our analysis has shown, some discourses of representation use negative geek stereotypes to create divisions between immature and "correct" ways of engaging with *Overwatch*. Other discourses label those demanding representation as "social justice warriors" or "snowflakes," pejorative terms borrowed from Gamergate and political discourses, and are here used to describe players who were seen to unnecessarily bring politics into the game. Thus, interdiscursivity was employed to show who does not belong, to shut particular players out.

Even though discussions analyzed in this research were focused on game characters, the characters themselves have a varying degree of importance and varying roles in different discourses. An overarching understanding of game characters as artifacts, products created by Blizzard and game designers, is present in the discussions. Sexuality belongs to the character's fictional dimension, and many discourses analyzed here juxtapose the narrative and mechanics of characters. In contrast, resistance discourses underline the meaning of mechanics in viewing Symmetra as a gay icon, as in one comment quoted above: "playing Symmetra is relatable to the lgbt experience."

## Conclusion

Inclusion of queer characters does not automatically mean more accessibility for players, but it does widen the way belonging can be negotiated by giving LGBTQ players an "authority" (the game designer) they can refer to while defending their right to belong. In the case of *Overwatch*, this can be hindered by how characters' sexualities are not mentioned in the game itself, but are essentially negotiated on the edges of the *Overwatch* transmedia universe. What can be seen as a balancing force is the presence of queer game mechanics with the character Symmetra. Symmetra's position as a gay icon reveals how a character who is not "officially queer" becomes the mark of a LGBTQ community, much due to the design of both her aesthetics and gameplay.

Discourses related to non-heterosexual game characters, either as designed by Blizzard or interpreted by the players, reveal how belonging to *Overwatch* transmedia universe is constructed through playable characters. Different underlying understandings of digital games and their function are operationalized in these discourses. Belonging is constructed in the interaction between different groups of players, game's creators and larger society -- essentially in the dynamics between production and consumption.

Our findings show that discussions around the introduction of queer heroes function as attempts to define what and who belongs in the game's spaces and who has the right to define. These discussions demonstrate various means through which belonging is constructed. While the reception of queer heroes did contain criticism of narrative coherence and questioning the authenticity of these particular queer heroes, the discussions expanded beyond the diegetic world of *Overwatch* -- touching upon highly politized issues such as sexuality and violence in games, the right to be represented and the current political climate in the US. The divisions reenacted the divisions prevalent in general discussions of identity politics. Characters function as a central point for both entering and understanding the *Overwatch* universe and as a nexus for these political debates. They function as limits and horizons for belonging.

Indications of straightwashing content in *Overwatch* transmedia demonstrate the limits that representation alone can have. Despite attempts by the game's designers to incorporate diverse characters and take representation of different groups into consideration, there are practices and effects in player communities that struggle for conserving alternative meanings. Results of our analysis indicate that advancing inclusivity in game cultures needs the input of sexuality, gender and ethnicity as more than just tidbits in the game narrative in transmedia expansions more or less distant from the actual gameplay. It also makes it clear game companies should listen to the community in order to understand what the marginalized groups themselves need.

## Acknowledgements

## Endnotes

[1] It is also worth noting that according to Graeme Kirkpatrick (2016), one of the elements of coding games as masculine has been the focus on mechanics rather than graphics or storylines.

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