JYU DISSERTATIONS 599

Tanja Välisalo

# Who is your favourite character?

## Audience engagement with fictional characters

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND
SOCIAL SCIENCES

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# ABSTRACT

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Transmediality, where narratives and fictional worlds are dispersed on multiple media platforms, has become a dominant feature of media production. As fictional characters are central to our relationship with stories and storyworlds, the transition into transmediality poses the question of how audiences engage with fictional characters in transmedia. This dissertation addresses this question empirically by focusing on how audiences articulate and construct character engagement, how character engagement is positioned in relation to transmedia engagement in general, and how character engagement is intertwined with broader meaning-making processes.

This empirical study was conducted within two contexts, the audiences of *The Hobbit* film trilogy and the players of the multiplayer online game, *Overwatch*. Both media products are part of a larger transmedia universe. The main research data consisted of surveys and online discussions. Textual data from survey responses and online discussions were analysed using open coding and thematic analysis, and discourse analysis methodology was applied to parts of the online discussions. These methods were supplemented by descriptive statistics and analysis of transmedia content.

The results offer empirical evidence to the notion that character engagement is connected to how audiences engage with the transmedia universe. Audiences articulate character engagement based on character traits, such as appearance, personality, gender, sexuality, as well as elements of character creation, such as character design or actor's performance. Analysis of these articulations revealed different interpretative contexts for character engagement: (1) individual text/work, (2) transmedia universe, (3), genre(s), (4) medium(s), and (5) socio-cultural context(s). Different audiences prioritize different contexts, which can lead to negotiations and struggles over meanings. These articulations and negotiations reveal and construct hierarchies among audiences and creators. Characters are also used in in creating places of belonging outside of these structures. Fictional characters are indeed central to our relationship with fiction; however, they are also important in negotiating, defining and constructing broader structures of belonging, identity, and power through fiction.

Keywords: fictional character, game character, film character, character engagement, transmedia, audience, fans, players, audience studies

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Välisalo, Tanja
Kuka on lempihahmosi? Yleisön kiinnittyminen fiktiivisiin hahmoihin
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Transmedia, jossa narratiivit ja fiktiiviset maailmat muodostuvat samanaikaisesti useissa eri mediamuodoissa, on tullut vallitsevaksi mediatuotannon muodoksi. Koska fiktiiviset hahmot ovat keskeisiä suhteellemme tarinoihin ja tarinamaailmoihin, transmediatuotannon yleistyminen saa kysymään, millainen on yleisöjen suhde fiktiivisiin hahmoihin transmediassa. Tämä väitöskirja lähestyy kysymystä tarkastelemalla sitä, miten yleisöt artikuloivat ja rakentavat hahmosuhdettaan, miten hahmosuhde asettuu osaksi vuorovaikutusta transmediasisältöjen kanssa, ja miten hahmosuhde kietoutuu yhteen laajempien merkityksellistämisen prosessien kanssa.

Empiirinen tutkimus toteutettiin *Hobitti*-elokuvatrilogian yleisöjen ja verkkomoninpeli *Overwatchin* pelaajien parissa. Molemmat teokset ovat osa laajempia transmediauniversumeja. Pääasiallinen tutkimusaineisto koostui kyselyaineistoista ja verkkokeskusteluista. Tekstimuotoisen kysely- ja keskusteluaineiston analyysiin hyödynnettiin avointa koodausta ja teemoittelua, osaan keskusteluaineistosta sovellettiin lisäksi diskurssianalyysia. Menetelmiä täydennettiin kuvailevalla tilastoanalyysilla ja transmedia-aineiston sisällönanalyysilla.

Tulokset tarjoavat empiirisiä todisteita sille, että yleisön hahmosuhde on yhteydessä siihen, millaisilla tavoilla yleisö on vuorovaikutuksessa transmedian kanssa. Yleisöt artikuloivat kiinnittymistään hahmopiirteiden, esimerkiksi ulkomuodon, persoonallisuuden, sukupuolen, ja seksuaalisuuden kautta, mutta myös hahmon toteutuksen, kuten näyttelijän suorituksen tai hahmon adaptaation perusteella. Yleisöjen artikulaatioiden tarkastelu paljasti erilaisia tulkinnallisia kontekseja hahmoihin kiinnittymiselle: (1) yksittäisen tekstin/teoksen, (2) transmediauniversumin, (3) genre(je)n, (4) mediumi(e)n, ja (5) sosio-kulttuurisen kontekstin. Eri yleisöt priorisoivat eri kontekseja, mikä johtaa neuvotteluihin ja kamppailuihin merkityksistä. Nämä puolestaan paljastavat ja rakentavat hierarkioita yleisöjen ja tuottajien keskuudessa. Hahmojen avulla myös luodaan kuulumisen paikkoja näiden rakenteiden ulkopuolella. Fiktiiviset hahmot ovat siis keskeisiä suhteellemme fiktioon, mutta niillä on myös rooli laajempien kuulumisen, identiteetin ja vallan rakenteiden neuvottelussa, määrittelyssä ja rakentamisessa.

Asiasanat: fiktiivinen hahmo, pelihahmo, elokuvahahmo, hahmosuhde, transmedia, yleisö, fanit, pelaajat, yleisötutkimus

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Majority of the research reported in this dissertation was created in different research projects. I will always remember the excitement of working in *Uses of Fantasy – The World Hobbit Project in Finland*, led by my supervisor, Irma Hirsjärvi, and funded by The Finnish Literature Society (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura). During this project, I was handed the most interesting dataset a new PhD student could hope for, and two of the articles in this dissertation were created in this project. I am deeply thankful for both the opportunity to learn from my colleagues in this project and the example this project set in its supportive and warm atmosphere.

The project that most affected this research was *The Overwatch Research Project*, which we undertook with my colleague, Maria Ruotsalainen. Learning to play first person shooter games is only one of the ways this project challenged me – as a researcher it led me to paths I never expected to follow, and together we discovered new frontiers. Thank you, Maria, for the amazingly fluent working relationship, which is clearly evidenced by three of our joint articles becoming parts of this dissertation.

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## FIGURES



## TABLES

## LIST OF ORIGINAL ARTICLES

I Koistinen, A.-K., Ruotsalainen, M. & Välisalo, T. (2016). The World Hobbit Project in Finland: Audience responses and transmedial user practices. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 13(2), 356-379. http://www.participations.org/Volume%2013/Issue%202/s1/10.pdf

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## CONTENTS

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Who is your favourite character, and why does it matter?

Who is your favourite character? This is a question repeated often in everyday discussions about fiction, be it with family, friends or colleagues, on social media and in online discussions, or in media stories about fictional worlds. It is a mundane, trivial question, but the answers can reveal much about us, about our relationship with fiction and media, about our values and ideals, about our identities, our communities, and our cultures. Therefore, the question of favourite character is simultaneously mundane and endlessly intriguing for academic research.

Similar questions that relate to favourite stories, favourite episodes of a television, film or game series, or even best special effects in a film can arguably reveal similar things. However, characters as fictional beings invite us to engage with them in ways that other elements of a fiction cannot achieve. We are invited by fictional characters to engage with them as persons who are similar to ourselves, while simultaneously we are aware of their artificial nature. Fictional characters are central to our relationship with stories and storyworlds. Further still, characters can grow beyond their stories and become meaningful to us beyond the fictional world they inhabit. Indeed, the question of our engagement with fictional characters holds particular weight and can open processes that are not necessarily available to the scholarly gaze otherwise. So, *who* is your favourite character and *why*, is the question I was interested in posing to audiences. However, I soon realized that often our least favourite characters can also reveal multitudes about our relationship with fiction. We have favourite characters, but we also have ones we deeply dislike, and we can have a deep engagement with either kind of character.

Changes in the logics of media production and the attempts to engage audiences in this millennium in particular have resulted in the depictions of recent

years as "the age of transmedia" (Stein, 2015), where using multiple media platforms to build narratives and fictional worlds has become a dominant form of media production. In research, this phenomenon has been investigated using concepts such as transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 97; Jenkins, 2007) and transmedia practice (Dena, 2009). In the same vein, fictional worlds have been conceptualized as transmedia worlds, that is, "abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms" (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004). This dominance of transmedia is emphasized in the 'transmedia culture', which refers to the pervasive nature of the logics of transmedia for practitioners and audiences alike (Evans, 2020, p. 9). Transmedia worlds, their related content and practices, as well as the concept of transmedia culture, all demand a new understanding of how audiences now relate to fictional characters.

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to create an empirically based understanding of how audiences engage with fictional characters in the current transmedia landscape. Fictional characters have been theorized in film studies and literary studies for decades, but in recent years empirical approaches to characters have gained momentum. Game studies research has been similarly interested in player characters, and increasingly also in other characters that appear in games. In this research, I create an approach to our engagement with fictional characters who are not limited to one media but take their form in several different media as part of the transmedia universes (Koistinen et al., 2021).

To research this engagement with fictional characters, I have reached out to users and audiences of two different transmedia universes, one built around a multiplayer online game *Overwatch* (Blizzard 2016–2022) and another, based on the works of the fantasy author, J.R.R. Tolkien, and in doing so, approached them particularly through a film trilogy adaptation (Peter Jackson, New Zealand & USA 2012–2014) of his book, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937). Both of these transmedia universes have had not only one audience, but several, each with different patterns of engagement. My methods for studying the audiences of these two media products have been slightly different, partially due to my own positioning in the research field. I have a personal relationship with both media products; however, my own history with them is quite different.

As a 9-year-old, I read Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954–1955). It is set in the same fictional world as *The Hobbit* films. I was awed by the story and especially the characters, places, and history of Tolkien's world, and re-read the trilogy, including the appendix, multiple times in the following years. I became an avid reader of fantasy and fell in love with science fiction. Then as a university student, I found fantasy and science fiction fan communities and started consuming and creating fan art and fan fiction, discussing and debating the topics on online fan forums and even participating in and arranging fan conventions. These events and online participation made me feel like being a Tolkien fan was part of who I was. Even though *The Lord of the Rings* was personally much more

meaningful to me as a book and a story than *The Hobbit*, upon entering this research project I felt I knew and understood at least some of the audiences of the film series quite well.

The world of *Overwatch* became familiar to me much later, as the game was introduced to me by Maria Ruotsalainen, my colleague and partner in much of the research reported here. Indeed, I specifically started playing it because of our joint research. I was an active player of *Overwatch* for two years during this research project, and I played the game for over 350 hours. Even though I had played games throughout my childhood and teenage years, contrary to fantasy and science fiction, they played a very small role in my identity construction. Due to this difference in my positioning in relation to these products, it became even more important to immerse myself in *Overwatch* and its communities by reading online discussions, exploring online fan fiction and fan art related to the game, as well as participating in different related events.

I have taken part in a local viewing party of the Blizzcon gaming convention, in Jyväskylä, Finland in November 2018, as well as an *Overwatch* tournament in Los Angeles, California in August 2019. Both events were immensely helpful in adding to my understanding of the game communities and the esports phenomena related to the game. Most importantly, being able to play the game regularly with colleagues and friends has been important in familiarizing myself with the different forms of engagement with the game and its characters. Playing with my researcher partner, Maria Ruotsalainen, has been especially important for our joint research.

The two transmedia universes I have focused on have distinct core texts, which are different media forms: for *Overwatch,* that form is a digital game, and for *The Hobbit,* it is a film series. These different media at the core of these universes also present their own distinct needs and requirements for research methodology. There is a challenge in researching audience engagement with game characters in an online game since online games nowadays are often more services than products (Stenros & Sotamaa, 2010). This challenge also means that games and their characters are constantly changing, whereas film characters are (apparently) more stable within their medium. However, in both *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch*, the characters inescapably do change and evolve through the processes of adaptation and transmediality. With *The Hobbit* the challenge was posed by how different audiences approached the films through different routes. Here self-reflexivity in understanding my own route to the films as only one option of many was essential. Even though I went to see the films as a fan of the *Lord of the Rings* books and a Tolkien fan, there were several other routes to the films as well, the one starting from *The Lord of the Rings* films being one of the major ones. To sum up, the different kinds of engagements and their changes, in addition to presenting a challenge, have been tremendously important for this research in helping to reveal what different audiences find valuable and meaningful in these fictional characters. My work thus attempts to not privilege a single mode of reception or engagement over others, but rather to capture some of their remarkable diversity.

## 1.2 Research questions and the structure of the dissertation

The aim of this study is to understand the engagement with fictional characters as conceptualized by audiences and players themselves. While multiple theories exist, I wanted to discover how actual audiences and players themselves understand and articulate their engagement with characters, and what these articulations can reveal. I was interested in what different kinds of engagements exist (cf. Tosca & Klastrup, 2020, p. 70), and how these engagements are constructed and reconstructed. Furthermore, I wished to understand how these engagements function in the dynamic meaning-making processes in relation to both fiction itself and our broader cultural structures. In other words, I approached this topic with a deep curiosity about what characters mean to audiences, and more particularly, how these meanings are constructed by audiences.

My main research focus is on **how audiences engage with fictional characters.** In addressing this question, I focus particularly on character engagement in transmedia universes and respond by asking the following sub-questions:

- RQ1: What is the role of fictional characters in how audiences engage with media?
- RQ2: How do audiences articulate and construct their engagement with fictional characters?
- RQ3: What are the roles of characters in meaning-making processes that go beyond media?

Research question 1 relates to understanding what the connections between character engagement and engagement with transmedia universes are.

Research question 2 aims to understand diverse audience engagements with fictional characters. I investigate what are the different aspects of characters that different audiences articulate as important, and, further still, what transmedial user practices and contextual factors (personal, community-related, societal) impact the formation of the different kinds of engagements.

Research question 3 focuses on how characters function in the negotiations over broader meanings. Here I refer to meanings that relate to works of fiction, but also to wider societal topics, such as power dynamics in media production and consumption as well as identity politics. In practice, I am looking to see how fictional characters are used in meaning-making beyond the individual work of fiction or the transmedia universe itself.

The structure of this dissertation is the following: Chapter 2 introduces the essential contextual frames of this research, first of all, the fandom studies approach to studying reception and audiences, which forms the underpinnings of this whole study and secondly, the 'age of transmedia' which has mirrored and co-developed along with the mainstreaming of fan cultures and their related theories,

and thirdly, the fantasy and science fiction worlds of *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch* and their audiences, which formed the concrete research context for my work. Chapter 3 lays out my main theoretical and conceptual tools related to fictional characters, and our engagement with them. This discussion is followed by Chapter 4, which describes my methodological choices and their foundations. In Chapter 5, I present summaries and the main results from the five articles that form the core of this dissertation. I discuss these results in more detail in chapter 6 and present my methodological contributions. Chapter 7 summarizes the conclusions and presents the challenges and tasks that my work presents for future research. The original articles (I-V) are included at the end.

# 2 THE CONTEXTUAL FRAME

## 2.1 Audiences and fans

Empirical research into character engagement is necessarily connected to the existing research on audiences. The current research on the reception of fictional content, its audiences, and users has two main origins, reception studies and audience studies. A central question in reception studies has been, how meanings are made – what the process is, and what elements affect this process. Academic interest in reception is rooted in the reader-reception theory related to literary studies. This approach emerged as what is often called *reception aesthetics* in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Iser, 1978[1976]; Jauss, 1970). An influential theorist in the field, Hans Robert Jauss (1970), coined the concept of 'horizon of expectation' to describe how the reader approaches text with expectations that derive from previous knowledge and experiences. However, reception aesthetics approached reception of fiction theoretically by focusing on the process of reception, but not using actual audience reception data as research material (Kovala, 2007, pp. 182–184).

While reception studies originated in the field of literary studies, audience studies are rooted in the study of audiovisual content, that is, film and television. Differing from the early reception studies, audience studies was based on research conducted with actual audiences. Audiences were the focus in mass communication research, which from the 1950s onwards was the dominant method of studying what were called *media effects*, mainly, how television and film affected their audiences, especially children (Livingstone, 1996). Media effects research focused on surveys and statistical analysis and was based on an understanding of viewers as passively receiving what they see. A different approach to audiences emerged when cultural studies and media studies were strongly affected by Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model. Hall's conceptualiza-

tion of reception, where meaning is formed in the process of reception and affected by the contextual elements beyond the text, such as the viewer's or reader's social status and environment, influenced whole generations of scholars who were studying audiences (Alasuutari, 1999, pp. 2–3). Another influential cultural studies scholar, Lawrence Grossberg (1984, 1988), emphasized the diversity of engagements with popular culture and the role that affect plays in these engagements. These approaches have strongly affected this current research and resulted in a multicontextual view of reception, where several different contexts work together and enable different forms and intensities of engagement. Understanding these contexts is a necessary foundation on which to build an empirical understanding of how individuals relate to fictional characters.

In the 1980s, an ethnographic approach to reception arose foregrounding the need to study cultures and communities from the inside (cf. Radway, 1984; Ang, 1991; Ang, 1996; Harrington & Bielby, 1995). Some of this research started to focus on particular kind of audiences, fans. Fandom studies as a field of research took its original form with works like *Textual Poachers* (1992) by Henry Jenkins, *Enterprising Women* (1992) by Camille Bacon-Smith, and the essay collection, *Adoring Audiences* (1992) edited by Lisa A. Lewis. A characteristic of early fandom studies was the emphasis placed on fans as active audiences that were capable of and practicing different forms of critical reception. Early fan studies battled both, the negative stereotypes of fandom as a phenomenon and the traditional understanding of audiences as a (passive) homogenous group (cf. Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992). The fan studies' emphasis on active meaning-making illustrated how fandoms were read as subcultures and fan practices and meaning-making in fandoms were framed as a resistance toward consumerism and capitalist logics in media (see e.g., Hills, 2002, p. 5).

The fandoms being studied were those with active fan communities and self-proclaimed fan identities, such as *Star Trek* fandom, which had often been depicted in a negative light in mainstream media (e.g., Jenkins, 1992). As fan studies matured, its interest turned to the personal experiences of fans and how fandom featured in their identity and identity-building processes (Sandvoss, 2005). Simultaneously, fandom as an identity marker has become available for larger social groups than before and has become an accepted moniker beyond the popular culture. Fan studies perspectives have also broadened to include more everyday and mainstream fandom and phenomena (Stein, 2015).

In the current research, fan studies traditions have been essential in understanding the engagements with these particular works of popular culture and the fictional characters in them. However, I do not merely focus on self-identified fans. There are avid fans of Tolkien or Peter Jackson among the audiences of *The Hobbit*, but others who resist fan status. Equally, among the players of *Overwatch,* fan identity is mostly superseded by the identities of a player or gamer, more traditional in game cultures. This research thus takes care not to use the word 'fan' to describe participants who have not self-identified as such. However, as fan practices and behaviours have become widespread among audiences, fan studies approaches have become all the more appropriate for studying those who

do not self-identify as fans (cf. Brooker, 2005; Wirman, 2007; Taylor, 2012, p. 188). Thus, here, character engagement is understood not just as part of tightknit fan communities or particularly intense fan relationships, but as a broader phenomenon, which still can benefit by being analysed through a fan studies lens.

Fandom studies approaches have led me to expect and understand diversity and contradictions in relation fictional characters. Especially to the works of Cornel Sandvoss (2005) and Lawrence Grossberg (1992a; 1992b), I credit my understanding of the relationships between audiences and works of fiction and how these relationships work as parts of individual identities, which in and of themselves are constructed, performative, and changing, and how they then structure that individual's relationship with other works of fiction – and the world. The understanding of fandoms as networks and the importance of communities emphasized by Irma Hirsjärvi (2009; 2010) are an important basis for my understanding of how meanings are formed in fan communities and the everyday practices of audiences. The current research differs from much of the fan studies scholarship in its choice of research material. Instead of using ethnographic methods, such as interviews or evidence of fan productivity such as fan fiction or fan art, this study is founded on an analysis of survey data from thousands of respondents and large amounts of online discussion data, thus responding to the call made by fan studies scholar, Jonathan Gray (2017, e.g., p. 81), for "reviving audience studies" through, for example, the use of large datasets.

Fandom studies approaches have commonly revolved around television and film, as well as music and sports. However, there is also growing scholarship centred around the intersection of game studies and fan studies (e.g., Wirman, 2007; Wirman, 2009; Swalwell et al., 2017). Even though game studies and fandom studies are two distinct areas of research, they do share similar perspectives. While game studies scholars have often highlighted the difference between games and other media and attributed this difference partly to the necessity of interactivity needed in order to experience games at all, interactivity has also been foregrounded in fan studies as a characteristic of the relationship between fans and their objects of fandom (e.g., Booth, 2010, p. 92). These two uses of 'interactivity' are distinct; yet the fan studies approach can also be applied to the study of players and game cultures.

Fandom studies have had a strong influence on the methodology of this research. Jenkins (1992) started a long tradition that stresses the benefits of the researcher being a fan as well. Jenkins (1992, p. 5) openly identified himself as a fan and compared the role of fan to that of an academic, the combination of the two later described as having a "dual allegiance" (2011a). Jenkins' work was very influential to fan studies methodologies, and the term *acafan* (or *aca-fan* or *Aca/Fan*) which he adopted, later became widespread. A decade later, Matt Hills (2002, pp. 19, 31, 35, 36) called for taking this approach further articulating an objective to "theorise the media cult and its fandoms through a primary allegiance to the role of 'fan' and a secondary allegiance to 'academia'", even suggesting the term "fan scholar" to highlight this hierarchy of allegiance. Having

also studied under the influence of fan studies and during its formation as a research field, I have internalized the ideal of being an aca-fan, a "hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic" (Jenkins, 2006b; cf. Jenkins, 2011a). My identification with this title and my stance toward fan studies has developed over the years, along with fan studies themselves, from the celebratory attitude underscoring the active, productive, and critical fandom to an approach that is complemented by taking a critical stance toward this early fan studies idealization of fandom. Thus, I do not see an acafan or a fan scholar as someone who absolutely needs to be involved deeply in the active core of the fandom they are studying. Rather, I see my experiences as a fan of multiple different media products and fan objects providing an understanding of fandom that contributes positively to my analysis as an ease-of-access and understanding. On the other hand, my personal history also creates a need for another kind of self-reflexivity, as it would be very easy to generalize my own experiences of fandom and fan cultures also fit those fan cultures and fan communities that are new to me. Thus, self-reflexivity in the form of constantly questioning my interpretations and turning to fans and players, both academic and non-academic, is an important part of researching fandom as an acafan (see e.g., 4.4).

Contextuality, which is about regarding a phenomenon as a part of broader structures and affected by different conditions, all forming different contexts, is an important guiding frame of this study, and the perspectives of fan studies adds to my understanding of fan phenomena as being located in vast systems of communities and cultures of popular culture. The effort to understand from the inside, but critically, is an essential tool for forming this understanding. One of the central features related to the acafan approach and understanding from the inside is the need to also understand the media products under scrutiny and the broader cultural phenomena of which they are a part. To understand the logics and boundaries of production, the dynamics of production and consumption, respectively, and also together, as well as how all of it functions in connection to character engagement, it is essential to gain an understanding of 'the age of transmedia' we are living in by turning to transmedia studies.

## 2.2 The age of transmedia

Fictional characters traverse from text to text and from one media format to another. They materialize in the form of fans dressing up as the characters and are re-interpreted by actors on the screen or by fans writing fan fiction. While all of these phenomena and practices reach far into the history of narratives and fictional media, changes in the last decades have led to a more purposeful production of what is described as 'transmedia'. The proliferation of transmedia production, both in volume and in the number of forms and variations, has demanded and then given rise to its own field of study. To understand how audiences engage with fictional characters in the transmedial landscape that they – both audiences and characters – are traversing, it is necessary to understand how

this landscape is constructed, and what are the forces and dynamics affecting that landscape and how.

Henry Jenkins has famously defined transmedia storytelling as "a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (2007; 2011b), where in an ideal situation "each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (2007). In the transmedia age, fictional characters that cross the borders between media forms and between texts have become all the more common. In their travels, these characters can take diverse forms from more traditional adaptations, such as from book to film, all the way to forms as material (and commercial) objects, such as a Barbie doll version of Galadriel, a character created by J.R.R. Tolkien and appearing also in *The Hobbit* films (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 172). Transmedia worlds can even be considered as being "character-driven" (Tosca & Klastrup, 2020, p. 153).

In reality, the kind of balanced transmedia as defined by Jenkins (2007) is relatively rare, and unbalanced transmedia, "a clearly identifiable core text and a number of peripheral transmedia extensions that might be more or less integrated in to the narrative whole", is more common (Mittell, 2015, p. 294). However, Mittell's configuration is also challenged by examples of transmedia with two or more core texts (Koistinen et al., 2021). Nevertheless, some parts of transmedia are always more important or central than others (Scolari, 2009, p. 598; Harvey, 2015, p. 87). For fictional characters, this kind of unbalanced transmedia storytelling can mean that apparently crucial events and information about characters are only introduced in transmedia expansions, which do not reach as large an audience as the core text does (cf. Harvey, 2015, p. 87).

An example can be found in the transmedia surrounding the science fiction television series, *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009), where the character of Felix Gaeta is revealed as having a homosexual relationship, but this side of his sexuality was only touched upon in the webisodes[1] *Battlestar Galactica: Face of the Enemy*, and completely bypassed in the television series, which was the core text of the transmedia universe (Koistinen et al., 2021; cf. Scott, 2011, p. 187). Another case is that of the Marvel universe character, Agent Coulson, who died in the film *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, USA 2012), but appears later in the television series, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, which is set in time after the events of the film, as noted by Colin B. Harvey (2015, pp. 83, 87). Thus, the audience watching the series who also saw the film must somehow reconcile with this discrepancy. This leads to a situation where, depending on what constitutes the transmedia universe for each individual audience member, the affordances for engagement with a particular character can vary greatly. On the other hand, transmedia expansions can also either succeed or fail in the eyes of the audience merely by their ability to create believable characters. Lizbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca (2004) have noted how *The Lord of the Rings* game, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Surreal Software 2002) failed to recreate the character of the Aragorn by having him do mundane tasks, such as picking melons, which were not in line with what was

1 *Webisode* is a short episode only published online.

known about the character based on the books and the films. These kinds of disruptions in character cohesion draw further focus on how characters are created and how character adaptation from one text to another or one medium to the next is carried out.

Transmedia production has strongly focused on 'engagement' (see Section 3.2), which in the industry has been understood as a collection of techniques to encourage loyalty in viewers and consumers (see Evans, 2011, pp. 40–41). One prevalent feature of engaging audiences is engaging them already in the production stage of a film, a game, a television series, or any media product. The making of *The Hobbit* film series (2012–2014) is an example. The pre-production phase was reported in detail on various platforms to engage the audiences (Michelle et al., 2017, p. 56). Even beyond pre-production, for fans, non-fictional content, such as interviews with actors and creators of *The Hobbit* films, as well as non-narrative content, such as fan art, are all parts of the experience with *The Hobbit* transmedia. Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Raine Koskimaa, and I (2021) have suggested a definition of *transmedia universe* that includes all of these, not just the narrative, but also non-narrative forms, and not just the diegetic but also the non-diegetic content. This approach integrates the perspectives of production and consumption by taking into consideration audience and fan practices and the content produced as a result alongside the 'official' transmedia production (ibid.). Understanding the complexity and multiplicity of transmedia universes helps one appreciate, how seemingly the same story or storyworld can be experienced in multiple different ways depending on the individual to form a unique experience, and thus, how the same fictional character can be experienced and engaged with in multiple different ways.

As transmedia universes encompass the perspectives of both production and consumption, as well as both official and unauthorized content (Koistinen et al., 2021), so does the methodology of studying audience engagement with transmedial characters need to include both perspectives. This aspect means that while the focus of this study is on audiences and players, an understanding of the media products is necessary and included as well.

## 2.3 *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch*

In this current research, the audience engagement with characters is approached through transmedia universes built around *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch*. They have distinctly different timelines of creation and represent two different types of transmedia production. While *Overwatch* and *The Hobbit* are both purposefully designed and produced transmedia, the latter is simultaneously a part of a larger emergent transmedia universe built around the literary works by J.R.R. Tolkien. Next, I will map out these transmedia universes, and then describe what makes them both suitable for this particular research.

***The Hobbit* transmedia universe.** *The Hobbit* film series (2012–2014) is a fantasy film trilogy based on the children's book, *The Hobbit, or there and back again* (1937) by J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973). The three films were launched in consecutive years: *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* in 2012, *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* in 2013, and *The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies* in 2014. There have been a multitude of transmedia products created around these films, both commercial products, such as digital games, toys, and collectibles, and non-commercial creations by fans, like fan art and fan fiction, just to name a few. Nevertheless, this is not the entire picture of *The Hobbit* transmedia, and it cannot be simply described as a transmedia universe with the book as its core text. The decades between the original book and this film trilogy as well as the changes in media production over time make it clear that this is not a transmedia universe originally and purposefully designed as such. There were several adaptations of the book already before the Peter Jackson films, some of the most prominent being the BBC radio drama series (BBC, United Kingdom 1968) and *The Hobbit* video game (Beam Software, Australia 1982). Further, the film series is simultaneously a book adaptation, and a prequel to the acclaimed *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (2001–2003), which is also based on Tolkien's works. Thus, Tolkien's book series, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) and many of its adaptations are central to audiences and fans of fantasy stories and fantasy worlds and are often credited for making high fantasy popular among mainstream audiences and for growing the fantasy literature fandom (e.g., James, 2012). *The Lord of the Rings* book series and the film trilogy was a global phenomenon, and for many, also the core text of what can be titled Tolkien universe (see Article I).

The central texts and adaptations of Tolkien universe currently stretch over a period of almost 80 years. Despite the nature of *LoTR* films or *The Hobbit* film trilogy as a global phenomenon, there have been local differences in how the transmedia universe materialised for audiences. I have studied the reception of *The Hobbit* film trilogy (2012–2014) in Finland, Sweden, and Denmark using data gathered through the same international survey; however, the original book was first translated into the native languages of these countries at different times: into Swedish[2] in 1947, into Danish[3] in 1969, and into Finnish[4] in 1973. In Denmark, *The Lord of the Rings* was translated[5] first (1968–1972). However, in Sweden and Finland, *The Lord of the Rings* translations came later and, in both countries, new translations of *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* were published still later. This timing can have an impact on whether audiences experience different works as part of the same storyworld, since for example, the first Finnish version had very different translations of names for the characters than *The Lord of the Rings* translation did, thus making the two works seem fairly detached from each other. Additionally, the order and availability of the translations also affected the order in

2 *Bilbo – En Hobbits Äventyr*, translated by Tore Zetterholm.
3 *Hobbitten, eller ud og hjem igen*, Ida Nyrop Ludvigsen.
4 *Lohikäärmevuori eli erään hoppelin matka sinne ja takaisin*, translated by Risto Pitkänen.
5 Translated by Ida Nyrop Ludvigsen.

which the audiences accessed different elements of the transmedia (cf. Harvey, 2015, p. 89).

It can, therefore, be asked whether a gradually formed compilation of fictional works, such as the ones formed by Tolkien's works, their adaptations and expansions, can be understood as transmedia. However, it has been argued that transmedia storytelling is indeed a historical practice, reaching at least to the 19th century (Meyer & Pietrzak-Franger, 2022). Furthermore, many of the transmedia production practices were also common in fan communities long before that. Thus, *The Hobbit* films and the transmedia productions surrounding their publication can be understood as parts of an even larger transmedia universe with a unique history and several different core texts.

As a result of this transmedia universe being built so gradually, depending on the audience, the core of this universe can be *The Hobbit* films, the book they are based on, *The Lord of the Rings* books, or their film adaptations (see Article I). Therefore, *The Hobbit* universe can be understood as merely being a part of the broader Tolkien universe, which is also evident in how other Tolkien's works, such as *Silmarillion*, are present in the reception of the films (see Korpua, 2016). Therefore, while I studied audience engagement with *The Hobbit* characters in a certain limited place in time, the diverse engagements have their roots in different time periods as well as in different texts and media products. Jennifer Brayton (2006) noted how in the Tolkien fandom, several communities formed with their own distinctive features after the publication of the *LoTR* films: there is the older generation of avid Tolkien fans, there are those who are first and foremost fans of *The Lord of the Rings* books, and there is a new generation of fans coming to this fictional world through Peter Jackson's *LoTR* film trilogy. This new community of fans functioned particularly in online environments – and discussions, and interestingly for the current research, Brayton (2006) found that the conflicts among the fans were often focused on the characters.

Indeed, for many – or even for the majority – of *The Hobbit* audiences, the core of the transmedia universe they engage with, is undoubtedly *The Lord of the Rings*, either the books or the films. However, as this study shows (see Article II), there were also audiences where this was their first encounter with Tolkien's works and, thus, it would be problematic to interpret the engagement with *The Hobbit* characters only from the perspective of Tolkien fans or Tolkien universe. Furthermore, as stated earlier, from the production point of view, *The Hobbit* is a core text from which a number of transmedia expansions are directly derived although not all audiences make distinctions between what belongs to the sphere of *The Hobbit,* and what does not. Thus, this research discusses character engagement in '*The Hobbit* transmedia universe', while acknowledging that its importance and its relationship with the broader Tolkien universe can differ for different audiences.

***Overwatch* transmedia universe.** *Overwatch* (Blizzard 2016–2022) is a team-based online first-person shooter (FPS) game located in a dystopian future. Its default mode of play are matches between two six-player teams. The world of

*Overwatch* can be best described as that of science fiction with stylistic elements drawn from fantasy fiction. In contrast to the whole of Tolkien universe, the *Overwatch* transmedia universe has been very purposefully created. The game has been from the very beginning accompanied by transmedia expansions, such as descriptions of game characters and their background stories on the game's website, web comics, short stories, animated short stories focused on the characters, and other video material. However, the game at the core of the *Overwatch* transmedia universe does not have a narrative progression beyond that of a single match and the sequence of player actions in that match. The game maps are located in places that are somehow significant to the background story, and the characters wear skins that are connected to their histories (see Article IV), but it is still possible to play the game without knowledge of the events to which the maps and skins refer. Thus, the narrative world is mainly built in the transmedia extensions.

The transmedia universe formed around *Overwatch* is particularly intriguing since it is not solely centred on the fictional world of the game, but also around the esports. *Overwatch* was from the start designed as an esports game and the production company, Blizzard Entertainment, founded a commercial esports league, The Overwatch League, in January 2018. The Overwatch League (OWL) is a global league with all teams representing different cities around the world. It is also a commercial franchised league with teams paying a substantial fee to participate. The official transmedial extensions built around OWL are diverse, such as articles and videos about the teams and their players, and statistics and merchandise – many familiar from traditional sports as well (Koskimaa et al., 2021). The audiences meanwhile create and circulate their own stories in discussion forums and esports stream chats and create fan art and fan fiction about the players – sometimes representing esports players as game characters, thereby combining fictional and nonfictional elements (ibid.). The Overwatch League has thus become an additional 'core text' within the larger *Overwatch* transmedia universe with much of this transmedial content having very little to do with the fictional world of the game (ibid.). Therefore, *Overwatch* players and audiences can also have widely varying knowledge of the fictional world of the game.

Blizzard has also created an overlap between their different game titles and the transmedia universes around them. *Heroes of the Storm*, the company's multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA) has several *Overwatch* heroes as playable characters and battlegrounds based on *Overwatch* maps. Also, *Hearthstone*, a Blizzard card game, references the *Overwatch* characters Hanzo and Genji.[6] While these references do not necessarily make *Heroes of the Storm* part of *Overwatch* transmedia, they do provide additional possibilities for engagement with *Overwatch* and its characters. After the research reported in this dissertation was already completed, *Overwatch* transmedia expanded in another intriguing way as *Overwatch 2,* which was published in October 2022, and the original *Overwatch* was shut down permanently. *Overwatch 2*, despite being presented as a sequel,

6 The existence of these references were confirmed by then *Hearthstone* Game Director, Ben Brode on Twitter (Brode 2017).

incorporated much of the original game while also including new content and modified features, such as new characters and significant changes to many of the existing characters, new types of maps, and a new user interface. While these changes are not directly reflected in the data gathered for this particular research, they do exemplify the continuous change that is part of online games, including their characters, which is discussed as part of this research in the case of *Overwatch* (see Article IV).

Both transmedia universes that are studied here have features that make them especially fitting for the current research:

(1) Both have multiple characters for audiences and players to engage with, thereby providing possibilities for multiple and diverse engagements with characters. *Overwatch* has more than 30 different playable characters with different abilities, and *The Hobbit* films have an ensemble cast that is about the same size. Thus, studying engagement with these characters potentially provides more diverse engagements than studying works with fewer characters.

(2) Both are transmedial in their nature, meaning they stretch out beyond one text and one medium, making the characters available to audiences through multiple media and giving the characters several different interpretational contexts. Fantasy and science fiction have been described as particularly suited for transmedia storytelling (Harvey, 2015, pp. 38, 94–95; Mittell, 2015, p. 311; Roine, 2016, pp. 209, 213) – while *The Hobbit* is a classic example of high fantasy, *Overwatch* is located in a futuristic science fiction universe. The tropes of these genres include concepts, such as parallel universes, mirror universes, and alternate timelines, which make it possible to tell a multitude of different stories about the same fictional world, as well as making it easy to propose an alternate telling of the same events (cf. Harvey, 2015, pp. 16, 95).

(3) Both have been popular and thus had certain significance for a number of people, which can make any data collection easier. In 2018, the game company Blizzard reported *Overwatch* had 40 million registered players, and *The Hobbit* films were a financial success, a direct result of the number of viewers they had[7].

Even though these transmedia universes do share many similarities, which I have described above as the rationale for selecting them for this research, they have many differences as well:

(i) These transmedia universes have their core texts appearing in different mediums. While digital games are a financially significant area of the entertainment industry, digital multiplayer games that are played using a PC or a gaming console still have a more restricted target group than does film, where *The Hobbit* films can be considered as belonging to the mainstream media.

(ii) *Overwatch* was purposefully built as transmedia during the span of just a few years, starting in 2016, and *The Hobbit* films, while having transmedia works

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7 The Numbers, a website that tracks film box office revenue, lists *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, as having created over 1 billion USD in revenue, and the sequels over 900,000 USD each (Nash Information Services n.d.).

directly related to the films published around them, are also a part of a larger Tolkien universe, one that has thus far formed slowly during a span of 90 years.

It is important to emphasise that my aim has not been to undertake comparative research between two transmedia universes. Rather, their similarities enable using some of the same concepts and tools for studying both, while their differences serve to yield a more extensive view of character engagement. Thus, there is a potential for reaching diverse audiences and diverse character engagements and uses of characters among these audiences and players.

# 3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

## 3.1 What is a fictional character?

When delving into engagement with fictional characters, it is necessary to understand what fictional characters are. Much of the foundational work on defining and theorizing fictional characters has focused on literary characters (e.g., Forster, 1962; Margolin, 1986; Phelan, 1989). Nevertheless, scholars of film (e.g., Michaels, 1998; Smith, 1995), television (Pearson, 2007), and digital games (Vella, 2016; Klevjer, 2006; Blom, 2020) have also offered their own definitions. The existing theories on fictional character have been grouped and categorized by scholars in different ways. Jens Eder et al. (2010, p. 5) recognized hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, structuralist-semiotic, and cognitive frameworks as research areas where most character theories derive. Essi Varis (2019, p. 16) has noted how existing theories can also be grouped, based on their functions, into those aiming to classify characters and those describing how characters are put together, or based on the medium, into medium-specific theories and theories that are approaching characters traversing across media. Next, the theoretical approaches I found to be the most useful are introduced.

As this research considers different dimensions and forms of engagement with fictional characters, that focus also necessitates understanding characters themselves as being multidimensional. In this vein, a particularly useful approach was offered by the literary scholar James Phelan (1989), who presented a theory of fictional characters wherein he proposed a character as being comprised of three dimensions: mimetic, thematic, and synthetic. The mimetic component simply describes the character's personhood in a way that derives from our knowledge of real persons (ibid. 2). The synthetic component marks the understanding that "part of knowing a character is knowing that" they are "a construct" (ibid. 2). The thematic component refers to the way characters can be used to propose or assert a message through the mechanics of representation (ibid. 3).

According to Phelan, all three components are present in characters, but the degree to which the mimetic and particularly the thematic are developed, can vary, while the synthetic component as such is stable, but can be "more or less foregrounded" (ibid. 3). Phelan developed his theory based on literary characters, but it can be applied to characters in other media as well, such as comics, film, television, and digital games. Even though games as a medium do differ from literature, they most often also include narrative elements, an aspect that makes Phelan's approach useful. In this research, I use Phelan's theory as a primary conceptualization of the construct that is a fictional character.

In studying engagement with characters in transmedia universes, there is also need for media-specific models of character construction. For instance, there is one key area, where characters in audiovisual media generally differ from most literary characters, and that is the visual embodiment of a character, sometimes created as animation, often in the form of an actor. The actor becomes such an integral part of the character that it is reflected in many character definitions in film and television studies. The film theorist, David Bordwell, (1985) suggested that characters are formed by traits, physical behaviour, and speech. Based on Bordwell, Roberta Pearson (2007, p. 43) defined televisual characters as a taxonomy of six key elements, which include psychological traits/habitual behaviours, physical characteristics/appearance, speech patterns, interactions with other characters, environment, and biography. Both scholars emphasize the actor's physical body, its behaviours and voice as parts of the makeup of a character. Pearson describes this connection between character and actor in detail in her description of Gilbert Grissom, a protagonist in the crime television series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Jerry Bruckheimer Television, CBS 2000–2015):

> Grissom, like all television characters, is conflated with the actor who embodies him. Grissom must look and talk like William Petersen; the actor's facial configurations/expressions, body posture/gestures and vocal quality/mannerisms all contributing to character meaning. The actor's performance is a key constructor of character meaning; other aspects of the character's traits and appearance are constructed by various other production personnel. (Pearson, 2007, p. 44)

In this application of Pearson's taxonomy, the emphasis is on how the character is created. It also succeeds in foregrounding other creators in addition to the actor. The different expertise demanded to create a character is perhaps more evident in animated film and television, where the physical appearance and behaviour of a character are the works of artists and animators, and the voice comes from a voice actor. Voice acting is an important part of many game characters as well. Similarly, actor's visual representation is increasingly present in digital game characters with actor's likeness represented in an animated form. This is particularly common in games based on an existing film or television series. An understanding of Phelan's synthetic dimension also becomes more detailed through this understanding of different actors (in both meanings of the word) that are involved in creating a character.

Film studies have also approached the question of character and actor in discussions of film stardom. Richard Dyer in his famous book, *Stars,* likened star images themselves to fictional characters and described how in the Golden Age of Hollywood, the characters in films were used to build and maintain particular star images (1979/1998, pp. 20, 97). Of particular interest here, is his notion of star image affecting the audience interpretation of a character. The star phenomenon can mean that "the 'truth' about the character's personality and the feelings which it evokes may be determined by what the reader takes to be the truth about the person of the star playing the part" (Dyer, 1979/1998, p. 125). Thus, star image can be considered to affect the understanding of not just the character's synthetic dimension, but their mimetic or even thematic qualities as well. Indeed, taking into consideration the actor's 'star image' can help understand audience engagement with characters that are played by well-known actors.

In the same vein, character engagement in games has its own media-specific dimension, player *interaction* with the game, playing as a character, or interacting with other characters, which causes game characters to demand their own understanding of engagement. In game studies, there have been arguments for understanding characters primarily as tools for simulation (e.g., Newman, 2002, 2009) rather than as persons. Discussion on game characters has been further complicated by a somewhat parallel and sometimes overlapping concept of the *avatar*. Avatars are commonly understood as computer-generated figures controlled by a user, but it is important to note that they do not necessitate a visual representation, but can also exist in other media and platforms, such as text-based or audio-based media (Coleman, 2011, p. 12). Joleen Blom (2020, p. 34) has noted that much of the early work on characters in game studies focused on the difference between 'character' and 'avatar'. Indeed, Rune Klevjer in their extensive and influential work on avatar-character distinction (2006, pp. 16, 94) defined a character as an independent persona, and an avatar as being reliant on the player, or their "prosthetic extension".

To further understand the effects of player control on playable characters, I turned to an analysis model by Felix Schröter and Jan-Noël Thon (2014), who mapped out the multiple dimensions of game characters. They combine in their model modes of character representation – narration, simulation, and communication – with corresponding modes of player experience – narrative, ludic, and social – resulting in three-character dimensions: (1) characters as fictional beings, (2) characters as game pieces, and (3) characters as avatars. This model does not just make a clear distinction between character and avatar, but also draws attention to the simulation aspect of game characters, that is, their interactive attributes and ludic abilities. The authors also maintain that the different dimensions are in a dynamic relationship influencing each other (Schröter & Thon, 2014, p. 50). Taking this model as a tool for analysing game characters is thus a useful addition to Phelan's character dimensions, enabling a better understanding of the specific nature of game characters.

Direct control over a playable character using an interactive interface is often necessary to fully experience the medium of a digital game[8], while this is not the case for traditional forms of literature, film, or television (cf. Blom, 2020, p. 34). However, in games, there are also computer-controlled characters, which in roleplaying games are often called non-playable characters (NPC). Even though these characters are not directly controlled by the player, the player's actions can affect them. Furthermore, narrative forms, such as the traditional Choose Your Own Adventure books, challenge this division, along with the nature of interactive films. While the empirical data in this current research is focused on game characters controlled by the player, taking into consideration computer-controlled characters further underscores the diversity of engagements with characters in transmedia universes.

The emergence and prevalence of transmedia storytelling poses a new challenge to studying fictional characters. When a character takes form in different media, the media-specific constraints and affordances affect how that character is built, and eventually how the audiences can engage with the character. When the same character traverses from one medium to another, also the potential engagements with the character change along the way. As such, in the age of transmedia, it would be difficult or perhaps even misguided to reduce characters to their representation in a single text. Jan-Noël Thon (2019, p. 188) has argued for understanding characters as first and foremost existing in separate work-specific storyworlds, thereby making them separate work-specific characters who are nevertheless all part of the same *global transmedia character network*. In Thon's (2019, pp. 188, 193) conceptualization, characters in different parts of the network can be understood as the same transmedia character only when the relationship between the separate works is noncontradictory, with both works either representing the same storyworld elements, or one work adding new elements, but not contradicting the storyworld of the other work. Thon's (2019, pp. 184–185) discussion of transmedia characters separates characters as entities in themselves from characters as constructed by the audience members, who will negotiate and exclude the contradictory information about different representations of a character. However, while for Thon (2019, p. 188) characters are situated first and foremost inside the storyworlds, for the current research the greatest interest is in the audience reception of characters and how characters are constructed in this process.

There are several scholars who have situated fictional characters outside or beyond of their representations in various media "existing as a whole only in the minds of the producers and the audience" as described by Pearson (2007, p. 43) in her study of televisual characters. Varis (2019, p. 110) in her study of comics characters has described characters as alive and meaningful only "in interactive interpretive processes that are realized in multitudes of different ways between different minds, contexts and textual environments." Furthermore, she has per-

[8] There is also an abundance of games without any fictional characters, such as the classic puzzle game, Tetris.

suasively argued that fictional characters are not to be reduced to a singular experience, a single text, or cultural signs, but are in fact all of these simultaneously and constantly changing (ibid., p. 110). Drawing on the concept of a 'transmedial world' (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004) where the fictional world is seen as an abstraction, existing beyond the material realm, the current research also understands a character as being separate from individual texts, thereby existing beyond merely one work of art or popular culture.

Since the approach to fictional characters in this research is one of *engagement*, I next describe how engagement as a term is used in this study to describe our relationship with not just fiction, but fictional characters in particular.

## 3.2 Engagement with fictional characters: Theoretical approaches from identification to engagement

The study of our relationship with fiction has taken place using a multitude of different concepts. In place of 'reception', concepts of 'interpretation' and 'use' are frequently used in research (cf. Kovala, 2007, p. 178). When it comes to fictional characters in particular, 'identification' is possibly one of the most common terms used to describe our relationship with them, but this concept has also been heavily criticized for being so often used 'loosely', without a distinct definition, and, more importantly, for being used to cover a multitude of different ways to approach fictional characters (Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, p. 165; cf. Cohen, 2001, p. 254; Barker, 2005, p. 354). This limited nature of 'identification' has been one of the reasons that I turned elsewhere for a more suitable concept.

The central concept in this research and the term I have chosen to describe our relationship to fictional characters is 'engagement'. 'Engagement' as a concept has its roots in multiple different fields. It is used widely in the fields of education, psychology, marketing, and media studies, to describe our way of relating to different kinds of contents and activities. As a result, the term has been defined and used in a variety of ways: engagement can refer to our experience with a particular object or, more commonly, to behaviours and practices connected to that object (e.g., Chan-Olmsted & Wolter, 2018, p. 5).

In psychology, engagement is understood as being comprised of behavioural, cognitive, and affective components (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2018). Behavioural engagement refers to the aforementioned behaviours and practices, but there are also other dimensions to engagement: cognitive engagement as thinking about and paying attention to the object, and affective engagement as (a mostly positive) affect toward the object of engagement. In studies of audiovisual media, 'engagement' with media content has been used almost exclusively as an umbrella term for different audience practices (e.g., Evans, 2011; see also Dahlgren & Hill, 2020). More recently, Elizabeth Evans (2020) conceptualized engagement as composed of audience behaviours, audience responses, and (non-

monetary) costs to the audience as well as the value derived from that engagement. Audience responses were further divided into the cognitive, physical, and emotional. The different dimensions of engagement in both approaches, while not directly operationalized in this research, do contribute to the understanding of engagement here, not merely as activities and practices, but also including dimensions, which are not necessarily as apparent to an outside observer and which as a result are not as easily measured as behaviours. I find it necessary not to limit this research to a single mode of audience engagement when attempting to capture the lived realities of audiences engaging with characters.

Murray Smith in his influential monograph (1995, pp. 75, 81–84, 106) on the viewer relationship with film characters, drawing from cognitive theory and textual analysis, suggested using the term 'engagement' in place of identification. He structured engagement through the concepts of *recognition*, *alignment*, and *allegiance*. In his theory, recognition is the construction of the character by the spectator, who knows they are processing a narrated representation (ibid., pp. 54, 82). Alignment with characters is formed by how the viewer is given access to the character's actions and behaviours (Smith calls this *spatio-temporal attachment*) and to their inner lives, thoughts and emotions (*subjective access*) (ibid., pp. 47, 83, 142–143). Allegiance is both a cognitive and an emotional response to a character, with the spectator evaluating the character's actions and emotions and responding to them with their own separate emotions (ibid., pp. 84, 85, 187). Smith (1995, p. 85) underlines that none of these three concepts require the spectator to "experience the thoughts or emotions of a character", with recognition and alignment being merely processes of understanding, and allegiance being a process of "evaluating and responding emotionally" to the character in a given "narrative situation".

This threefold structure of engagement is, according to Smith (1995, pp. 85–86), "a structure of sympathy" which is differentiated from empathy by its acentrality, imagining the character's situation from the outside, while "central imagining" is what labels empathy. For Smith (1995, pp. 86, 96, 99, 103), empathy is "imaginative substitution", and has voluntary (emotional simulation) and involuntary mechanisms (motor and affective mimicry and autonomic reactions). However, emotional simulation and affective mimicry, both mechanisms of empathy, function within the structure of sympathy, informing or aiding the formation of knowledge necessary for recognition and alignment (ibid., p. 103). Thus, sympathy and empathy are not strictly separate, but have an interconnected relationship. The importance of Smith's theory lies in forming a detailed understanding of audience's relationship with fictional characters, an understanding that is not reduced to popular notions of (unrestrained) emotion. Nevertheless, character engagement is not exhaustively explained by Smith's theory alone.

Despite the importance of Smith's work, he has been rightfully criticized for excluding contextual factors, such as the spectator's previous experiences and knowledge (Barker, 2005, p. 360). Smith limits his theory to the actualized moment of film viewing. In the current research, drawing from previous studies on

reception, audiences, and fans introduced in the previous chapter, I consider the contexts of great importance to character engagement. My approach has been influenced by that of Anne Jerslev (2006), who in her study of *The Lord of the Rings* film audiences separated film viewers' emotions related to the narrative and fictional universe of a film from emotions related to the making of the fictional universe. Here I apply her approach to fictional characters by including emotions related to the making of a character as an integral part of character engagement. Using Phelan's character dimensions to discuss this area of character engagement, Jerslev's model expands the understanding of character engagement, so that the mimetic (character as a person) and the synthetic (character as an artifact) dimensions of a character can be equally the objects of emotional or affective engagement. This means, for example, that following news stories or discussing about character design online, casting film actors to play particular characters, or creating CGI animation are understood as an essential part of character engagement in this research.

The concept of 'engagement' as a tool to understand our relationship with fictional characters is present in game studies as well. While 'identification' has also been used to describe the players' relationship to game characters (e.g. Shaw, 2013; Taylor et al., 2015; Van Looy et al., 2012), and some others have applied the media psychology view to game characters and defined that relationship as experiencing empathy (Nomura & Akai, 2012), Petri Lankoski (2011, p. 293) has promoted the use of 'engagement' as a term for a player's relationship to the player character.[9] While his approach is based on single-player games, Lankoski applied Murray Smith's theory of character engagement as the basis for his approach wherein he differentiates on a conceptual level between goal-related engagement and empathic engagement with the playable character. For Lankoski (2011, p. 306), goal-related engagement focuses on *the player's* goals and choices in the game and includes emotions that are the player's own emotions, whereas empathic engagement is focused on *the character* and is "essentially about reacting to the character's actions."

This study also uses the term 'engagement' in media-specific forms of 'audience engagement' when discussing audiovisual media and use 'player engagement' when discussing games. Nevertheless, I understand engagement in and of itself as a transmedial experience, taking place in and around different media platforms and through different practices as well as via cognitive and affective processes (cf. Article I, p. 356). Jerslev (2016, p. 213) has noted how emotional experiences of film viewers are also related to different practices related to the film, such as "construction of the very act of going to the cinema to watch the film as a ritual or an event". Jerslev's research exemplifies how in addition to forms and platforms traditionally understood as media (film, games, literature etc.), places and physical practices can also become part of the transmedial experience (cf. Article I, p. 359).

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[9] There are also other influential theoretical concepts related to the player-character relationship, which are not a part of this dissertation, such as the player involvement model and incorporation offered by Calleja (2011).

There is also an alternative perspective to engagement with fictional characters, which I will briefly introduce here although I have not incorporated it into this research, since its approach and goals differ from the ones adopted here. 'Parasocial relationships' is the label used for intense relationships with fictional characters. David Caughey, in his ground-breaking research, *Imaginary Social Worlds: A Cultural Approach* (1984), which was based largely on interviews and surveys on "American imaginary relationships" (ibid. vii), described how people can feel strong emotions for media figures whom they have never met face-to-face (ibid., pp. 33, 40). He emphasized the experienced benefits of these parasocial relationships: "Like a meeting with a good friend, the artificial communication may lift the person out of a bad mood. Often the contact is sought for just this reason" (ibid., p. 66). Caughey divides the relationships with media figures into three categories, those of (1) observing, (2) participating, and (3) identifying (ibid., pp. 36–38). Observing is behaviourally passive, but emotionally invested interest in media figures' social interactions, making the individual not just an observer, but a voyeur (ibid., pp. 36, 37). Participating, for Caughey, is the change in the psychological responses to those that resemble an actual social relationship (ibid. 38). With the notion of media techniques "virtually forcing this kind of identification" (ibid., p. 39), Caughey's study represents a stance long past its expiration date, since it considers audience reception as something dictated by the medium, whereas engaging media content for decades now has been considered a much more multifaceted phenomenon (see 2.1). Nevertheless, their work was influential in attempting to remove some of the stigma from intense fan relationships (cf. Caughey, 1984, p. 40). The acknowledgement of different modes of engagement is important as well. What is problematic in Caughey's approach in my view, is that it bundles together attachment to an animated character, attachment to a fictional character played by an actor and attachment to a media figure, such as news reporter, treating these as but variations of the same phenomenon. This view indicates, however, that Caughey does not take into consideration how these characters are created.

Since Caughey's initial work, there have been attempts to understand parasocial relationships based on the object of interest from first-order (actual individuals such as celebrities) to second-order (fictional individuals with physical counterparts like actors and actresses) to third-order (fictional characters without a physical counterpart) (Giles, 2002). There have also been parallel and related terms suggested, such as 'parasocial friendship' and 'parasocial love' (Tukachinsky, 2011), or 'fictophilia' (Karhulahti & Välisalo, 2021). While research into parasocial relationships is important in the frame of research into the romantic and sexual behaviours of humans, it can also be criticized for labelling the phenomenon as something less than or something that is simulating 'actual' social relationships in the sense where simulation is often seen as a replacement for a relationship with another human being. Study of parasocial relationships with fictional characters is derived from psychological approaches, which also makes it distant from the perspective taken in this research. The current study considers

character engagement in the context of engagement with fictional and media content, while research into parasocial relationships compares character engagement to relationships with other people. In this study, I reach to the diversity of engagements with fictional characters rather than only focusing on a particular type of relationship.

# 4 METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Methodological approaches to engagement with fictional characters

Ultimately, a research report can never precisely describe or attach to the meanings and meaning-making processes constructed and taking place in the actual lived experiences of real human-beings. It is also always restricted by the interpretive repertoire of the researcher in question. What a researcher *can* do, is, firstly, reach to the textual and material evidence of meaning-making already in existence, and secondly, turn to people themselves for expressions and articulations of these meanings, and attempt to make visible and understandable the processes that are taking place.

In collecting and analysing research data, this project was designed and conducted as mixed methods research throughout. This means that both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in the research process. The mixed method approach meant that methods were mixed both sequentially and concurrently at different stages of research: formulating a research objective, collecting the data, and analysing that data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, pp. 9–10). However, in the analysis phase, the qualitative methods were the dominant ones giving the quantitative methods a supportive role (see Figure 1).

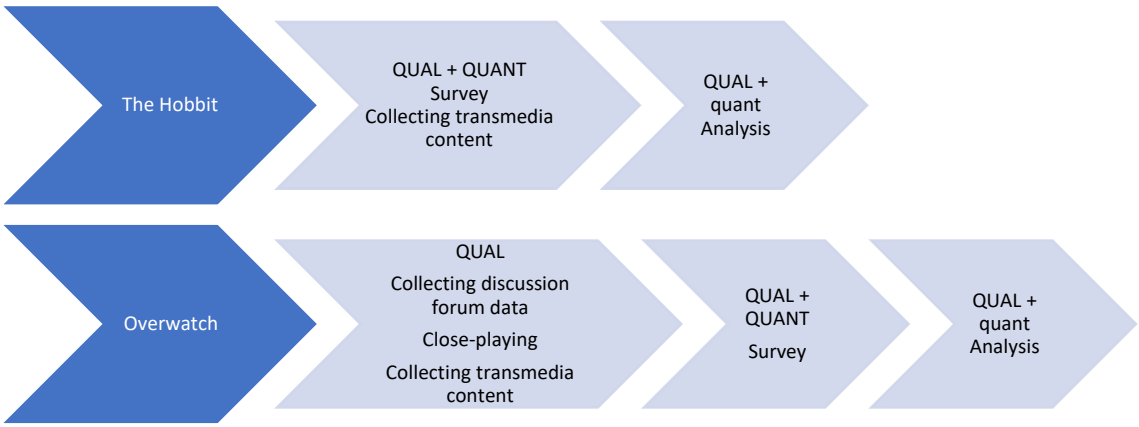


FIGURE 1. The relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods in the research project. The capitalized items denote a dominant position in that part of the research project, while lower case letters denote a lower priority.

TABLE 1. The data and methods for each article in this study.

| **Article** | **Transmedia universe** | **Research data** | **Analysis methods** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Article I: The World Hobbit Project in Finland | *The Hobbit* | Survey data | Open coding & Thematic analysis<br>Descriptive statistical analysis |
| Article II: Engaging with Film Characters | *The Hobbit* | Survey data | Open coding & Thematic analysis<br>Descriptive statistical analysis |
| Article III: "I Never Gave Up" | *Overwatch* | Survey data | Open coding & Thematic analysis<br>Descriptive statistical analysis |
| Article IV: Player reception of change and stability in character mechanics | *Overwatch* | Game and its transmedia extensions | Close-playing<br>Content analysis |
| | | Survey data | Open coding & Thematic analysis<br>Descriptive statistical analysis |
| | | Discussion forum data | Thematic analysis |
| Article V: "Sexuality does not belong to the game" | *Overwatch* | Discussion forum data | Rhetoric-performative discourse analysis |

To delve into the audience engagement with fictional characters in *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch,* I used multiple types of data, both qualitative and quantitative. The different types of data and analysis methods used in the individual research articles are introduced in Table 1. I opted for online surveys as my main research

method, as it enabled gathering qualitative data from large numbers of respondents and also quantitative data for background information and comparison. Compared to other methods, such as interviews or focus groups, surveys lack the possibility of refocusing an inquiry by asking new more detailed questions based on the responses and essentially going where the interview or discussion takes you. However, my aim was to reach large numbers of respondents and also gain quantitative data for comparison. This choice was partially led by practicality, as survey data on the reception of *The Hobbit* data was gathered as part of The World Hobbit Project (see 4.2.1) and was already being collected when I joined the project. I was not part of the survey design or the data collection, which posited its own restrictions and challenges for research, as not all design choices were the most appropriate for my particular research perspective (see also 4.5 and 5.1). However, while working with the existing data posed certain limitations to research, it also gave me access to large-scale data that I would not have been able to collect for a doctoral dissertation alone.

When studying *The Hobbit* audiences, my main data was survey data (see 4.2.1). For engagement with the *Overwatch* characters, I used survey data (see 4.2.2) and discussion forum data (see 4.3.1). While *The Hobbit* audiences wrote extensive accounts of their experiences in answering the opening questions in the survey, the *Overwatch* survey participants were much more concise in their written responses. In studying the engagement with *Overwatch* characters, the survey alone would not have yielded rich enough data for the purposes of this research. Thus, collecting discussion forum data as well as survey data offered broader insights into the *Overwatch* character engagement. As a result, the main data in this research consists of texts that construct and convey the meaning of characters for audiences.

The aforementioned choices in data collection meant that different types of data were used for studying the engagement with *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch* characters, respectively. A survey with its structure, the wording of its questions, and the size and positioning of its text boxes produces a particular frame and certain limits to meaning-making, whereas discussion forum messages are much more free-form in length and style of writing and especially regarding the topics of discussion. This meant that the discussion forum data related to the *Overwatch* characters was much better equipped to offer insights into the role of characters in terms of meaning-making well beyond these media products and terms of topics, such as a sense of belonging in game communities (RQ3), compared to *The Hobbit,* where only survey data were collected.

It would have been possible to collect discussion forum data that also related to *The Hobbit* characters. However, as the survey responses in themselves provided rich data for studying character engagement in *The Hobbit*, and the massive survey data provided insights into character engagement among audiences who would not necessarily be active in online communities, discussion forums were purposefully left outside the scope of this particular effort. Additionally, the premise of this research was not to compare character engagement in the two

transmedia universes with identical datasets, but rather tease out diverse forms of actual engagement with fictional characters.

This research also used media content from the two transmedia universes as both background and supplementary data. A systematic analysis of some of the characters in the transmedial worlds of *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch* meant employing an analysis of textual and visual representations of characters in different products and texts in the transmedia universe. In the case of *The Hobbit,* the data was used for contextualization and support when interpreting the survey data (Articles I and II). In The Overwatch Research Project, the results from this character analysis are in focus in Article IV, where we discuss two *Overwatch* characters in particular, Brigitte and Reinhardt. However, the analysis of other characters formed a necessary background for the study of transmedia engagement and character engagement in other articles as well (Articles III and V).

A concurrent research approach was used for The Overwatch Research Project, and research data was gathered simultaneously using (1) a survey, (2) collecting data from discussion forums and in-game (e.g., close-playing, see 4.4), and (3) gathering media content published by Blizzard. Analysis results of these datasets were compared to validate, explain, and broaden the conclusions based on each other (cf. Guest et al., 2012). Next, I describe in more detail how the survey data (see 4.2) and discussion forum data (see 4.3) were collected and analysed in practice, before advancing to do a deeper level of data analysis, primarily thematic analysis and discourse analysis (see 4.4).

## 4.2 Survey data

### 4.2.1 The World Hobbit Project survey

The World Hobbit Project (2014–2015) was an international research project led by Professor Martin Barker (University of Aberystwyth) to conduct a global-scale audience reception survey on *The Hobbit* films. Barker has led also other audience studies projects focusing on audiovisual fantasy fiction, the first (2003–2004) on *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (2001–2003) (Barker & Mathijs, 2008), and, after *The Hobbit*, the Questeros project (2016–2017) focusing on the reception of the fantasy television series, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) (Barker et al., 2021). These three projects were all conducted with international co-operation between researchers, and all gathered large sets of survey responses as their main data, including The World Hobbit Project. Each project was built on the shoulders of the previous one, which meant the methodology and the actual surveys were informed and affected by the outcomes of the previous project.

The survey questionnaire for *The Hobbit* audiences was designed in international co-operation between the research groups. The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions and eight demographic questions (for the complete survey questionnaire, see Appendix 1). I joined the project after the survey was launched, so I was not involved in its design.

TABLE 2. The demographics of the datasets from The World Hobbit Project survey.

| **Dataset** | **Finnish data, transmedia users (Article I)** | | **Nordic data (Article II)** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Frequency | Percent | Frequency | Percent |
| Frequency | 1,242 | 100.00 | 4,879 | 100.00 |
| Female | 373 | 30.03 | 2,332 | 47.80 |
| Male | 869 | 69.97 | 2,547 | 52.20 |
| Age groups | | | | |
| 6–15 | 117 | 9.42 | 290 | 5.94 |
| 16–25 | 581 | 46.78 | 2239 | 45.89 |
| 26–35 | 318 | 25.60 | 1103 | 22.61 |
| 36–45 | 140 | 11.27 | 680 | 13.94 |
| 46–55 | 61 | 4.91 | 378 | 7.75 |
| 56–65 | 22 | 1.77 | 145 | 2.97 |
| 66–75 | 2 | 0.16 | 41 | 0.84 |
| 76–85 | 1 | 0.08 | 1 | 0.02 |
| 86–95 | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 0.02 |
| Over 95 | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 0.02 |

Survey data in The World Hobbit Project were gathered through opportunistic sampling using different avenues and marketing the survey through social media channels (see more on the data collection methods in Section 4.2.3).[10] The survey questionnaire was launched in 2014 in 34 different language versions and resulted in receiving 36,109 responses from 143 different countries. As part of The World Hobbit Project, our Finnish team had the main responsibility for analysing the Nordic data, which also focused my research. In Article I we used only those Finnish responses that mentioned participating in any transmedial activities related to the films as our research data (n=1,242). Most of the responses were written in Finnish, but there were some in English and Swedish. Article II demanded a bigger dataset, since it mainly focused on a single open-ended question in the data, whereas in Article I several open-ended questions were analysed. Therefore, in Article II, I included Finnish (n=1,614), Danish (n=1,191) and Swedish (n=2,074) data, altogether totalling 4,879 responses. This group formed a dataset of Nordic responses, from which the small amounts of Norwegian (67) and Icelandic (6) responses were excluded, for data cohesion. The gender and age distributions for both the Finnish dataset and the Nordic dataset are presented in Table 2.

The World Hobbit Project survey data is permanently stored and openly shared through Aberystwyth University's research portal.[11]

10 The responses from Denmark also included a random sample set of responses (Barker & Mathijs 2016, 162).

11 The World Hobbit Project Database, https://doi.org/10.20391/aa40f8e7-00d3-45dd-b63b-e5da58168312.

### 4.2.2 The *Overwatch* survey

The *Overwatch* survey was designed to explore how players engage with the game and how audiences engage with the *Overwatch* esports. The survey design was based on the research team's knowledge of the game, previous survey studies on audience engagement with *The Hobbit* (Article II) and esports audiences (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017) and a preliminary analysis of related discussion forum data (more about forum data in Section 4.3). Contrary to *The Hobbit* survey, I participated personally in the design of the *Overwatch* survey, which offered the possibility of including more detailed questions related to characters. The survey questionnaire included altogether 44 questions, of which ten were related to game characters (for the complete survey questionnaire, see Appendix 2). The data were gathered using opportunistic sampling (for more on the data collection method, see 4.2.3).

The survey was posted online from August 2018 to November 2019 and went through several iterations, as a long-running survey can demand that researchers adapt to changing situations. *Overwatch* is an online game which is constantly updated, and there were several changes to the game during the running of our survey. Consequently, changes to the survey form were needed when new playable characters[12] were added to the game they had to be added to the survey questionnaire as well. A more significant change to the survey questionnaire came after the first dataset was analysed (Article III). When respondents were asked their reasons for choosing a particular character as their favourite, they were given different options as well as the possibility to add their own explanations. Gender and sexuality appeared as reasons in several responses, and after careful consideration, we added them as actual options in the next iterations of the survey form. This choice was made due to the apparent importance of these character qualities to the respondents and also because game and gamer cultures have traditionally been fairly uninviting to women and sexual minorities (Kirkpatrick, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019; more on this in Section 4.5).

The resulting data included 428 responses. The respondents reported being from 24 different countries with the largest groups of respondents from France (n=212), Finland (n=84), and USA (n=36) (see Figure 2). The majority of the respondents, 75.47%, were male (323), 21.96% were female (94), and 2.10% (9) identified differently, and two respondents did not answer the question. The respondents' age was most commonly between 16 and 35 years (88.79% of respondents) (see Table 3.) Most of the respondents had played *Overwatch* for more than a year (91.36%), meaning they had a fairly long-term engagement with the game.

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12 Four new characters were added to the game from when the first version of the survey questionnaire was finished to when the last version of the survey was closed.

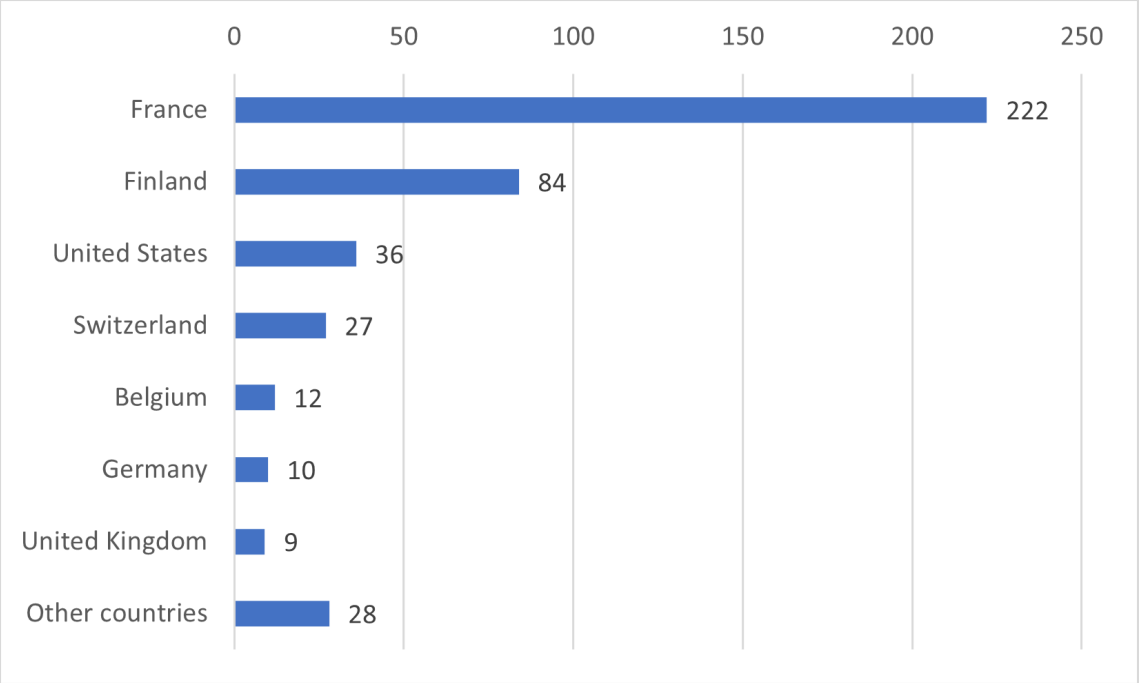


FIGURE 2. *Overwatch* survey respondents by country.

TABLE 3. Age and gender of the *Overwatch* survey respondents

| **Dataset** | **Pilot survey data (Article III)** | | **All responses (Article IV)** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Frequency | Percent | Frequency | Percent |
| Frequency (N) | 135 | 100.00 | 428 | 100.00 |
| Female | 57 | 42.22 | 94 | 21.96 |
| Male | 75 | 55.56 | 323 | 75.47 |
| Other | 3 | 2.22 | 9 | 2.10 |
| Age groups | | | | |
| 6–15 | 7 | 5.19 | 20 | 4.67 |
| 16–25 | 56 | 41.48 | 254 | 59.35 |
| 26–35 | 58 | 42.96 | 126 | 29.44 |
| 36–45 | 14 | 10.37 | 24 | 5.61 |
| 46–55 | - | - | 2 | 0.47 |

The *Overwatch* survey data is permanently archived in the University of Jyväskylä's data storage service.

### 4.2.3 Collecting survey data

Both survey datasets were gathered using opportunistic sampling, which is characterized by gathering data based on availability (Daniel, 2012, p. 83). In practice, opportunistic sampling in the current research meant that survey responses were gathered by spreading the link to the survey questionnaires so that the eventual sample was formed by responses from those who happened to come across the survey link. The survey link was spread by the researchers through several different channels including social media services, for example, Twitter, where the

survey was posted with relevant hashtags, Facebook groups, and online discussion forums. Spreading the link further was also encouraged, and information about the surveys thus spread organically as well. For example, on Twitter it was possible to see how the link to the *Overwatch* survey spread by people sharing the original message.

What could be considered a weakness of opportunistic sampling, is that those most likely to participate are not necessarily representative of the larger population of *Hobbit* audiences or *Overwatch* players, but instead, due to the recruitment process, are more likely to reach those following media and social media content related to *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch*, respectively (see also Article I). As an exception, *The Hobbit* survey data also included many responses from audiences who do not follow social media channels, or online discussion forums related to the films. For *The Hobbit* survey an official press release was issued, which resulted in a story about the research project in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest national newspaper in Finland, so it seems likely that publicity in traditional mainstream news media invited the respondents not active in social media. Still, even these respondents were somehow personally motivated to participate. Nevertheless, the aim of this study was not to find an absolute answer to, for example, what is the prevalent form of engaging with fictional characters in transmedia, but rather, to find out what kinds of engagements do exist, and the meanings assigned to them (cf. Tosca & Klastrup, 2020, p. 70). Thus, the audiences that were reached were diverse enough for the purposes of this study.

### 4.2.4 Analysing survey data

My approach to analysing the survey data was heavily influenced by Martin Barker, who developed the Q & Q methodology, based on combining both qualitative and quantitative data in the same survey, for the study of reception. An important feature of this approach is following closed-ended questions with open-ended questions on the same topic, thereby giving the respondents the opportunity to articulate their own meanings and understandings of the subject (Barker et al., 2021, p. 16). As in the Q & Q methodology, I found it essential that the quantitative and qualitative data inform each other; in practice, exploring the quantitative data produced questions that were then used for analysing the qualitative data, and in turn, the analysis of qualitative data produced a need for more quantitative understanding (Barker et al., 2021, p. 19).

Responses to selected open-ended questions were initially analysed using *open coding*, a data-driven approach wherein categories are formed as the analysis progresses (Given, 2008, p. 86). Coding was an appropriate analysis method for the large datasets in this research, particularly *The Hobbit* survey data, due to the method's ability to reduce massive qualitative datasets into smaller samples as directed by each research question. Open coding is also well suited to the explorative methodology adopted in this research since it allows for unpredicted themes and topics to emerge from the data.

The coding itself was an iterative process wherein new codes were created as the analysis proceeded. This procedure meant that the same responses needed

to be read repeatedly from different viewpoints. As the coding proceeded, it was sometimes also necessary to separate an existing code into two different codes or to combine codes. This process required a re-reading of the responses multiple times. When several coders analysed the same data (three coders in Article I, two coders in Articles 3 and 4) the process was based on a constant dialogue between the researchers: each section of data was coded by a single researcher, but the categories were then discussed and reworked as the coding process advanced. The responses to open-ended questions in *The Hobbit* data were in general lengthier than those in the *Overwatch* survey data, so the coding process for that data was also more demanding.

In practice, the responses were coded using the spreadsheet software Microsoft Excel. Each new code formed its own category, a new column in the spreadsheet, while each individual response was in its own row. Whenever a response was considered fitting for a particular category, it was marked in the suitable column. The categories were not exclusive, meaning that the same response could belong to several different categories. Excel software was chosen because it made it easy to keep all the data by the same respondent in the same place, that is, have the responses to both closed-ended and open-ended questions attached to the individual response and its analysis throughout the whole process. Simultaneously, the chosen software made it possible to quantify qualitative data, present descriptive statistics of it, and also make useful connections and comparisons between the qualitative and quantitative responses.

Quantifying qualitative data meant that a numerical value of 0 or 1 was given to each new column (code) created to mark whether that code appeared in that particular response. One column was also created for whether the respondent had answered the question or not. For example, when I studied audience engagement with the characters of *The Hobbit* (Article II), I used the question 'Who was your favourite character in the book or the films? Can you say why?' Separating the two groups of responses based on whether they mentioned a favourite character or not could not be accomplished reliably using automated methods, such as filtering the responses based on whether they had textual content or not, since 246 participants responded to the question only to answer that they could not choose a favourite character or that all characters were their favourites, which marked these responses as belonging to the group without a favourite character (see Article II).

Quantitative data, either when produced through closed-ended questions or by quantifying text responses, was analysed mainly using descriptive statistical methods, which meant counting frequencies, frequency distributions, and percentages of different options that were chosen by the respondents. Descriptive statistics were also used in multiple ways in this research.

Firstly, descriptive statistics gave an overview of the data. The analysis was for both surveys launched by producing basic statistics for the responses to all the questions in the survey. This process resulted in an initial understanding of what kind of data was at hand, what could be done with it, and what limitations

it might have. For example, basic demographic statistics formed a picture of who had actually participated in the survey.

Secondly, an overview of the data showed how the data could be segmented for further analysis. For example, in studying the transmedial user practices among *The Hobbit* audiences (Article I), we used the multiple-answer multiple-choice question 'Have you taken part in any of these other activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?' to find the appropriate subset of data gathered from all the responses by Finnish survey participants. All the respondents who chose at least one activity and thus reported engaging with the films in any other way in addition to watching them were included in the final dataset. This process meant excluding 23.0% of Finnish respondents from the study, resulting in 1,242 responses as the final dataset for this part of the research.

Third, quantifying qualitative data and forming descriptive statistics based on that data directed the questions posed for the quantitative data. For example, discovering that a large number of responses in *The Hobbit* data did not include a mention of a favourite character, posed a question of whether these respondents were different compared to some of the quantitative questions as well. This process resulted in comparing responses to the question of a favourite character to how the respondents rated the films or the book. Thus, the descriptive statistics raised a need for further inquiry and resulted in somewhat surprising connections (see Article II).

## 4.3 Discussion forum data

### 4.3.1 Collecting discussion forum data

Discussion forum data were used in this research when studying the engagement with *Overwatch* characters (Articles 4 and 5). Discussion forum data has its limitations in terms of research – not all audiences are willing or able to contribute, for example, due to diverse levels of technical proficiency. Nevertheless, it can be expected that *Overwatch* players have sufficient proficiency in using common methods of online communication, such as discussion forums, as *Overwatch* is an online game. One factor that did limit the possible participants was the language used in our data gathering: our survey was conducted in English and also the discussion forums used to gather data were in English, thus excluding players with insufficient skills in the chosen language. While playing *Overwatch* certainly demands some understanding of game-related English vocabulary, it is not necessarily at a level that would enable a player to participate in written online discussions or answer a long survey with complicated questions, even though they might be active in other than English-speaking *Overwatch* communities.

As a result, this research is not based on the supposition that the discussions forming the data were representative of all players – rather, it is based on the understanding that the discussions conducted on these forums were not created in a vacuum, separate from all other forms of meaning-making, but also reflect

the discussions taking place among the players in the game and elsewhere, outside of these forums. Furthermore, the online discussions are not a mere reflection of some other, more real, reality, but of the communities themselves, making the forums places where meanings are actively formed in interactions between participants.

The online discussion forums chosen for data collection were the official *Overwatch* forum maintained by the game company, Blizzard Entertainment, and the general discussion forum, Reddit.

The official *Overwatch* forum was shut down, and a new version of the forum was launched in February 2018, when this research was just beginning. Both versions of the forum were used in this research. The *Overwatch* forum has an in-built hierarchy of participants based on their engagement with the game – a player has to reach a certain level in the game to be able to post links or images on the discussion forum. This also affected our data collection for the aforementioned *Overwatch* survey, so that my co-researcher Maria Ruotsalainen, who had played the game longer than myself, was the one to distribute the link on the official forum, and only after reaching a certain level. The official discussion forums are also heavily moderated, which affects the kind of messages that are present.

Reddit is a general discussion platform with multiple discussion areas called subreddits. These subreddits can be considered online communities in and of themselves (cf. Squirrell, 2019, p. 1912). The platform combines common social media affordances (such as shareability and algorithmic newsfeeds) with elements of traditional internet message boards, including anonymity and volunteer moderators (Squirrell, 2019, pp. 1911–1912). Reddit also has had a reputation as a platform where online harassment has been extensively tolerated, although different new policies have been put in place since 2015 to keep track of the situation (e.g., Reddit, 2015; Reddit, 2020; cf. Massanari, 2017). As the discussion forum data in this study was gathered from multiple *Overwatch*- related subreddits, it is fair to describe it as being collected from multiple *Overwatch* communities.

The discussion forum data for this research was gathered as several separate datasets. An important basis for choosing and gathering these particular datasets was the extensive ethnographic fieldwork[13] conducted online by my colleague, Maria Ruotsalainen, who had followed these forums daily since the beginning of 2018. Thus, the information gleaned through her ethnographic work influenced my work as well, even though I did not personally conduct field ethnography in the *Overwatch* communities. Ruotsalainen also collected a large dataset from the original Blizzard *Overwatch* forum before it was shut down, including discussions particularly in the "General" section of the forum, and dating from May 2016 to the closing of the forum in February 2018 – these data were important in our design of the *Overwatch* survey. Based on her knowledge of the research field, and after profound joint consideration, we gathered six different datasets as follows:

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13 A more detailed description of the online ethnography can be found in the doctoral dissertation of Maria Ruotsalainen (2022).

*1) Favourite character dataset*

Data from the current official Blizzard *Overwatch* forum (United States version) 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 consists of 19 discussions (18,352 words) focused on character preferences. The data were collected in August 2018.

*2) Favourite player dataset*

Data from the Reddit subreddit (discussion area) r/competitiveoverwatch, which focuses mainly on the Overwatch League, were gathered using the search words "favorite", "favourite", "fan", and "fandom". The final dataset included only those discussions focusing on favourite players or favourite teams in the Overwatch League. The discussions in the dataset were conducted between November 7, 2014, and August 1, 2018. The data (22,816 words) were collected in August 2018.

*3) Brigitte dataset*

An individual discussion thread pertaining to the hero, Brigitte, and the changes made to her character was gathered from the official Blizzard *Overwatch* forum. This discussion took place in July and August 2020. This dataset is 1,936 words in length. Data were gathered in September 2020.

*4) Tracer dataset*

Data from the official Blizzard *Overwatch* forum (the previous version of the forum, now offline) focusing on the reveal of character Tracer's girlfriend in the web comic *Reflections* (2016). The final dataset consisted of what is called a 'megathread', created by the forum moderators, meaning one long discussion thread (202,242 words) where all the threads on the same topic were combined. This dataset was gathered in February of 2018.

*5) Soldier:76 dataset*

Discussions on the reveal of the character Soldier:76 being homosexual were gathered from the official Blizzard *Overwatch* forum using the search phrases "soldier" & "gay", "soldier" & "LGBT", and "soldier" & "reveal". This final dataset included 37 discussions (103,338 words). The data were gathered in March and April 2019.

*6) Symmetra dataset*

Data discussing the character Symmetra's role as a gay icon was gathered from the Reddit subreddit r/symmetramains, which focuses on the character of Symmetra (5 discussions), using the search phrases "symmetra" & "gay", and "soldier" & "lgbt", and from the official Blizzard *Overwatch* forum (6 discussions) using the search terms "gay" and "lgbt". The dataset consisted of 11 discussions (112,640 words). The data were collected in February 2020.

The resulting online discussion datasets can be divided into two groups based on the range of discussion: firstly, discussions on favourite characters and favourite

*Overwatch* esports players in general, and secondly, discussions focused on individual characters and a particular theme (see Table 4 with the datasets used for each article). These two groups of forum data were also used for somewhat different purposes in this research.

The discussions in the data typically lasted for no more than one or two days. The few exceptions were discussion threads which had quieted down, but then started anew weeks or even months later. For example, a discussion thread on whether the reveals of the characters' sexualities were relevant for the *Overwatch* storyworld includes 67 messages sent during a 36-hour period, but then the discussion stopped for a little over a month before it started again, and 11 more messages were sent over a period of six hours. Thus, the actual active discussion time for this thread was less than two days, even though the discussion stretched across 39 days. The discussion forum data are archived in the University of Jyväskylä's data storage service.

TABLE 4. The online discussion datasets used in each article.

| **Article / Dataset** | Favourite character | Favourite player | Brigitte | Tracer | Solder:76 | Symmetra |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Article III: "I Never Gave Up" | x | x | | | | |
| Article IV: Player reception of change and stability in character mechanics | x | | x | | | |
| Article V: "Sexuality does not belong to the game" | | | | x | x | x |

### 4.3.2 Analysing online forum discussions

Open coding, which was used in the analysis of survey data, was also utilized in analysing the online discussion data. Similar to the survey data, the datasets for the online forums were substantial in size, and coding made the collection of large datasets more usable for analysis. The codes were derived from the data based on the reoccurring appearances of topics, arguments, expressed emotions, and other similar repetitiveness (Given, 2008, p. 86). This also meant that as new codes emerged, parts of the data needed to be re-read to use the codes in previously un-coded parts of the data.

In practice, the analysis was executed using ATLAS.ti software. Each online discussion was stored as a single file in pdf format and imported into the software. ATLAS.ti enabled a more precise coding process in comparison to Microsoft Excel, which was used for analysing the survey data (see Section 4.2.3), since in ATLAS.ti it was possible to attach the codes to individual words, phrases,

or sentences instead of the entire discussion entry. This distinction was particularly useful with lengthy discussion entries, which could entail many different topics, whereas the survey responses were usually more confined to the question. Processing the data using ATLAS.ti also maintained the connection of each separate message to the discussion thread, which was necessary for understanding the meaning behind many of the discussion comments.

The next stage of the analysis was evaluating the codes and making adjustments, such as renaming codes, combining existing codes, or separating existing codes into two codes. Connections between the codes were also made by grouping them into different *code families*, a process supported by the chosen analysis software, ATLAS.ti. Code families made visible the connections between different codes. As one code could belong to several code families, this process also made visible connections between different code families. This stage revealed repeated statements and recurring themes, which could then be used to identify the relationships between themes (Lennon et al., 2014). This part of the coding process was crucial in forming a deep understanding of the research data and its patterns, which could then be further analysed to understand the meaning making in online discussions.

## 4.4 Constructing meanings

My main interest in the texts written by audiences and players that consisted of open-text responses of survey data and discussion forum data, were *the meanings they constructed,* and *how.* Previously I described the practical procedure of open coding. The analysis of individual responses and messages meant dissecting the text thoroughly to discover these meaning-making processes. This meant approaching the data with several questions. First, I asked questions that related directly to the content: Who are the characters discussed? What are the topics? What happens in this text? Then I proceeded to identify the structures, relationships, and identities: What *really* happens in this text? How do writers self-identify in their responses? Who are the actors involved: audiences, players, producers, creators, maybe fictional characters themselves? How are these actors described and what is their role in the meaning-making process? What kind of hierarchies and relationships are in place? What are the meanings produced through these constellations? These questions focused on character engagement in a particular context, where the texts become understandable through knowledge of the kind of relationships and structures, they are created in. In other words, answering these analytical questions was based on the concept of articulation as defined by Lawrence Grossberg (1992b, p. 54) as "the construction of one set of relation out of another" and "delinking or disarticulating connections in order to link or rearticulate them."

The primary analysis method for extracting the meanings in this research project was thematic analysis. This method required a closer analysis of the topics discovered through coding. Further consideration of these categories allowed

finding larger themes that could derive from one or more categories. This stage of the analysis process sometimes also meant returning to the coding phase and redefining the categories.

The chosen perspectives influenced what kind of themes were derived from the data. Nevertheless, I strived to keep an open mind in the analysis process to allow for categories and themes that were not immediately evident as to their connection to the research topic. This open approach to the data allowed themes to emerge that later revealed something new about the phenomenon. One such example is the following response to the question of favourite characters by a Finnish respondent to The World Hobbit Project survey:

> Galadriel är trevlig för hon är en av de få starka (ursprungliga) kvinnorna som får plats utan att i första hand vara som någons kärleksobjekt i Tolkiens värld.
>
> Galadriel is nice because she is one of few strong (original) women who get space [in the films] without being primarily someone's love object in Tolkien's world. (Translated from Swedish by the author)

In my analysis of audience engagement with *The Hobbit* film characters (see Article II), this response was coded under the category of 'Tolkien's other works', meaning those in addition to *LoTR* and *The Hobbit*. Some of the same characters are present in both *The Hobbit* and *LoTR* films, but references to Tolkien's works beyond *LoTR* seemed at first to be only anomalies, superfluous in connection to *The Hobbit* characters. However, the quote above reveals how engagement with a particular character was in this case interwoven with the engagement with the entire Tolkien universe. The respondent references not just the character Galadriel's role in the films but draws a comparison with the female characters and their roles in Tolkien's works more broadly. Thus, the respondent's knowledge of Tolkien's works, or at least the discussions related to them, resulted in them identifying the uniqueness of Galadriel's character and furthermore identifying this as the reason for their engagement with the character. 'Tolkien's other works' together with the category '*Lord of the Rings* films' thereby formed a theme entitled 'Tolkien universe' (Article II).

While thematic analysis was used to analyse both the discussion forum data and the written responses in the survey data, the interpretation of these two kinds of data had some fundamental differences because of who the audiences and players are writing to. Survey respondents are seemingly writing to the researchers. However, from the responses to the *Overwatch* survey, it became evident that some of the respondents seemed to think they were writing to the game company, Blizzard, or at least they believed the research data would be delivered to the game company, as the responses included direct messages to the company, such as this one:

> Please Blizzard give us a solo campaign with cinematics and good characters and storyline like you use[d] to do in the past. I love the multiplayer but it would be great to have the full story.

This phenomenon shows that even though the survey questions were preceded by a description of the research project and a consent form, at least some of the respondents passed by them quickly, perhaps even without reading them. This is possibly a result of an existing practice or phenomenon of digital culture where approving user agreements and terms of use on different digital services are considered mandatory steps in a process of accessing a service, rather than conscious decisions. More importantly, this misunderstanding could affect what these respondents were focusing on in their responses, as it might increase the likeliness of their focusing on the kind of content typical in player feedback, such as changes they wished to see in the game, as in the previous example, and simultaneously decrease the likeliness of these same respondents communicating personal meaning. Nevertheless, these explicit misunderstandings in the data were only a few, but it is important to note that they can happen. In contradiction, a similar phenomenon was not present in the Finnish data for The World Hobbit Project survey. This knowledge could be an indication of the differences between players and film audiences in terms of how close they feel to the creators of the respective cultural products in question, and how they perceive their own possibilities of communicating to them.

Survey responses from *The Hobbit* audiences presented a different kind of challenge, as the films had an extremely polarized reception both in the media and in audiences and fan communities, and it also showed in the survey responses. In our research data there was an overwhelming number of critical responses, even though at the other end of the spectrum there were also sincerely enthusiastic viewers. Understanding this polarization of responses necessitated a thorough contextual knowledge of the discussions centred around the films. Even though the responses were written for researchers, based on their style of writing, for many participants, the responses were an extension of the discussions they had followed or participated in. This polarization also showed in how some survey respondents identifying themselves through negation – they described themselves as 'not superfans', 'not extreme fans' or 'not hardcore fans' of either *The Hobbit* films or other works in Tolkien universe (Article I). These responses were attempts to separate the participant from the audiences with more extreme opinions of the films. However, these became understandable only with further knowledge of the existing debates that formed the contexts for these articulations (cf. Grossberg, 1992b, p. 55).

The discussion forum data also differed from survey responses in that the discussants were writing to each other, not to the researcher. This means that not all messages addressed the discussion topic directly but, for example, included mere expressions of agreement or disagreement with other discussants, or were so-called 'off-topic' messages, which discuss something completely different from where discussion started. Consequently, a researcher must both shuffle through them without losing their focus, and simultaneously avoid ignoring them in order not to miss meanings that are less evident, existing between the lines. Discussion forum data can also tell us much about what it does *not* discuss,

as online discussions also create a social space where some comments are more welcome than others.

Even though the research data related to *Overwatch* included both forum discussions and survey responses seemingly discussing the same game, the types of data differed in their form and style of writing. The forum discussions included more jargon that was used in communities formed around online multiplayer games in general, such as *trolling*[14] or *smurfing*[15], jargon used in *Overwatch* communities specifically, such as *GOATS*[16] or *bubble*[17] (cf. Siitonen, 2007, pp. 68–69), as well as meme images as forms of communication, all of which demand the researcher to be fairly knowledgeable about not just the game as a product but the communicative practices of player communities.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, I was not merely interested in the meanings attached to fictional characters by audiences and players, but also how those meanings were formed. While the survey data offered the opportunity to map out the breadth of engagements with fictional characters, the discussion forum data opened some of the meaning-making processes *as they were taking place in player communities*. While the act of responding to a survey question is a form of meaning-making in its own right with meaning being formed in the interaction between the respondent and the researcher, it is not a dynamic two-way process in the way online discussions can be. In discussion forums, character meanings are articulated for other players and often in response to them, with meanings being formed and shaped in the particular context where they emerge.

In practice, when studying online discussions for how meanings were formed around the sexual orientation of *Overwatch* characters and how the characters were used in identity politics (Article V), we utilized discourse analysis when approaching the data. For this particular study, we used what is called rhetoric-performative discourse analysis (Palonen & Saresma, 2017), developed for the study of populism and politics, as politics have progressively become more present in both online and fan communities (Dean, 2017). Rhetoric-performative discourse analysis is more of a methodological approach than a precise method. It considers political discourses as essentially affective and persuasive in their styles, but also identifies the logics by which these discourses and meanings are created (Palonen, 2019). This methodology is built on the idea that identities are constructed through repetition in a performative process.

Whenever researching audience and player engagement, it is also necessary to understand the cultural products themselves. For the audiences who were already familiar with Tolkien's works before experiencing *The Hobbit* trilogy, many of the films' characters were already known from elsewhere. This is also apparent

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14 Trolling is acting provocatively with the intention of inciting conflict.

15 Smurfing is playing using a secondary game account which is often of lower rank than the player's main account.

16 GOATS is the name for a team formation strategy, where the team consists of three tanks and three supports, in the competitive mode of *Overwatch*. The strategy was named after an Overwatch esports team of the same name, who were known for using this strategy.

17 Bubble refers to *Overwatch* character Zarya's ability to throw a protective bubble around herself or another character from the same team.

in how adaptation was an important frame within which the characters were discussed in the survey responses (see Article II). I conducted a closer analysis of the characters of Bilbo, Legolas, and Smaug, and how the aforementioned discussion of adaptation framed the audience engagement with them, though this analysis is not included in any of the articles published so far. This character analysis demanded a rereading of *The Hobbit, or there and back again* (as a Finnish translation), watching and rewatching *The Hobbit* films, rereading *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, watching *The Lord of the Rings* films, and acquainting myself with the breadth of current online discussion forums, fan fiction, and fan art related to *The Hobbit* films. All of this also created a strong context for the analysis of the primary research data.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the *Overwatch* characters, I did a character analysis of chosen characters based on the gameplay through the method of close-playing (Aarseth, 2007) and an analysis of other materials related to *Overwatch* characters provided by the game company, Blizzard. These include character descriptions, short stories, comics, and audiovisual content in the form of animated short stories and introductory videos, all published on the game's official website, and videos also made available through the online video service YouTube. The initial analysis included several characters, but two were chosen for a more detailed analysis. This character analysis was part of a study focused on engagement with game characters particularly in relation to character changes (Article IV).

When I started doing the character analysis, I had already played the game extensively which helped me in understanding what was particular about the chosen characters, Reinhardt and Brigitte, in relation to the whole game and its other characters. I played *Overwatch* around 350 hours during this research project, but only a few hours were used purposefully for close-playing. This was a conscious decision, as close-playing was a supplementary method for my study. In an online multiplayer game that doesn't include a continuous narrative which would progress through gameplay, close-playing cannot be measured by the times of playing through the game, but rather it has to continue until a saturation point is fulfilled. I undertook close-playing partly while playing with strangers and partly in collaboration with my colleague, Maria Ruotsalainen, where we would analyse the characters dialogically while playing the game.

Character analysis through close-playing started with listing all the characters' abilities and available player actions as well as their possible achievements and goals provided by the game mechanics and the user interface. The next step was identifying features of the character that were provided by engaging in the game and game communities: possible character-specific goals not dictated by the game but rather the game community as well as knowledge of how the character can function in different kinds of team compositions in combination with other characters. Also, all the skins, emotes (animations), voice lines, and other representative elements in the game, some depicted as voice lines or other elements in different game maps, were gathered. Material outside the game in-

cluded all that Blizzard offered on their website: text descriptions and videos introducing mechanics and narrative backgrounds of the characters, as well as web comics and short stories about them. Thus, close-playing included not just the moments of actual gameplay, but also other actions, such as browsing through the menus and consuming additional information and content about the character. Engagement with the game characters through the researchers' personal play experiences, but also through the instrumentalization of the 'implied player' (Aarseth, 2007) formed the basis of this analysis. Implied player is a construct based on a pre-existing construct of an 'implied reader' that was originally formed by Wolfgang Iser and used in literary studies to describe the ideal reader the text expects – similarly Espen Aarseth (2007, p. 132) formed the concept of 'implied player' as an analytical tool to understand the behaviours that the game expects from the player.

The foundation for this search of meanings was my own position as a researcher, essentially my relationship to the object of my research. Recognizing that position is necessary for transparency of the research process and this research report. My approach to the research in this sense derives from the fields of anthropology and ethnology, where the researcher's positioning in relation to the research field is essential. As mentioned in the introduction, I identify as a fantasy and science fiction fan and have at times been relatively active in different fandoms. Being a fan is a personally important identity for me. My background gives me cultural and social capital beneficial for the research, but also poses the danger of over-emphasizing the kinds of practices and interpretations that are familiar or important to me. Due to this issue, I have tried to cross-examine my interpretations throughout this research.

I feel confident and at home with audiences of *The Hobbit* due to my identity as a fantasy fan. However, balancing this strongly polarized reception challenged both my identity as a researcher and my identity as a fan. While long-time Tolkien and *LotR* fans largely have rejected *The Hobbit* trilogy, the films also attracted enthusiastic fans (cf. Barker & Mathijs, 2016). In discussions with other scholars, I found that many of them found *The Hobbit* a subpar addition to Tolkien universe. During this project, therefore, I was forced to thoroughly think about my relationship to the films and repeatedly articulate that relationship whenever I discussed the project, be it at academic seminars or fan conventions, where our team disseminated the research results on many occasions. My own stance toward *The Hobbit* was much less intense than that of other fans or even many colleagues. I found the films to be entertaining enough and enjoyed their aesthetics – the latter being a target of much criticism. I did not form an intense fan relationship with the films but neither did I dislike them. This difference in my relationship with *The Hobbit* compared to that of many others created a challenge, as it made me sometimes question my fan identity – was I a 'real' Tolkien fan, if I did not hate the films? This inner conflict also challenged my scholarly identity as an aca-fan, making me at times question it. However, as the research progressed, I realized that this experience of discomfort and the uncertainty of my position also forced me to consider my interpretations more closely and perhaps

even aided me in discerning valuable nuances in my reception of the data. In the end, I found this struggle was useful as it forced me to reconceptualize what being an 'aca-fan' means in the context of this research at least – not necessarily being merely a combination of particular emic and etic positions where a community or culture is studied simultaneously from the inside and the outside, but rather, I see the aca-fan as someone who is ideally able to continuously question and reflect on their position as a member of these different communities, both fan communities and academic communities, but also what these combinations and intersections of identities mean for that research.

With *Overwatch,* my position is further from the centre, simultaneously that of a casual *Overwatch* player who is fairly confident in their knowledge of the game, and a relative newcomer to the world of team-based online games in general. Even though I do not identify as a 'gamer', partially due to cultural burdens put on that moniker (e.g., Shaw, 2011; Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022), I do play games and consider myself a player of games. I started playing *Overwatch* as a result of the research reported in this dissertation, and the research consequently changed my stance to playing by acquainting me with multiplayer online gaming much more deeply than before.

During this research process, I essentially transferred from out-group to in-group in relation to *Overwatch.* In the beginning, I was a novice in many ways, as an *Overwatch* player, as an FPS player, and as a player of team-based online games. As I gained more knowledge, skills, and experience, so-called 'gaming capital' (Consalvo, 2007), my confidence in my abilities rose and so did my sense of belonging in the game. Thus, my identity in relation to *Overwatch* and similar games in general changed, which in turn changed and evolved my abilities to understand the meanings and meaning-making processes in this particular research field. However, as my identity and my practices in relation to popular culture were built around media fandom first and my knowledge of fantasy fandom and its practices runs deeper than my knowledge of online game cultures, there was the risk of seeing games and game cultures through a fan studies lens because of where I came from as a player. A simple example of this effect would be how I started immersing myself in *Overwatch* – my first instincts were to look for player-created content from traditional media fandom platforms: fan fiction archives and online platforms like social media site Tumblr and DeviantArt, a site used by many fan art creators for publishing their art. Even though I acknowledged there was much I did not know about online game communities and that just finding the community environments would be a task of its own, it seemed easier to begin with what I knew. Therefore, playing and doing research with other scholars who had different backgrounds in gaming and who were more at home in these environments than I was became of utmost importance. I found that Twitter can be an important platform for publishing fan art and that the most active discussions can be found in the official discussion forums hosted by the game developer. Immersing myself in the culture of *Overwatch* and the self-reflection necessary in this research process was largely aided by continuous discussions as we played together and compared our experiences. Thus, the aca-

fan position I built for and during this research, was constructed via interaction, not just with the fan and player communities but also with other scholars who had similar dual positions.

## 4.5 Ethics

Ethical issues are present in all phases of the research process when choosing a research topic and a perspective, formulating research questions, designing the research, collecting data and analysing it, drawing conclusions based on that analysis, and reporting on the process and the findings. The need for confidentiality and protection of individual research subjects' privacy has often been seen as the most pressing issues concerning ethics. However, the constantly changing digital landscape makes the binary division to public and private now nearly obsolete (Markham, 2018, p. 4). Markham (2018, p. 5) suggests that "privacy may not be the most relevant concept at all in a digital age, but rather control and context." For this research, this has meant considering ethical choices separately for different types of data and for each publication.

However, there are general ethical principles that have directed these individual ethical choices. *Principle of care*, which is a common ingredient in ethical principles directing research, starts with, but also goes beyond "do no harm", to actively showing respect and aiming to do good – keeping in mind that a researcher usually has more to gain than the research subject (Boelstorff et al., 2012, pp. 129–130). According to Boelstorff et al. (2012) the principle of care in researching virtual worlds includes *informed consent, anonymity, avoiding deception, doing good,* and *accurate portrayal*. How these principles take form as actions was different in different parts of this research process. Next, I will go through the different ethical choices made for each type of data used in this research project.

**Survey data.** Survey data in this research were collected with respondents being made explicitly aware that they were participating in research. Our survey data were also collected without direct identifiers so as to maintain the participants' *anonymity*. Indirect identifiers of age, gender, and nationality were collected. If this information was reported together with the open answers from the survey, identification could be possible. This kind of combination of data is thus something to be mindful of when reporting on a research project and, consequently, was something I avoided for this project.

A survey questionnaire always contains an understanding of not just the phenomenon under investigation, but also its intended respondents. The questionnaire also communicates this understanding to the respondents. This aspect makes it important to be mindful of how the respondents are represented in the survey. The importance of this background knowledge is heightened when the targeted group of a survey questionnaire is a community with its own power structures, hierarchies, and even conflicts. Thus, a survey questionnaire can be a tool for either inclusion or exclusion.

For the current research, ethical dilemmas in surveys arose specifically related to inclusion and the duty of *accurate portrayal*. The questionnaire for The World Hobbit Project survey was created with international co-operation from a large group of researchers before the onset of the research project. Survey design using co-operation demands many compromises. One compromise in the design process was that the question on gender only had two gender choices - male and female. Thus, all potential respondents did not have a choice when reflecting their gender identity and were essentially a group of respondents that were being excluded from the survey. Simultaneously, the question was mandatory, which meant that they could either submit or not submit their answers or were forced to make a choice they were not happy with. Since the demographic questions were at the very end of the survey, the respondents had already invested time and effort into the research before they came across this question. This could result in respondents feeling they were obligated to finish the survey even though they were not happy with the choice they had to make about gender identity. It is also possible we lost respondents over this as there was negative feedback about this question in the responses which were submitted. As I was not part of the project when the survey was designed, I was left with the question of how this feature of the survey data effected my research. In reporting results based on this data (Articles I and II), we felt it particularly important to keep in mind that the respondents' self-identification as "male" or "female" was not voluntary, and we thus decided not to use these terms as direct reflections of respondents' gender identities. As for this dissertation, my attempts to answer the research questions related to the role of characters in engaging with fiction (RQ1) and audiences' articulations and construction of engagement with fictional characters (RQ2) might lack some perspectives and experiences by some audience segments of *The Hobbit* films. These gaps I have attempted to balance in the study on engagement with *Overwatch* characters.

In The Overwatch Research Project, gender and sexual orientation arose as ethical questions that were already in the survey design, as briefly mentioned previously (Section 4.2.2). We provided the respondents with three options of identifying gender ('female', 'male', 'identify differently'), but gender and sexual orientation were also brought forth in another way. We asked the respondents, who was their favourite gameplay-based character and why, and who was their favourite lore-based (i.e., based on narrative) game character and why. The respondents were provided a list of reasons for choosing a favourite character and they could choose as many options as they wanted. The last option was "other, what?" Several respondents highlighted gender or sexual orientation in their choice for their favourite lore-based character: "Because he's gay like me. (I'm not joking)". / "Breaks gender stereotype"/ "Tracer is a lesbian, and so I am. Seeing LGBT+ representation in such a well-known game is beautiful to me." As a result, we decided to add these as options to the survey question. This was a choice based on our duty to accurately portray the respondents. Even though we had considered the narrative dimension of the characters to be covered by options, such as "personality" and "background story", gender and sexual orientation

were highlighted by the respondents as having significance separate from the options we already provided. Thus, the choice of altering the survey questionnaire was based on having the most accurate portrayal of the respondents, but also on an understanding of our duty to *do good*, that is, to actively acknowledge the existence and importance of different gender and sexual identities in the *Overwatch* communities. Had we conducted that in-depth analysis of online discussions about *Overwatch* characters before launching the survey, we might have included these options at beginning, as gender and sexual orientation arose as significant frames for discussing characters also in the *Overwatch* discussion forums. Altering the question in the middle of data gathering, meant we ended up with different datasets: from before and after the change, which also affected on how the study was reported: the first dataset became a pilot survey, which was reported in Article III, and the complete dataset, including the new responses, was reported in later publications, including Article IV in this research.

**Discussion forum data.** Informed consent is not always possible when observing audience behaviour in online environments. This was the case for the large discussion forum datasets gathered for this research. Here we considered two questions: (1) could the discussants reasonably assume their comments to remain private or open only to a limited group of readers, and (2) is there potential harm in using the discussions as research data? As to privacy, all the forums used in this research were public, so reading them did not require registration. Users were reasonably not expected to presume otherwise, although this is not true for all online services (e.g., Zimmer, 2010). In terms of potential harm, the most crucial choices concerning the forum data were done during the publication stage. Including quotations from a specific forum in a publication, even without pseudonyms, can result in the identification of discussion forum user accounts by other active forum users. Here we considered *accurate portrayal*: taking care the quotations and how they are portrayed in the article to maintain the original meaning and context of the comments. This choice meant framing the quotations in the context of the discussion as needed. We were careful to avoid judgment or negative portrayal of any individuals or individual comments in the data, even when dealing with difficult topics, instead striving to understand and focus on what the comments could tell us about the meanings and meaning-making processes being studied.

Taking context into consideration in relation with research ethics meant different solutions not just with different types of data, but also for individual cases. As the forum discussions sometimes touched upon sensitive topics, such as sexuality or mental health, quotations for publications on these topics were particularly carefully vetted. Sometimes a comment that was considered too sensitive and personal in nature, but communicated something essential for the research, was paraphrased rather than quoted directly.

Throughout this research *doing good* has in practice meant attempting to interact in a positive way in my interactions with the communities related to this research,

the *Overwatch* game community and Tolkien fandom. In both projects, we have also taken steps to share the research results with the communities, through an open access website in the case of The Overwatch Research Project and through talks at fan conventions in the case of The World Hobbit Project. In addition, all articles in this research are or will be made available online without pay-walls through open access publications (Articles I, II, IV and V) or online repositories (Article III). Thus, the results of this research hopefully will offer something worthwhile to the communities and audiences themselves.

# 5 RESEARCH RESULTS

## 5.1 Article I: The World Hobbit Project in Finland: Audience responses and transmedial user practices

Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Maria Ruotsalainen & Tanja Välisalo
Published in 2016 in *Participations* 13(2), https://www.participations.org/Volume%2013/Issue%202/s1/10.pdf

This article examines the audience engagement with *The Hobbit* fantasy film trilogy as a participatory and transmedial experience. We used the Finnish responses to The World Hobbit Project survey (n = 1,614) as our data to investigate what we called *transmedial user practices* (audience practices that spanned across different mediums), and how they emerged among audiences. We further examined how transmedia users receive and experience the films, what are the meanings assigned to *The Hobbit* films and the fantasy texts and the user practices related to them, and what these meanings tell about the possible broader meanings and the uses of fantasy.

We found that different viewers contextualized the films in different ways, as adaptations of literary work, as prequels to *Lord of the Rings* films, as works by director Peter Jackson, or as parts of a broader storyworld. These contexts also affected how the viewers interpreted the films. Thus, audience experiences of *The Hobbit* films were transmedial in nature: mediated through and affected by content in different mediums. Through examining these different interpretive frameworks, a broader 'Hobbit universe' emerged.

In our study, we defined the concept of 'transmedial user practices' to mean the different forms of mediated practices in how audiences interact with *The Hobbit*, and based on those practices, the concept of 'transmedial users'. Through our analysis we found that transmedial user practices were prevalent among audi-

ences – the majority of respondents (77.0%) had partaken in at least one transmedial user practice. Among these transmedia users, the most common practices were 'seriously debating the films' (90.7%), 'commenting online' (38.8%), 'collecting merchandise' (20.7%) and 'gaming' (18.4%). The first of these practices did not specify whether the debates took place online or face-to-face, so we made the choice of treating them as mediated debates. Even though some of the percentages of different practices might be explained by transmedia users being more active in responding to surveys, such as the one analysed here, the prevalence of these practices indicated a change where practices previously common among specialized audiences, such as fantasy and science fiction fans, have now become common among larger audiences as well.

The audiences of *The Hobbit* expressed different meanings for the films. Personal meanings were often emotional in nature and connected to aforementioned transmedial practices, not just the text itself. They derived either from the films' connection to the respondents' personal histories, the films' use as escape and immersion, essentially tools for coping in the current reality, or a shared social experience, with some respondents also identifying themselves as part of a particular type of audience or audience group (e.g., Tolkien fans). Societal meanings were related to particular themes that the respondents found meaningful, such as friendship and greed.

**All of the authors** contributed equally to this article. The current author designed the research, analysed the data, and wrote and finalized the article in collaboration with the co-authors. The current author analysed particular questions from the data independently (Q11 "Do you think there are people who would share your ideas about *The Hobbit*? What are they like?" and Q15 "Which stories or debates [on the films] have most interested you?) and thereby introduced fan studies approaches to data analysis and interpretation.

## 5.2 Article II: Engaging with film characters: Empirical study on the reception of characters in *The Hobbit* films

Tanja Välisalo
Published in 2017 in *Fafnir* 4 (3–4), 12–30, http://journal.finfar.org/articles/engaging-with-film-characters/

In this article, I studied the reception of characters in *The Hobbit* films based on responses to The World Hobbit Project survey from Finland, Sweden, and Denmark (n = 4,879). My main interests were finding out whether characters are important for all audiences of the films, and how audiences construct their engagement with characters. My analysis was focused on responses to question Q7 "Who was your favourite character, in the book or the films? Can you say why?"

I identified groups of character-oriented (CO, 83.5%) and non-character-oriented (NCO, 16.5%) audiences among the respondents. Both groups rated the

films very similarly, but the CO respondents were more likely to have read *The Hobbit* book and more likely to rate it as excellent than were NCO respondents, and similarly they were more likely to rate *The Lord of the Rings* films as excellent. When looking at transmedial activities, the CO respondents were more likely to engage in them, and the commonly character-centric activities like creating fan art or fan fiction were almost exclusively chosen by CO respondents. This result suggests that engaging with several different parts of the transmedial world of *The Hobbit* was connected to having stronger engagement with the characters.

Data-driven analysis of open answers on their favourite characters yielded 11 categories related to character engagement: (1) empathy/sympathy for the character, (2) physical and personality traits, (3) actor/performance, (4) character adaptation from the book, (5) a particular scene or event, (6) character development, (7) embodying a character type, (8) a character's central role in the narrative, (9) connection to Tolkien's works and world, (10) connection to *The Lord of the Rings* films, and (11) technical creation. These categories are the different interpretational contexts for the audience engagement with characters: (i) *The Hobbit* films and the book, (ii) the Tolkien universe, and (iii) fantasy film and fantasy genre more widely.

To analyse the data, I combined Murray Smith's theory of character engagement (1995), which largely ignores elements outside the film itself, with the empirically-based theory by Anne Jerslev (2006), who claims that audience emotions can also be targeted at the making of a fictional world. Jerslev had previously claimed that the emotional relationship to characters is connected only to the fictional world itself and is empathetic in nature, but this research showed that non-empathetic emotions, such as admiration, were also directed toward the characters and their artistic creation, such as acting, character design, and the technical creation of animated characters.

**The current author** designed this research, analysed the data, and wrote and finalized this article independently.

## 5.3 Article III: "I Never Gave Up"- Engagement with Playable Characters and Esports Players of Overwatch

Tanja Välisalo & Maria Ruotsalainen
Published in 2019 in *Proceedings of FDG '19*, August 26–30, 2019, San Luis Obispo, CA, USA, https://doi.org/10.1145/3337722.3337769

We studied audience engagement with the playable characters and professional esports players of *Overwatch* using (1) discussion forum data from the official *Overwatch* discussion forums and Reddit discussions, as well as (2) survey data on *Overwatch* and *Overwatch* esports (N=135). We wanted to investigate how players and audiences articulate their engagement with the game characters and

esports players and the possible similarities and differences emerging from the data.

Nearly all survey respondents (98.5%) chose a gameplay-based favourite hero, and a slightly smaller majority also chose a lore-based (i.e., narrative-based) favourite hero (91.0%). The most common reasons for choosing a gameplay-based favourite character were abilities / game mechanics, playability, and role in the game, while for the lore-based favourites the most common reasons were background story and personality. Nevertheless, personality and role in the game, along with physical traits / appearance, and voice acting were all common choices for both types of favourites. These results also show that mimetic elements of a character that make character human-like were important for gameplay-based favourites as well, and furthermore, it shows how character mechanics and character personality and appearance are often intertwined in character reception, also supported by the forum discussion data.

Forum discussions further revealed characters' values, such as pacifism, as a reason for liking them. In open-text answers about gender and sexual orientation arose as important reasons for choosing a favourite lore-based character. Changes made to characters also evoked numerous detailed descriptions of engagement with characters and articulations of emotional responses to them. We also found a gendered differences in our survey as to which favourite characters were chosen, as, for example, Reinhardt, a hypermasculine warrior, was a favourite lore-based character among male respondents, while there was no single character favourite among the female respondents.

In the responses to the question of favourite esport player, Finnish players were well represented, due to the many Finnish respondents in the data. Indeed, the most common reasons for choosing a favourite *Overwatch* player were player's personality, the hero the player plays, and the nationality of the player. In the open-text answers, a player's gender and sexual orientation were mentioned by several respondents.

When comparing engagement with playable characters and esports players, importance of personality was considered important for both, along with gender and sexual orientation, which arose in the open-text answers for both. Simultaneously, nationality was important for engagement with esports players, but not for playable characters.

This research demonstrated the need for further research on (i) combining character analysis and player engagement with the characters, as well as (ii) investigating connections between game characters and identity construction, for example, in regard to gender and sexual orientation.

**Both of the authors** contributed equally to this article. The current author designed the research, collected the data, analysed the data, and wrote and finalized the article in collaboration with the co-author. The current author introduced fan studies approaches to the article. The current author also acted as the corresponding author for the article.

## 5.4 Article IV: Player reception of change and stability in character mechanics

Tanja Välisalo & Maria Ruotsalainen
Published in 2022 in *Modes of Esports Engagement in Overwatch*, edited by Maria Ruotsalainen, Maria Törhönen, and Veli-Matti Karhulahti. Palgrave Macmillan, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-82767-0

In this article, we studied modes of engagement with the playable characters in the game *Overwatch*. We particularly investigated the roles of change and stability in character engagement. Change is a constant in online games and can produce significant changes to the characters as well, including additions of new characters. Our data consisted of a combination of (1) a character analysis of two chosen characters, and data on player engagement with the characters, namely (2) discussion forum data from official *Overwatch* discussion forums and (3) survey data on *Overwatch* (N=428).

In *Overwatch*, each character falls into one of three roles: tank, damage, or support. We analysed the characters of Reinhardt and Brigitte because they share similar mechanics and aesthetics, and their background stories are intertwined. Simultaneously, they are opposites in terms of change. Reinhardt is a character who has been in the game from its launch in May 2016 and whose mechanics have mostly stayed unchanged. Brigitte was introduced in February 2018 and her mechanics have gone through multiple changes. These characters represent different perspectives to change also in terms of narrative and personality. Reinhardt is depicted as a character with a history, someone whose past mistakes have changed him into a steadfast warrior, while Brigitte is depicted as someone who is still learning and, thus, changing.

The reception of these characters has differed greatly. Reinhardt is one of the most popular characters based on our survey, and he was perceived positively for his enjoyable gameplay and personality. However, there were comparatively few comments about him, and those were often very short. Simultaneously, Brigitte gathered several often-verbose negative comments. Her mechanics were considered to unbalance the game, and they also represented an unfamiliar mixture of abilities connected to all three roles, namely, tank, damage, and support. The negative reception to her character was particularly evident in the social media campaign, #deletebrig, which also expanded to negative comments directed at the voice-actor of the character. Due to this feedback, Brigitte's character has gone through multiple changes, which can also make her more difficult to engage with.

Character analysis in this article pinpointed how transmedial expansions can produce game design choices in terms of character mechanics, such as the Reinhardt's charge mechanic or the intertwinement of Brigitte's defence and attack mechanics, both more understandable and more logical for the player. In terms of player engagement, the analysis of discussion and survey data revealed how changes in game mechanics affect character engagement, leading to diverse

forms of engagement within the same game. We also found how some players and player communities foreground the synthetic dimension of a character, such as how a character's abilities are balanced, or in Brigitte's case, are not balanced. Methodologically, this research showed how analysing player engagement with a particular character, like Brigitte, can shed light on player engagement with another, as the concise commentary and silences regarding Reinhardt need a comparison point to become fully understandable.

**Both of the authors** contributed equally to this article. The current author designed the research, collected the data, analysed the data, and wrote and finalized the article in collaboration with the co-author. The current author had the main responsibility for character analysis using close-playing methodology.

## 5.5 Article V: "Sexuality does not belong to the game" – discourses in Overwatch community and the privilege of belonging

Tanja Välisalo & Maria Ruotsalainen
Published in 2022 in *Game Studies* 22 (3)

In this article, we studied how playable characters of *Overwatch* were used to negotiate belonging and non-belonging in the game. We focused on two cases where, after the game's launch, a playable game character (Soldier: 76 and Tracer) was revealed to be homosexual, and a third case of a character (Symmetra) considered a queer icon by a community of players. We analysed online discussions on the game using rhetoric-performative discourse analysis and identified five groups of discourses.

(1) Consumer discourses framed the game as a service and created a hierarchy between the characters' narrative elements and the gameplay qualities foregrounding the latter as well as the players more focused on them. (2) Auteur discourses framed the game as art and emphasized the authority of the game designer over the game and its characters. According to this discourse, the players truly belonging to the game are the ones understanding enough to yield to the designer's authority. (3) Authenticity discourses forefront the narrative cohesion of characters. They argue against reveals of Tracer's and Soldier:76's non-heterosexuality as something not belonging to games in general, and portraying homosexuality as oversexualizing the character of Tracer, and as posing a conflict with the hypermasculine stereotype that Soldier:76 represents. (4) LGBTQ representation discourses frame queer players as a group needing representation through game characters in order to belong. (5) Resistance discourses present an approach where belonging is constructed through a specific community of *Overwatch* players, who choose to interpret Symmetra as a queer character, rather than the whole player community or the game's production company.

These discourses contain an over-arching understanding of characters as artifacts created by game designers and developers. Many discourses analysed here create a division between narrative and mechanical elements of characters, purposefully foregrounding either one over the other. Somewhat deviating from this view are resistance discourses, which intertwine mechanics and narrative, as they consider the gameplay of the characters in itself creating meaning. Altogether, characters function here as a nexus for political debates that extend far beyond *Overwatch*, and concern gender and sexuality in games, the right to be represented, and the current political climate in Western countries. Consequently, characters in these discourses create the limits and horizons for belonging in *Overwatch*.

**Both of the authors** contributed equally to this article. The current author designed the research, collected the data, analysed the data, and wrote and finalized the article in collaboration with the co-author. The current author was the corresponding author for the article.

# 6 DISCUSSION

## 6.1 Responding to the research questions

I embarked upon this journey wanting to find out empirically what it means to engage with a fictional character. That question proved to be more complex than I anticipated, and the research project led me to paths I had not expected. It was as if I had started on a path looking to find a particular beautiful spot, but the path branched out to several different paths with no clear instructions. I would follow each path in turn only to realize that all the paths led to the same spot and were merely approaching it from different directions. Without going down all these paths, I would not have ever enjoyed the different sceneries on the way and would have had perhaps only a very one-sided view of the spot. These different paths, which sometimes crossed each other, instead led me to different perspectives on character engagement, all of which reveal something about the relationship we have with a fictional character. Next, I will go through my main findings from these different paths and how they connect to the different research questions. In Table 5, I have marked which research questions are answered in which article. This table also shows how *The Hobbit* data was more suitable for answering the first two research questions (RQ1, RQ2) and *Overwatch* data was more suitable for others (RQ2, RQ3).

TABLE 5. The articles and their connection to the research questions

| Article | RQ1 | RQ2 | RQ3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Article I: The World Hobbit Project in Finland: Audience responses and transmedial user practices | x | | |
| Article II: Engaging with Film Characters: Empirical study on the reception of characters in *The Hobbit* films | x | x | |
| Article III: "I Never Gave Up"– Engagement with Playable Characters and Esports Players of *Overwatch* | x | x | |
| Article IV: Player reception of change and stability in character mechanics | | x | x |
| Article V: "Sexuality does not belong to the game" – discourses in *Overwatch* community and the privilege of belonging | | x | x |

**RQ1: What is the role of fictional characters in how audiences engage with media?**

To understand engagement with fictional characters in the current media landscape, it was necessary to gain an understanding of how audiences engage with transmedia. *Transmedial user practices*, "audience practices that are somehow transmedial in nature" (as defined in Article I), were extremely common among the audiences studied here. The majority of the Finnish *Hobbit* respondents (77.0%) and an overwhelming majority (98.4%) of *Overwatch* audiences (Ruotsalainen & Välisalo, 2020) took part in transmedial user practices. While there are individuals who only watch a film or play a game and never purposefully engage with any official transmedia expansions, in the networked media environment, it is difficult to completely avoid transmedial user activities (see also Klastrup & Tosca, 2016, pp. 110, 120). Thus, audiences construct their engagement with characters not just through a single work of fiction, but through their engagement with the transmedia universe overall.

I found that transmedial user practices do have a connection with the intensity of character engagement, that is, how important these characters are for different audiences. In my study of the Nordic reception of *The Hobbit* films, characters were not as important to all audiences – at least not important enough to mention a favourite character when asked (16.5% did not mention a favourite character, see Article II). For the purposes of analysis, I described the audiences with a favourite character or characters as *character-oriented* and those without a favourite one as *non-character-oriented*. When comparing these different audiences, I found that audiences with a favourite character had more often read and liked the book that the films were based on, had more often seen and enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy that preceded *The Hobbit* films, and engaged in other transmedial user practices more often as well (see Article I).

The connection to character-orientation was particularly prominent in typically character-centred practices, such as creating fan art or writing fan fiction, that were almost non-existent among those audiences who did not mention a favourite character (Article II). However mundane this result might seem, here it is still based on a large

set of empirical data. It affirms the understanding of how our engagement with fictional characters is not just about engaging with a film character through watching a film, a game character through playing the game, or a book character through the act of reading, but rather, it is modified and perhaps strengthened through multiple different media and activities, and vice versa, character engagement also has an effect on audiences' choice of these transmedial user practices.

Building on the aforementioned conclusions, there seems to be a connection between what is the specific route that audiences use to navigate through the transmedia universe in question and *which* character or characters the audiences prefer. For example, in *The Hobbit*, the character of the elven warrior, Legolas, was particularly liked by audiences who had enjoyed the *LoTR* film trilogy but had not read *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again,* indicating they had entered the Tolkien universe through the *LoTR* films (Article II). In the case of a broader transmedia universe like the one comprised of Tolkien's works and their adaptations, where literature has traditionally had a central position, this study reveals and gives access to an audience who does not necessarily have its focus on literature at all. Simultaneously, there were many respondents whose engagement with *The Hobbit* characters was strongly influenced by the role of the films as adaptations from a book, making it all the more evident how many of those favouring Legolas formed a unique audience segment. These results provide further empirical support to claims made in transmedia studies on different mediums inviting different audiences (e.g., Jenkins, 2011b).

Connections between favourite characters and navigating a transmedia universe were visible also in the study of player engagement with *Overwatch* characters. In our survey, respondents were more often able to choose a favourite *Overwatch* character based on the gameplay (98.5%) than based on the character's lore, that is, their background story and place in the fictional world (91.0%) (Article III). As characters' background stories are revealed mainly via different transmedial expansions and there is very little narrative content in the game itself, these results indicate that these audiences who are engaging mainly with the game and less with any fictional narratives from the world of *Overwatch* are more likely to engage with characters based on their gameplay value. Ideally, this data should be further compared to other existing studies of different types of players, play mentalities, and preferences (e.g., Kallio et al., 2011; Vahlo et al., 2017; Cömert & Samur, 2021).

Indeed, the studies on both, *The Hobbit* audiences and *Overwatch* players, highlight the potential of large-scale surveys in reaching diverse audiences and diverse engagements with fictional characters and their relation to media engagement. However, research employing these methods necessitates having sufficient knowledge of the communities and the platforms these audiences inhabit and the media they use.

**RQ2: How do audiences articulate and construct their engagement with fictional characters?**

Audiences articulate their engagement with characters typically in terms of the different elements of a character, such as appearance, personality traits, or character development in a narrative. Some of these elements are medium-specific, such as voice-acting, character adaptation from another medium, or game character mechanics (see

Articles II and III). Different players and audiences, individually and also as communities, emphasize different character elements over others, depending on contextual factors, such as the time and place where these evaluations are made. Some elements, such as personality traits or a character's background story, can be identified as belonging to the diegetic dimension of fiction, that is, to the fictional world, while elements such as character adaptation from another medium, also reach into the non-diegetic, and particularly into the processes of creating a character. Some character elements may also become dominant in relation to others. An example can be found in the study of discussions on the *Overwatch* character, Brigitte. A negative perception of Brigitte's character mechanics spread into engagement with the character's other elements as well, and the overall reception of the character was also negative for parts of the player community (see Article IV). Thus, character mechanics was a dominant character element for certain audiences.

In this study, gender and sexual orientation were revealed to be among the particularly meaningful character elements for audiences. This aspect became apparent in both the reception of the *Overwatch* characters and *The Hobbit* characters alike. These elements also provided the greatest challenge to this research in terms of methodology (see Sections 4.2.2 and 4.5). Gender and sexuality are also character elements that strongly connect the meaning-making processes around characters to meaning-making among audiences more generally, thereby connecting to broader discussions ongoing in culture and society. In *The Hobbit*, Tauriel, a female elven warrior was a new character created for the films and her addition to the films became a point of wide criticism and debates among both the media and audiences. It was also repeatedly mentioned by the survey respondents in this study as well (see Article II). The respondents repeatedly discussed the need for a more diverse female representation and how the character of Tauriel answered that need. Thus, the addition of a female character showing this particular type of strength was welcomed as breaking a gender stereotype. Simultaneously, she was seen as a negative female stereotype, considering her role was reduced to that of a love interest and a vehicle for developing the male characters' stories and the relationships among themselves (see also Korpua, 2017). These responses at the very least demonstrated the continuing importance of representation. They also resonate with earlier public and academic discussions on the problematic representation of women in Tolkien's work (see Michelle et al., 2017, p. 206). Further still, they exemplify how the quality of this representation matters – for these respondents, it is not valuable to have female representation, if the female character has a very narrow stereotypical role in the narrative. This view is also apparent in some of the mixed reception related to her, as in the following quotation from a respondent who first mentions Tauriel as one of her favourite characters and then continues further:

> Taurielin hahmo on kuitenkin mielestäni arveluttava feministisestä näkökulmasta, sillä oli hän kuinka vahva ja kova tahansa, hänet on luotiin vain Kilin ja Legolasin romanttisen rakkauden kohteeksi. Mutta koska olen romantikko, olisin tietenkin halunnut Kilille ja Taurielille onnellisen lopun tai edes tietää, miten Taurielille lopulta kävi.
>
> Anyway I find Tauriel's character dubious from the feminist viewpoint, because no matter how strong or tough she is, she was only created to be the object of romantic love for Kili

> and Legolas. But because I'm a romantic, I would have wanted Kili and Tauriel to have a happy ending or even to know, what happened to Tauriel in the end. (Translated from Finnish by the author)

These engagements with Tauriel are built in a context where there is a need for more representation of women in fantasy fiction, but also the need for more diversity in that actual representation.

Discussions around Tauriel draw attention to the nature of characters as artificial creations, as results of conscious design choices. They indicate the significance of *character creation* for audience engagement**.** Character creation is a term commonly used to refer to a process in digital games, and in role-playing games most commonly, where the gameplay is preceded by the player creating a player-character according to predetermined variables, such as skills or appearance. However, in terms of audience engagement, I understand character creation as encompassing all the ways in which a character is artificially created, be it through writing, visual and costume design, animation, casting an actor or voice actor to portray a character, the performance of that actor, or creating abilities for a game character via technical creation. In my analysis of *The Hobbit* reception, it became evident that (i) audiences engage strongly not just with fictional characters themselves but also with the process of character creation, and (ii) audiences structure their relationship with a character not merely through empathetic engagement (cf. Smith, 1995; Jerslev, 2006), but also their non-empathetic emotions such as admiration for the aesthetic or the craft of character creation (see Article II).

Studying the meaning of character creation in character engagement is particularly productive in transmedia universes, such as the ones studied here. This is due to the fact that a transmedia universe is usually created and built over time, allowing for, and indeed, resulting in changes in the created characters as they appear in different works in the same universe. Additionally, online multiplayer games, such as *Overwatch,* are constantly going through updates and modifications, including changes to their characters. In the case of *Overwatch*, changes to characters took place inside the core game as changes to the game mechanics, but also through new expansions to the transmedia universe. These changes often became topics of intense debate and discussion among the players (see Articles IV and V), further revealing how meanings for characters and, particularly, character creation, are constructed. The attitudes towards these changes then reveal in actual practice how different character elements are prioritized by different audiences and are connected to reveal the kind of strong engagements that could be more difficult to observe in an independent work of fiction.

Indeed, character engagement is nonseparable from the contexts it inhabits (cf. Grossberg, 1992b, p. 55). I identified the interpretative contexts of character engagement in transmedia universes (Figure 3). In the context of a particular *text* or *work,* the character is considered within the confines of that single work and that work's narrative, world, structure, aesthetic, cohesion, and so forth. In this study this same context was evident among both the *Overwatch* players and *The Hobbit* audiences in their evaluations of character authenticity, that is, whether character's actions are believable based on what is known about them from earlier.

In the context of a *transmedia universe*, character engagement takes place in a vast storyworld and is also affected by non-diegetic elements and user-generated content

that is mediated in different ways. In this context, different representations, and interpretations of the character in different transmedia extensions are considered as contributing to the audience engagement with the character. As the same character is often present in several different works in the same transmedia universe, character adaptation can weigh heavily in character reception (see also Hutcheon, 2013, pp. 114, 122). This is prominent in how *The Lord of the Rings* books and films affected *The Hobbit* audiences' engagement with the character of Legolas – audiences expressed enjoyment in learning more about his character in the new film series (Article II). Thon (2019, pp. 184–185) has conceptualized characters in different transmedia works as separate characters unless the works in questions are clearly non-contradictory but has maintained that audiences actively ignore contradictions and search for explanations from the authorial intentions or conventions related to a particular medium. However, based on the current research, while audiences themselves attempt to see these different character representations as if they were meant to be the same character, they also actively debate and discuss the contradictions between different works in the same transmedia universe rather than merely ignoring them or explaining them away (see Article V), in contradiction to what Thon claims. Indeed, many fan practices that have become more common with the proliferation of fannish behaviours, such as fan fiction and fan art, have resulted in the creation of what are essentially new transmedia extensions, all providing their own, often conflicting, interpretations of characters (cf. Kaplan, 2006, p. 151).

In the context of *genre*, previous and other works in the same genre come into play, along with the expectations and evaluations they evoke in relation to character aesthetics or character stereotypes. This context was evident, for example, in how some audiences of *The Hobbit* considered Smaug the kind of dragon that dragons should be, evoking their expectations based on the fantasy genre (Herman et al., 2012, p. 126). Conversely, breaking stereotypes can also be welcomed, such as the reveal of the homosexuality of the character Soldier:76, the stereotypical male soldier in *Overwatch* (Article V). It is noteworthy as well that different works in the same transmedia universe can sometimes belong to different genres. Additionally, fan fiction often introduces new genres to the transmedia universe (see also Jenkins, 1992, pp. 169–170). For example, fans can create humorous stories related to an otherwise more solemn or dramatic fictional world. Therefore, different parts of the transmedia universe may evoke different genre expectations, and the perceived hierarchy of different parts of that transmedia universe can determine which genre conventions take precedence over others.

Similarly, character stereotypes and expectations related to characters can derive from different *mediums*. Audience expectations can be somewhat different for game characters compared to film characters. The notion of a particular medium as being an interpretational context is especially interesting when studying transmedial characters. Even though the characters in this study are all from transmedial universes, a single medium can take priority in the audience reception of a character. This is evident, for example, among the audiences of *The Hobbit* films who emphasized character adaptation from the book as a reason for liking a character and were thus emphasizing the book as the primary medium (see Article II). Genre and medium can also function together, creating specific expectations. For example, the *Overwatch* characters Brigitte

and Symmetra were seen by some players as not fitting the typical FPS game character type, as their mechanics were atypical for the genre (see Articles IV and V). Consequently, there are clear medium-specific differences in how audiences construct the meaning of characters.

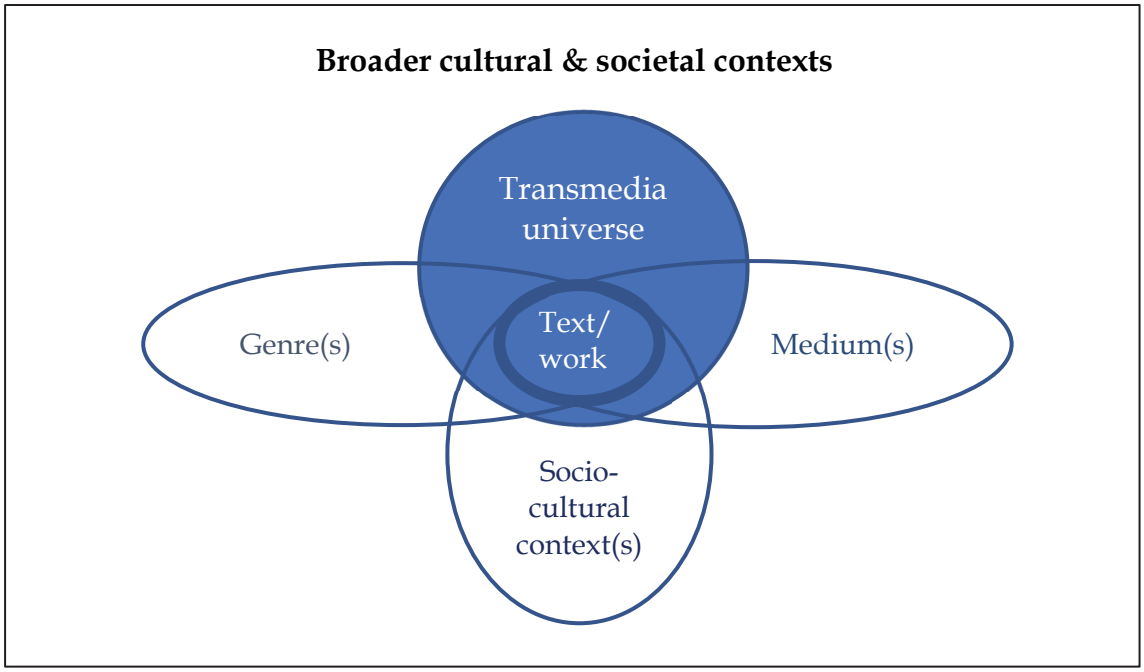


FIGURE 3. Interpretative contexts of character engagement.

*Socio-cultural contexts* can also be identified as an interpretational frame for character engagement. Even though all of the aforementioned contexts, text/work, transmedia universe, genre, and medium, are parts of broader cultures and societies and communities, audiences evoke particular socio-cultural contexts in their unique articulations of character engagement. An online community formed around one *Overwatch* game character, Symmetra, on the online discussion forum Reddit is an example of this. The community considers Symmetra to be a 'gay icon', drawing from the character's untraditional game mechanics, personality, appearance, and perceived 'underdog' status among players in general (see Article V). This community's interpretation of the character is not based on the official storyworld created by the game company, but rather, it is created in the context of a particular LGBTQ+ culture by likening Symmetra to other classic gay icons.

Even though individuals are simultaneously affected by different interpretational contexts, a single context can take precedence over others when audiences articulate the meanings they attach to characters. This does not necessarily mean that this context is always the primary one for an individual. For example, if an audience member in their articulation of engagement with a particular character bases their evaluation on how the character is adapted from another medium, this does not mean that the same is true for all the character adaptations they encounter, or, if an audience member finds one character's narrative development the most intriguing thing about them, that does not need to be the case for all the fictional characters they engage with.

Furthermore, these articulations and emphases may change over time and in different social contexts.

Prioritizing some interpretational contexts over others leads to negotiations and even struggles among audiences over which interpretational context is the primary one. Different discussion platforms create important sites for negotiating character meanings. Meanings related to characters are articulated, discussed, and debated, but also silenced and made absent. There are characters or narrative arcs for particular characters, which are judged, sometimes harshly, in different audience segments or communities. There is no question that this response has an effect on audience engagement with these characters, although it does not negate the possibility that these characters can still be meaningful. Indeed, quite to the contrary, it can increase the meaning of these characters for certain audiences.

**RQ3: What are the roles of characters in meaning-making processes that go beyond media?**

Articulations of engagement with fictional characters reveal and construct broader cultural and social hierarchies. When emphasizing particular character elements over others, audiences come to invoke different understandings of the roles and power dynamics of different subjects and objects in the process of constructing meanings. From the perspective of game studies, it is especially interesting to learn how the emphases on different character elements are intertwined with different understandings of what a game is. In this research, the study of audience engagement with the non-heterosexual characters of *Overwatch* revealed diverse interpretations of the game that were primarily based on how the audience understood its function, either as a service, a piece of entertainment, or a work of art (Article V). In essence, discussions on characters sexualities were in part being used to construct the role of games in cultures and societies more broadly.

Discourses present in the discussions on the sexualities of *Overwatch* characters also actively constructed power dynamics between players and creators and assigned them different amounts of authority. Competing discourses gave the authority over character interpretation to the player or to the game's creator. For example, some discourses positioned players as paying customers and creators as service providers, while others positioned creators as authorities whose decisions should not be questioned by the players (Article V). Further still, these discourses constructed hierarchies between different groups of players based on, for example, the time played or their perceived interpretative skills, in essence, their 'gaming capital' (Consalvo, 2007, p. 4). Thus, these discourses used game characters for creating space and encouraging belonging in the game for some groups of players while painting others as outsiders, and less welcome.

Characters are also used to create new spaces, as was the case for the online community formed in Reddit around the *Overwatch* game character, Symmetra, and described as LGBTQ+ friendly (Article V). The community around Symmetra's character is located in the margins, beyond the official game forum and away from the major *Overwatch* communities in Reddit, where discussions of LGBTQ+ characters and topics are often reported by other users. Thus, the character-centred community serves as

a platform and space for players who do not necessarily have similar opportunities in the official and mainstream *Overwatch* communities. Therefore, the character of Symmetra serves here as an 'icon', as described in the community, indeed a symbol for a safe environment for particular groups of players. The discussions of Symmetra and the LGBTQ+ characters in *Overwatch* also act as evidence and an example of how fictional characters can form a nexus for political debates around belonging and power.

By engaging with fictional characters through discussing them online and partaking in many other practices, audiences not only participate, but also attempt to define how fiction relates to the cultures and societies in which they exist. Further, audiences use characters to construct meanings for the communities and cultures they inhabit. Thus, articulations of character engagement can become instruments for constructing different meanings and, indeed, different realities.

## 6.2 Methodological contributions

Understanding character engagement needs diverse data. Using several types of data reveals many of the strengths and weaknesses of different data types, which became particularly apparent in studying the engagement with *Overwatch* characters. Debates in the *Overwatch* communities between groups who consider only character mechanics as important and others who emphasize narrative representation were heated and portrayed audience segments that were strongly opposed and sometimes even hostile toward each other (Articles III and V). In the open-text survey responses, it was rarer to see polarized views on characters, and there were also responses with significantly less affective intensity; individual survey respondents even discussed topics using different viewpoints in their responses. This difference indicates that online discussions do construct meanings related to characters, but the meanings visible there are not necessarily the only ones that are being constructed and articulated. Therefore, only using online discussions for data would have created a somewhat simplified, or at least a more polarized, understanding of the audiences that were studied here. Thus, in researching character engagement, diverse forms of research data seem particularly necessary.

Expanding the different types of data discussed above to include closed questions in surveys can be very fruitful. *The Hobbit* audiences who navigated the transmedia universe centred around Tolkien's works by following the character of Legolas is a convincing example of how cross-examination of character preferences and media use with large datasets and both quantitative and qualitative methods better enable the identifying of different kinds of audiences. Thus, the question of a favourite character can lead to significant findings on the patterns of media use.

When studying *Overwatch,* it was noteworthy, how online discussions around one of the most popular characters in the game, Reinhardt, were surprisingly scarce and there were relatively few responses related to him in our survey as well, while many other characters aroused active discussions on online forums and an abundance of commentary in our survey (Article IV). It seems that engagement with a central or popular character in a particular transmedia universe does not necessarily mean there

will be large amounts of articulations of this engagement that can be easily found. Simultaneously, significant changes to characters, their narratives, and their design or unconventional character mechanics lead to significant debates and discussions around *Overwatch* characters**.** Indeed, the relative silence on the engagement with Reinhardt becomes more understandable through comparing it to the active discussions on other characters – Reinhardt's character design and mechanics remained stable and reliable in accordance with the character's personality, while many other characters have gone through the kind of changes that evoked even heated debates among the players. Character design can create specific affordances for different engagements with that character as well as with the transmedia universe they inhabit. Thus, a comparative approach to engagement with different characters in a transmedia universe can be a methodological choice that gives interpretational power to the silences or the lack of discussion regarding specific characters.

# 7 CONCLUSIONS

In this research, I have sought to show that engagement with different characters across media cannot be essentialised to a single understanding of characters as simple and singular constructs. Rather audiences connect with multiple different character elements that can be understood as different dimensions. Furthermore, these engagements are connected to how audiences engage with transmedia universes more generally, so there are connections between the intensities and objects of character engagement, and the specific works in a transmedia universe and specific transmedial user practices that audiences engage in. All this takes place in overlapping contexts that the audiences are very much aware of.

Indeed, audience engagement with fictional characters is highly contextual. This connects to not just how audiences construct meanings for characters, but also to how characters become parts of broader meaning-making processes. These contexts are not delimited by the porous borders of the transmedia universe, but instead reach beyond, to genre-specific and media-specific conventions and through those conventions to larger cultural and societal contexts. These interpretational contexts include those formed around characters – individual works of popular culture, the transmedia universes in which they are located, genres, and mediums – but also the cultural and societal contexts. Understanding these different contexts makes it clear how it is possible for characters to have different meanings for different audiences.

This research was conducted in the context of transmedia productions. That focus means that the diversity of character engagements can be different for stand-alone works of fiction. The two transmedia universes studied here, *The Hobbit* and *Overwatch*, are both in the realms of fantasy and science fiction, with many non-human characters. Thus, this research was limited by its choice of fictional worlds that were under scrutiny, as fictional worlds closer to the audiences', the players' and the fans' personal everyday lives were excluded. Whether characters in fictional worlds closer to ours would yield more diversity in these research results, remains outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, both *The Hobbit* films and the game *Overwatch* are products of mainstream popularity, which can be expected to have diverse audiences. In terms of characters, *Overwatch* as a game provides a particular kind of game characters, and thus, a game with a focus or even more emphasis on roleplaying could certainly offer more diverse results.

However, in light of the results of this study, it is safe to say that characters are not equally as important to all audiences, and neither are they meaningful to all audiences in the same way. What is important to note as well is that the audience reception of characters has its own specific nature in terms of the reception of fiction in general. Characters are important to audiences as themselves, as independent personas and not merely as parts of a narrative, a media product, or a fictional world. Importantly, audiences give characters meanings that are separate from a narrative or narrative world or the conventions of genre or a medium, and these meanings are not merely based on their mimetic nature as human-like entities, but on how the characters are created and how they are used in discussions, debates and struggles regarding broader cultural and societal themes.

Audiences are increasingly interested in how characters are created, and what kind of design choices are made, and they have an interest in influencing this process. The synthetic dimension of characters is not something ideally unnoticeable or something to turn away from; rather it is important for audiences, which makes it necessary for media creators to open their creative process to their audiences, which is also used as a form of purposeful consumer engagement. The increased attention to the process of character creation coincides with the increased technological possibilities of character creation held by the audiences themselves. Different forms of role-playing, where creating a character at the start of the game have existed long before the prevalence of digital and online games. However, digital and online games with built-in character creators, which make it possible or even demand the player to create a character before being able to play, have made creating characters a mainstream practice through numerous immensely popular and widespread games, such as *World of Warcraft*. Simultaneously, there have emerged other playful communities and forms of play where creating characters is central, from text-based role-playing on discussion boards to various communities inhabiting virtual worlds. Character creation is a form of engagement that currently takes place in both official and non-official practices that relate to fiction. It can be part of a transmedial game's demands, or it can be an essential part of a non-official transmedial audience practice (cosplay, role-playing etc.).

While the practice of creating characters in roleplaying games is certainly not equivalent to character creation as a broader set of practices as understood in the current research, it is certainly worthy to ponder whether the emergence and popularity of games with this feature have turned character design choices into an everyday practice in a way that also affects the ways audiences now engage with fictional characters. The prevalence of playing games as a practice and of character creation as part of those games have perhaps changed the audience perception of characters in other media as well. The change from receiving and interpreting characters to also creating them has resulted in a change in the audience subject position from layman to expert when it comes to characters. When all audiences can create characters, they perhaps have more to say about the kinds of characters created and the practices of creating and developing them. Practices related to creating characters raise a multitude of questions for future research, not the least of which is the formation of new economies born around character creation.

The role of characters in transmedia needs further research from the audience perspective. In transmedia studies, there is great support for the idea of transmedial

worlds having a particular "core text" (Harvey, 2015, p. 87; Mittell, 2015, p. 294) or even several "core texts", which are central and more important from the production point of view than other parts of the transmedial world. The existence of core texts is evident in how transmedial extensions are not necessarily understandable or accessible without knowledge of the core texts. For transmedia it is also typical or at least expected that different parts of the transmedia can function as entry points to the universe. So how do audiences traverse between these different texts? As discussed here, there are indications in this research that some audiences follow particular characters throughout a transmedia universe. The character can be the guide to what works are of interest, what practices are engaged in, and what communities or social behaviours related to the transmedia are important for individual audience members as well as for whole communities. Tosca and Klastrup (2020, p. 153) have described some transmedial worlds as "character-driven". That is something that needs to be further understood on a deeper level. What can 'the character trajectories' these audiences follow through the transmedia universe tell us about what the characters mean to them? On a related note, more research is needed to determine whether the concept of *character-oriented audiences* used in this research is applicable to understanding character engagement and media engagement more broadly. Following this path, further studies on character engagement should be undertaken to try and reveal and interconnect with how different audiences position themselves as well as content creators in relation to characters and how these positionalities construct the power dynamics that are connected to engagement with popular culture as a whole.

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Hahmoilla on suuri merkitys tarinankerronnalle ja yleisöille olipa kyse sitten kirjallisuudesta, elokuvasta, digitaalisista peleistä, sarjakuvasta tai televisiosta. Hahmot kantavat tarinaa ja toimivat mediayleisön kiinnittymisen kohteina, mutta teorian näkökulmasta hahmoja on tarkasteltu etupäässä alisteisina narratiiveille, ja empiiristä tutkimusta hahmojen ja yleisöjen suhteesta on ollut vähän.

Eräs näkyvimpiä mediatuotannon muutoksista on ollut transmediatuotannon yleistyminen. Siinä samaa tarinaa tai tarinamaailmaa rakennetaan yhtäaikaisesti käyttäen useita eri mediamuotoja. Transmedian yleistyminen on tuonut mukanaan kysymyksen siitä, miten yleisöt rakentavat suhteen fiktiivisiin hahmoihin transmediaalisessa mediaympäristössä. Tämä väitöskirja tarkastelee yleisöjen suhdetta fiktiivisiin hahmoihin kolmen alakysymyksen kautta: (1) Mikä on fiktiivisten hahmojen rooli yleisöjen mediasuhteessa? (2) Miten yleisöt artikuloivat ja rakentavat suhdettaan fiktiivisiin hahmoihin? (3) Mikä on hahmojen rooli mediasisältöjä laajemmissa merkityksenmuodostamisen prosesseissa?

Tässä tutkimuksessa etsitään vastausta näihin kysymyksiin tarkastelemalla hahmojen vastaanottoa ja hahmosuhdetta empiirisen tutkimuksen keinoin kahden eri transmediakokonaisuuden kontekstissa: Toinen on fantasiakirjailija J. R. R. Tolkienin teosten ympärille muodostunut kokonaisuus, jota tässä tutkimuksessa lähestyttiin ensisijaisesti *Hobitti*-elokuvasarjan (2012–2014) yleisöjen kautta. Toinen on verkkomoninpeli *Overwatch* (2016–2022), joka sijoittuu science fiction -genreen. Näiden tarkastelun tutkimuksellisina kehyksinä toimivat transmediatutkimus sekä yleisöjen ja vastaanoton tutkimus, erityisesti fanitutkimus. Transmediatutkimuksen kehys auttaa määrittelemään sen, mitä on transmedia, jonka kanssa yleisöt ovat vuorovaikutuksessa. Tässä tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin erityisesti transmediauniversumin käsitettä, joka määrittelee transmedian yleisöjen näkökulmasta ja sisällyttää siihen mukaan saman tekijän tai tuottajan teosten lisäksi erilaiset ei-narratiiviset ja ei-diegeettiset tuotokset sekä yleisöjen, fanien ja pelaajien itsensä tuottamat laajennukset samaan tarinamaailmaan. Vaikka kaikki yleisöt ja pelaajat eivät ole faneja, niin fanitutkimuksen lähestymistavat tarjoavat ymmärryksen ensinnäkin vastaanoton moninaisuudesta – edes yhden populaarikulttuurin teoksen yleisöt eivät ole yksi yhtenäinen joukko – ja toisekseen merkityksen muodostumisen sosiaalisesta ulottuvuudesta erilaisten yleisöjen ja pelaajien verkostojen ja yhteisöjen kautta.

Kyselyaineistot ja verkkokeskustelut toimivat tutkimuksen ensisijaisina aineistoina. *Hobitti*-elokuvien vastaanottoon liittyvä kansainvälinen tutkimusprojekti, The World Hobbit Project, keräsi laajan aineiston, josta tässä tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin Suomesta, Ruotsista ja Tanskasta kerättyjä vastauksia. *Overwatch*-pelin osalta käytettiin niin ikään kyselyaineistoa, mutta lisäksi kerättiin pelihahmoihin liittyviä verkkokeskusteluaineistoja. Kyselyjen avovastauksia ja keskusteluaineistoa analysoitiin hyödyntäen avointa koodausta ja sen perusteella muodostettua teemoittelua. Pelihahmoihin ja seksuaaliseen identiteettiin liittyvää keskusteluaineistoa analysoitiin lisäksi retoris-performatiivisen diskurssianalyysin keinoin. Näitä ensisijaisia aineistoja ja analyysimenetelmiä täydennettiin kyselyjen tuottaman numeraalisen datan kuvailevalla tilastoanalyysilla. Lisäksi molemmista transmediauniversumeista toteutettiin valikoitujen hahmojen lähempää analyysia media-aineiston keinoin.

Analyysin tulokset osoittavat, että yleisöjen suhteella transmediaan ja fiktiivisen hahmoon kiinnittymisen välillä on yhteys: Yleisön hahmosuhteen intensiivisyys on yhteydessä siihen, millainen on yleisön suhde koko transmediauniversumiin – yleisöt, jotka valitsivat ja kuvasivat lempihahmon tai lempihahmoja, olivat myös vuorovaikutuksessa transmedian kanssa moninaisemmilla tavoilla kuin yleisöt, jotka eivät kyenneet valitsemaan lempihahmoa. Yleisöjen erilaiset tavat olla vuorovaikutuksessa transmedian kanssa, niin sanotut transmediakäytänteet, erosivat myös sen mukaan, kuka oli heidän lempihahmonsa. Hahmomieltymyksiä tarkastelemalla voi siis piirtyä spesifejä reittejä transmediauniversumin halki. Transmediayleisöistä voidaan siis hahmosuhteen perusteella erottaa segmenttejä, jotka eroavat toisistaan muillakin tavoin.

Kun tarkastellaan yleisön tapoja artikuloida ja siten rakentaa suhdettaan fiktiivisiin hahmoihin, tämä tutkimus osoittaa, että yleisöt rakentavat suhdettaan fiktiivisiin hahmoihin erilaisten hahmopiirteiden, erimerkiksi ulkonäön, persoonallisuuden, sukupuolen, seksuaalisuuden tai hahmokehityksen kautta, mutta myös hahmon toteutukseen liittyvien elementtien, kuten hahmon designin tai näyttelijän suorituksen perusteella. Näiden piirteiden tarkastelu tapahtuu erilaisten kontekstien kautta, joista transmedian kontekstissa voidaan tunnistaa: (1) yksittäisen tekstin/teoksen, (2) transmediauniversumin, (3) genre(je)n, (4) mediumi(e)n, ja (5) sosio-kulttuurinen konteksti. Vaikka yksilötasolla vaikuttavat samanaikaisesti useat eri kontekstit, niin ajoittain jokin konteksti nousee toisia tärkeämmiksi. Tämä puolestaan johtaa neuvotteluihin ja kamppailuihin hahmoihin liitetyistä merkityksistä.

Fiktiivisiin hahmoihin liittyvien merkitysten artikulointi osaltaan sanallistaa ja rakentaa hierarkioita yleisöjen ja pelaajien kesken sekä yleisöjen ja tuottajien välillä. Hahmojen avulla luodaan myös uusia tiloja silloin, kun kuulumisen mahdollisuudet olemassaolevissa yhteisöissä ovat vähäisiä, kuten seksuaalivähemmistöt ovat tehneet *Overwatch*-hahmo Symmetran avulla tai *Hobitin* yleisöt naispuolisen haltiasoturi Taurielin kautta. Hahmoja käytetään siis kuulumisen kokemuksen muokkaamisessa ja identiteettipolitiikan välineinä.

Fiktiiviset hahmot ovat siis keskeisiä suhteellemme fiktioon, mutta niillä on myös roolinsa laajempien kuulumisen, identiteetin ja valtarakenteiden laajempien rakenteiden neuvottelussa, määrittelyssä ja rakentamisessa. Hahmosuhteen artikulaatiot voivat toimia siis välineinä paitsi merkitysten myös todellisuuden rakentamisessa.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1. THE WORLD HOBBIT PROJECT SURVEY

### THE WORLD HOBBIT AUDIENCE PROJECT

1. What did you think of the *Hobbit* films overall?
   ❍Awful ❍Poor ❍Average ❍ Good ❍Excellent

2. Can you sum up your response to the films in your own words?

| |
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3. Please choose *up to three* reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films, from among the following:

❍I wanted to experience their special features (eg, high frame rate, 3D)
❍ I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films
❍ I love Tolkien's work as a whole
❍ I like to see big new films when they come out
❍ I wanted to be part of an international experience
❍ I love fantasy films generally
❍There was such a build-up, I had to see them
❍ I was dragged along
❍ I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like
❍ I love Peter Jackson's films
❍ No special reason
❍An actor that I particularly like was in them:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☐ Richard Armitage | ☐ Cate Blanchett | ☐ Orlando Bloom |
| ☐ Benedict Cumberbatch | ☐ Martin Freeman | ☐ Ian Holm |
| ☐ Christopher Lee | ☐ Evangeline Lilly | ☐ Sylvester McCoy |
| ☐ Ian McKellen | ☐ James Nesbitt | ☐ Jeffrey Thomas |
| ☐ Aidan Turner | ☐ Hugo Weaving | ☐Another? Please specify: |

| |
|---|
| |

4. Which of the following come closest to capturing the *kind of films* you feel *The Hobbit* trilogy are? Please choose up to three. (They are in random order.)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ❍ Children's story | ❍Fairytale | ❍ World of fantasy |
| ❍ Prequel / sequel | ❍Star attraction | ❍ Part of Tolkien's legend-world |
| ❍ Multimedia franchise | ❍ Family film | ❍Digital novelty cinema |
| ❍ Action-adventure | ❍ Peter Jackson movie | ❍Literary adaptation |
| ❍Stunning locations | ❍ Coming-of-age story | ❍ Hollywood blockbuster |

*If you are unsure what we mean by one of these, hover your cursor over it, to see a short explanation.*

Is there another? Please specify:

| |
|---|
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5. Are there any of these that you definitely would *not* choose? Again, please pick up to three.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ❍ Children's story | ❍Fairytale | ❍ World of fantasy |
| ❍ Prequel / sequel | ❍Star attraction | ❍ Part of Tolkien's legend-world |
| ❍ Multimedia franchise | ❍ Family film | ❍Digital novelty cinema |
| ❍ Action-adventure | ❍ Peter Jackson movie | ❍Literary adaptation |
| ❍Stunning locations | ❍ Coming-of-age story | ❍ Hollywood blockbuster |

6. Can you tell us why you've made these choices in Questions 4 and 5?

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7. Who was your favourite character, in the book or the films? Can you say why?

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8. What element of the films impressed or surprised you most? Can you say why?

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9. Did anything particularly disappoint you about the films? Can you say why?

| |
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| |

10. Do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?

11. Do you think there are people who would share your ideas about *The Hobbit*? What are they like?

12. Have you taken part in any of these other activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?

- ❍ Producing fan art
- ❍ Role-playing
- ❍ Collecting merchandise
- ❍ Commenting online
- ❍ Making fan videos
- ❍ None of these
- ❍ Blogging
- ❍ Writing fan fiction
- ❍ Seriously debating the films
- ❍ Gaming
- ❍ Visiting filming locations

13.What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today? Choose *up to three* which are nearest to your opinion:

- ❍They are a way of enriching the imagination
- ❍They are a way of experiencing and exploring emotions
- ❍They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world
- ❍They are a way of escaping
- ❍They are a form of shared entertainment
- ❍They allow us to explore different attitudes and ideas
- ❍They are a way of creating alternative worlds
- ❍No particular role

14. How important was it for you to follow stories and debates around the films?

❍Not at all ❍Slightly ❍Reasonably ❍Very ❍Extremely

15. Which stories or debates have most interested you?

16. What did you think of the *Lord of the Rings* films overall?
❍Not seen ❍Awful ❍Poor ❍Average ❍Good ❍Excellent

17. Have you read *The Hobbit*?
❍Had it read to me ❍Read once ❍Read more than once ❍Still reading
❍Not read at all ❍Planning to read

18. If you did, what did you think of it?
❍Not read ❍Awful ❍Poor ❍Average ❍ Good ❍Excellent

19. In which formats have you seen the *Hobbit* films? Please pick as many as are relevant for each film.

| | Original cinema Release | Dubbed | TV | Sub-titled | IMAX | 3D | 48 fps | DVD/ Blu Ray | Down -load | Stream on demand | Mobile device | Not seen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unexpected Journey | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Desolation of Smaug | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| There and Back Again | | | | | | | | | | | | |

20. In what format do you *prefer* to see films like *The Hobbit*? (Please pick up to two.)

| Cinema release | IMAX | Home theatre system | DVD/ BluRay | TV | Stream on de-mand | Down-loaded | Mobile device | Doesn't matter |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | |

21. Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?

Finally, a few simple facts about yourself:

22. In which year were you born? [Pull-down year list, beginning 2014 back to 1915]

23. Are you: ❍Male ❍Female

24. Which of the following comes closest to describing your position?

❍Student ❍Clerical/administrative ❍Creative
❍Professional ❍Industrial labour ❍Executive
❍Home/child-care ❍ Agricultural labour ❍Self-employed
❍Service work ❍Unemployed ❍Retired

25. What level of education have you reached?

❍Primary school ❍Secondary school ❍Vocational qualification
❍University degree ❍Higher qualification

26. What are your top three most common cultural activities? They can be of any kind – sports, reading, gardening, surfing the internet, whatever.

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27. What are your three all-time favourite cultural or media experiences or products? Feel free to name any kind that you like.

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28. What is your country of residence? PULL-DOWN LIST

29. What is your nationality? PULL-DOWN LIST

SUBMIT

# APPENDIX 2. THE OVERWATCH SURVEY

**OVERWATCH SURVEY 2019**

What do you think of Overwatch as a game? *

❍Awful
❍Poor
❍Average
❍Good
❍Excellent

How long have have you been playing Overwatch? *

❍Less than a month
❍1 - 6 months
❍7 - 12 months
❍Over a year
❍1-2 years
❍Since the game launched (May 2016)
❍From the beta stage onwards
❍I have never played Overwatch

How often do you play Overwatch? *
❍Every day
❍A few times a week
❍A few times a month
❍Periodically - sometimes a lot, with long breaks in between
❍I no longer play actively

What is your preferred mode of playing options. *

❍Arcade PvP (player versus player)
❍Arcade PvE (player versus environment ie. Uprising)
❍Quick play
❍Competitive play
❍Custom games

Why do you prefer these modes of playing?

Why do you play Overwatch? Choose all the relevent options. *
❑To relax/unwind
❑To compete and gain better rank
❑To socialize
❑To have fun
❑To get better at the game
❑To become a pro-player
❑To obtain in-game cosmetics
❑To produce content for stream/videos
❑To be part of the Overwatch community
❑To learn more about the Overwatch storyworld and its heroes
❑Other, what?

How important is the Overwatch lore for you? *

❍Not important at all
❍Slightly important
❍Moderately important
❍Important
❍Very important

**Gameplay**

Do you play Overwatch in competitive mode? *

❍Yes
❍No

What is the highest rank you have achieved? *

❍Bronze
❍Silver
❍Gold
❍Platinum
❍Diamond
❍Master
❍Grand master
❍Top 500

In which season did you achieve your highest rank? *

❍I do not remember
❍S1
❍S2
❍S3
❍S4

❍S5
❍S5
❍S6
❍S7
❍S8
❍S9
❍S10
❍S11
❍S12
❍S13
❍S14
❍S15
❍S16

What is the role or roles you play the most? Choose all the relevant options. *

❑Support
❑Tank
❑DPS

Have you played any other FPS games besides Overwatch? *

❍Yes, I have played FPS games extensively for years.
❍Yes, I have played FPS games occasionally.
❍I have tried FPS games before, but haven't played them much.
❍I have not played FPS games before.

**The heroes of Overwatch**

Who were the first heroes you played (after the tutorial)? Choose 1 - 3 heroes *

❑Ana ❑Lúcio ❑Soldier: 76 ❑I don't remember
❑Ashe ❑McCree ❑Sombra
❑Baptiste ❑Mei ❑Symmetra
❑Bastion ❑Mercy ❑Torbjörn
❑Brigitte ❑Moira ❑Tracer

❑D.Va ❑Orisa ❑Widowmaker
❑Doomfist ❑Pharah ❑Winston
❑Genji ❑Reaper ❑Wrecking Ball (Hammond)
❑Hanzo ❑Reinhardt ❑Zarya
❑Junkrat ❑Roadhog ❑Zenyatta

Who is your favorite lore-based Overwatch hero? *

❍Ana ❍Lúcio ❍Soldier: 76 ❍ I cannot choose a favourite.

❍Ashe ❍McCree ❍Sombra
❍Baptiste ❍Mei ❍Symmetra
❍Bastion ❍Mercy ❍Torbjörn
❍Brigitte ❍Moira ❍Tracer
❍D.Va ❍Orisa ❍Widowmaker
❍Doomfist ❍Pharah ❍Winston
❍Genji ❍Reaper ❍Wrecking Ball (Hammond)
❍Hanzo ❍Reinhardt ❍Zarya
❍Junkrat ❍Roadhog ❍Zenyatta

Why? Choose all the relevant options *

❑Physical traits / Appearance
❑Personality
❑Voice acting
❑Dialogue
❑Nationality
❑Background story
❑Role in the game
❑Abilities / Game mechanics
❑Playability / Game feel / How it feels to play this hero
❑I feel emotionally connected to the character
❑Reminds me of myself
❑Is the kind of person I would like to be
❑Hero's sexual orientation
❑Hero's gender
❑Other reason, what?

Who is your favorite gameplay-based Overwatch hero? *

❍Ana ❍Lúcio ❍Soldier: 76 ❍ I cannot choose a favourite.
❍Ashe ❍McCree ❍Sombra
❍Baptiste ❍Mei ❍Symmetra
❍Bastion ❍Mercy ❍Torbjörn
❍Brigitte ❍Moira ❍Tracer
❍D.Va ❍Orisa ❍Widowmaker
❍Doomfist ❍Pharah ❍Winston
❍Genji ❍Reaper ❍Wrecking Ball (Hammond)
❍Hanzo ❍Reinhardt ❍Zarya
❍Junkrat ❍Roadhog ❍Zenyatta

Why? Choose all the relevant options *

❑Physical traits / Appearance
❑Personality

❑Voice acting
❑Dialogue
❑Nationality
❑Background story
❑Role in the game
❑Abilities / Game mechanics
❑Playability / Game feel / How it feels to play this hero
❑I feel emotionally connected to the character
❑Reminds me of myself
❑Is the kind of person I would like to be
❑Other reason, what?

Who is your most played hero in competitive mode? *

❍I do not play in competitive mode.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ❍Ana | ❍Lúcio | ❍Soldier: 76 | |
| ❍Ashe | ❍McCree | ❍Sombra | |
| ❍Baptiste | ❍Mei | ❍Symmetra | |
| ❍Bastion | ❍Mercy | ❍Torbjörn | |
| ❍Brigitte | ❍Moira | ❍Tracer | |
| ❍D.Va | ❍Orisa | ❍Widowmaker | |
| ❍Doomfist | ❍Pharah | ❍Winston | |
| ❍Genji | ❍Reaper | ❍Wrecking Ball (Hammond) | |
| ❍Hanzo | ❍Reinhardt | ❍Zarya | |
| ❍Junkrat | ❍Roadhog | ❍Zenyatta | |
| | ❍ I cannot remember. | | |

Who is your most played hero in other game modes? *

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ❍Ana | ❍Lúcio | ❍Soldier: 76 | ❍ I cannot remember. |
| ❍Ashe | ❍McCree | ❍Sombra | |
| ❍Baptiste | ❍Mei | ❍Symmetra | |
| ❍Bastion | ❍Mercy | ❍Torbjörn | |
| ❍Brigitte | ❍Moira | ❍Tracer | |
| ❍D.Va | ❍Orisa | ❍Widowmaker | |
| ❍Doomfist | ❍Pharah | ❍Winston | |
| ❍Genji | ❍Reaper | ❍Wrecking Ball (Hammond) | |
| ❍Hanzo | ❍Reinhardt | ❍Zarya | |
| ❍Junkrat | ❍Roadhog | ❍Zenyatta | |

Who do you consider to be the hardest heroes to play? Choose up to 3 heroes *

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ❑Ana | ❑Lúcio | ❑Soldier: 76 | ❑I cannot choose |
| ❑Ashe | ❑McCree | ❑Sombra | |

❑Baptiste ❑Mei ❑Symmetra
❑Bastion ❑Mercy ❑Torbjörn
❑Brigitte ❑Moira ❑Tracer
❑D.Va ❑Orisa ❑Widowmaker
❑Doomfist ❑Pharah ❑Winston
❑Genji ❑Reaper ❑Wrecking Ball (Hammond)
❑Hanzo ❑Reinhardt ❑Zarya
❑Junkrat ❑Roadhog ❑Zenyatta

Who do you consider to be the easiest heroes to play? Choose up to 3 heroes *

❑Ana ❑Lúcio ❑Soldier: 76 ❑I cannot choose
❑Ashe ❑McCree ❑Sombra
❑Baptiste ❑Mei ❑Symmetra
❑Bastion ❑Mercy ❑Torbjörn
❑Brigitte ❑Moira ❑Tracer
❑D.Va ❑Orisa ❑Widowmaker
❑Doomfist ❑Pharah ❑Winston
❑Genji ❑Reaper ❑Wrecking Ball (Hammond)
❑Hanzo ❑Reinhardt ❑Zarya
❑Junkrat ❑Roadhog ❑Zenyatta

How do you feel about the new heroes added to the game after its launch (Ana, Orisa, Sombra, Doomfist, Moira, Brigitte, Wrecking Ball/Hammond, Ashe, Baptiste)? You can comment on as many characters as you want.

**Player community**

Who do you usually play with? Choose all the relevant options. *

❑Solo
❑With players from Looking For Group tool (LFG)
❑With online friends
❑With offline friends
❑With family members / life partner
❑With team members / scrim partners

Is you game profile visibility set to: *

❍Private
❍Friends only
❍Public
❍It varies by situation

Have you taken part in any of the following activities, in connection to Overwatch? Choose all the relevant options. *

❑Follow/participate in discussions on Overwatch forums
❑Follow/participate in discussions on Reddit (e.g. r/overwatch; r/competitiveoverwatch)
❑Follow/participate in discussions on other websites and services
❑Watch live-streams and videos
❑Stream / Create videos of gameplay (your own or others')
❑Writing about the game (reviews, blogging, creating wiki content etc.)
❑Writing fan fiction
❑Creating fan art
❑Enjoying other people's fan productions (fan fiction, fan art etc.)
❑Cosplay
❑Collecting cosmetics (skins, voice-lines, poses, emotes etc.)
❑Collecting merchandise
❑Watching animated short-films of Overwatch created by Blizzard
❑Reading comics of Overwatch created by Blizzard
❑Other, what?

❑None of these

Would you like to tell more about these activities?

Is there something else about your relationship to Overwatch you would like to add?

**Overwatch League**

Do you watch/Have you ever watched Overwatch League games? *

□Yes ❍No

How often do you watch Overwatch League? *

❍All the matches
❍1-2 matches per week
❍Matches of my favorite teams
❍Stage and season playoffs and finals of Overwatch League

❍Matches that are widely anticipated in the community
❍Other:

Have you taken part in any of the following activities, in connection to Overwatch-League (OWL)? Choose all the relevant options. *

❑Watching matches online
❑Watching matches on site
❑Watching streams by professional players
❑Following OWL related content in media
❑Follow/participate in discussions on forums and in social media
❑Writing about OWL (on fan sites, blogs, eSports publications etc. / articles, blogging, creating wiki content etc.)
❑Creating fan art about players/teams
❑Writing fan fiction about players/teams
❑Engaging with other people's fan creations
❑Buying OWL merchandise
❑Buying OWL cosmetics (ingame or twitch)
❑Other, what?

❑None of these

Who is your favorite player?

Why is this player your favorite? Choose all the relevant options. *

❑I do not have a favourite player
❑The player is from my home country
❑For the team the player is in
❑I think the player is best at the game
❑I like the player's personality
❑I like the hero the player usually plays
❑I have followed the player in other eSports
❑The player was the first professional player I followed
❑I know the player personally
❑I think the player is good role model
❑Player's gender
❑Player's sexual orientation
❑Other reason, what?

What is your favorite team in OWL? *

❍I do not have a favorite team
❍Boston Uprising
❍Florida Mayhem
❍Houston Outlaws
❍London Spitfire
❍New York Excelsior
❍Dallas Fuel
❍Los Angeles Gladiator
❍Los Angeles Valiant
❍Philadelphia Fusion
❍San Francisco Shock
❍Seoul Dynasty
❍Shanghai Dragon
❍Atlanta Reign
❍Paris Eternal
❍Toronto Defiant
❍Chengdu Hunters
❍Guangzhou Charge
❍Hangzhou Spark
❍Vancouver Titans
❍Washington Justice

How did you choose your favorite team? Choose all the relevant options. *

❑Because of the city or area the team represents
❑Because of the nationality of a player or players
❑I became a fan of the team after watching them play
❑I followed a player or players before they played OWL
❑I like a player or players in the team
❑I like the team colours, logos or skins
❑I like media content created by the team
❑I like the stories or narratives related to the team
❑Other reasons, what?

How would you describe the role of eSports in contemporary society? Choose up to three options. *

❑Form of entertainment
❑Way for good players to make a living
❑Sport among other sports
❑Way of marketing a product
❑Means of escape from everyday
❑Way of experiencing or exploring emotions

❑Way of rebelling against the mainstream culture
❑Way of making money

Do you follow other Overwatch eSports than Overwatch League? Choose all the relevant options. *

❑None
❑Contenders
❑Open division
❑Overwacth World Cup
❑Others, what?

Do you follow other eSports? *

❍Yes
❍No

Do you follow non-digital / traditional sports? *

❍Yes
❍No

Is there something else about your relationship to Overwatch League or other Overwatch eSports you would like to add?

**Background information**

Age? (Fill in numbers) *

Gender? *
❍Female
❍Male
❍Identify differently

Nationality? * [pull-down list]

# ORIGINAL PAPERS

# I

## THE WORLD HOBBIT PROJECT IN FINLAND: AUDIENCE RESPONSES AND TRANSMEDIAL USER PRACTICES

by

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# The World Hobbit Project in Finland: Audience responses and transmedial user practices

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**Abstract:**
This article examines audience engagement with *The Hobbit* fantasy film trilogy as a participatory and transmedial experience. To do so, we use the data collected by The World Hobbit Project in order to investigate the transmedial user practices of the Finnish audience of the trilogy. We will, firstly, look at what kinds of transmedial user practices – and transmedia users – emerge from our data. Secondly, we will ask the following questions: How do transmedia users receive and experience the films? What are the meanings assigned to The Hobbit films and the fantasy texts and user practices related to them, and what do these meanings tell of the broader meanings and uses of fantasy? Doing so, we use both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

**Key words:** transmedial user practices, transmediality, fantasy, adaptation, Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, audience experiences

## Introduction

In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins famously coined the term 'transmedia storytelling', which he dubs a story that 'unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (Jenkins 2006, 95–96; see also Jenkins 2013). In this article, we examine the audience engagement (i.e. how audience members experience the films and take part in user practices around them) with *The Hobbit* fantasy film trilogy (Jackson, USA & New Zealand 2012; 2013; 2014) as a participatory and transmedial experience. As research material, we use the data collected by The World Hobbit Project[1], more specifically the Finnish responses to the online survey on *The Hobbit* films.

The aim of the article is to investigate what we call transmedial user practices (i.e. audience practices that are somehow transmedial in nature) of the Finnish audience of *The*

*Hobbit* films. In Jenkins' definition, *The Hobbit* film trilogy and the Tolkien book (*The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, 1937, henceforth *The Hobbit*) they are based on would not constitute a transmedia storyworld as such as they do not together form the unfolding elements of a particular story. In fact, the films are more like Tolkien's story retold. *The Hobbit* film trilogy can, indeed, be seen as an adaptation of Tolkien's book, a prequel to Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* (henceforth *LotR*) films (USA & New Zealand 2001; 2002; 2003) and simply as a series of films, more or less independent of other works of cinema or literature (see also Harvey 2015, 63–92). For the audience, engaging with *The Hobbit* book, films and other related fantasy texts and user practices may, nevertheless, be a transmedial experience. To put it simply, the term transmedial user practices therefore refers to the way audience members access *The Hobbit* story (or more broadly, *The Hobbit* universe) via different mediums, which also has an effect on how they experience *The Hobbit* films.

The focus on user practices therefore blurs the line between the original and its adaptation – as well as adaptation and transmedia, at least on the level of audience experiences and practices. Jenkins (1992) along with John Fiske (1992) has been among the researchers promoting the change of paradigm in audience research from how the media affect audiences to how audiences actively construct meaning. In the present article, we therefore look at not only the transmedial user practices but also the meanings that these fantasy texts and practices related to *The Hobbit* films seem to have for the respondents of the survey – and how these meanings are constructed. We will, firstly, look at how many audience members have engaged with the transmedial user practices available to *The Hobbit* trilogy, such as writing fan fiction or commenting online. Secondly, we will ask the following questions: How do transmedia users receive and experience the films? What are the meanings assigned to *The Hobbit* films and the fantasy texts and user practices related to them, and what do these meanings tell of the broader meanings and uses of fantasy?

## Transmedial User Practices: Theories, Methods and Definitions

In order to answer the research questions stated above, we use both quantitative and qualitative research methods. To be more precise, we examined the answers given by the Finnish respondents to specific multiple choice questions in the survey and performed descriptive statistical analyses of this data. In addition, we used the method of thematic analysis to record recurring themes in the responses given to open-ended questions and to categorise the responses according to these themes. In the course of the initial analysis a broad range of themes were found. A closer analysis was then conducted on the themes related to transmedial user practices and the experiences and meanings assigned to the fantasy texts and practices connected to *The Hobbit* films. Our analysis is based on the responses given by a specific group that had, in their answers to one question in the survey, chosen at least one of the activities that we call transmedial user practices. This question was 'Have you taken part in any of these other activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?' (question twelve in the survey, henceforth Q12). The options given were the following:

Producing fan art
Blogging
Role-playing
Writing fan fiction
Collecting merchandise
Seriously debating the films
Commenting online
Gaming
Making fan videos
Visiting filming locations
None of these

Even though the options are phrased as 'other activities' instead of 'transmedial user practices', we argue that these activities can be considered transmedial. On some closed-ended questions we also made comparisons between the respondents that chose an activity in Q12 – who we call transmedia users – and the rest of the Finnish respondents to provide background information.

Before going further, it is necessary clarify how we understand the terms 'transmedia' and 'transmedial user practices' in this article. In addition to Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling, another way to understand transmedia is through the concept of memory, as does Colin B. Harvey (2015). For Harvey, memory is what distinguishes adaptation from transmedia storytelling. Whereas, '[f]rom the perspective of authorial intent', adaptations tend to remember their so called original versions vertically, meaning that memories travel only from the source material to the adaptation, in 'transmedia storytelling memories can travel back and forth across the horizontal axis' (Harvey 2015, 91). However, what is at play in creating transmedia worlds is not only how transmedia expressions remember each other in the level of the narrative, but also the memories of the storyworld these expressions evoke in the audience (Harvey 2015, 3). Thus, when audiences engage with transmedia worlds, their past memories affect their engagement with the text at hand and they take with them their memories of different parts of these worlds (Harvey 2005, 3).

When one considers audiences instead of authorial intent, the process of remembering is also what can blur the boundaries between adaptation and transmedia, at least on the level of audience practices and experiences (see also Harvey 2005, 91–92). Indeed, while reading the responses to the Hobbit survey we noticed that even though many respondents interpreted *The Hobbit* films as adaptations, many also experienced them as part of, or in relation to, a broader storyworld. In this sense, the memories of *The Hobbit* book, or of Tolkien's work more generally, may affect the interpretation of the films – and do, indeed, affect, as our analysis will show. This also makes the audience experiences of *The Hobbit* films transmedial, in the sense of the experience being mediated through and affected by content on different mediums. When it comes to the memories of audiences, these memories can also go both ways between *The Hobbit* book and films, for example, if one has seen the adaptations first and only afterwards read the book.

Thus, audience engagement seems to go beyond experiencing *The Hobbit* trilogy as an adaptation, inviting various transmedial user practices. Furthermore, this raises questions about the definitions of transmedia storytelling and transmedial worlds. Lisbeth

Klastrup and Susana Tosca (2004, 409) have introduced the concept of transmedial worlds defining them as 'abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms'. They emphasise the importance of a shared mental image instead of particular material products (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 409; 2014, 296). In other words, the audience's shared mental images or memories are what create a broader transmedial world, not so much in the sense of transmedia as storytelling as creating a coherent storyworld, but as an abstract construction binding together different productions and practices across the media and beyond it. In their ongoing work with Professor Raine Koskimaa at the University of Jyväskylä, some of the authors of this article (Koistinen and Välisalo) have also been theorising a concept of transmedia universe that takes into account the way users contribute to the construction of a transmedia universe that can consist of multiple worlds. Thus, we would claim that a broader *Hobbit* universe emerges through audience practices and experiences from our data. We will return to this concept later on.

It is therefore the starting point of this article that audience engagement with *The Hobbit* trilogy may be a transmedial experience including practices such as reading the book, watching the films, and accessing other media products and platforms – for example playing games, visiting filming locations or writing fan fiction. Even though some of the practices are non-mediated in the traditional sense, we use the term media in a similar manner to Christy Dena (2009, 56–57), who, drawing on Ryan (2003), includes material objects that are considered mediums in disciplines such as the arts in her concept of 'transmedia practice'. Thus we consider, for example, board games and merchandise as mediums.

Moreover, we argue that user practices that are not clearly connected to any particular medium, such as visiting filming locations, can nevertheless be said to include interaction with media. It can be argued that visiting filming locations always requires some sort of information gathering via the media (for instance, visiting online sites for information on these venues). From the perspective of the audience, filming locations can also be seen as belonging to the fictional world, hence visiting them is an act of 'inhabiting the world' (Hills 2002, 144, 151).[2] Role-playing can also be interpreted to include playing in different contexts such as tabletop role-playing games, live action role-playing and different digital role-playing games and environments. Even though the first two are non-digital they usually involve media-related practices such as creation and use of game scripts or manuals, and character sheets or character descriptions. Furthermore, these practices are transmedial also in the sense that they contribute to the understanding of and engagement with the fictional narratives that they are connected to; in this case, *The Hobbit* films.

In relation to transmedial user practices, a specifically problematic option in Q12 is the one considering debating the films, as the survey does not specify, whether these debates take place on a media platform or in a face-to-face setting. Therefore, the option 'Seriously debating the films' can also be connected to a medium. Even though there is an option called 'Commenting online', this does not encompass all online discussions (as there is a difference between posting a comment and engaging in discussion), and online

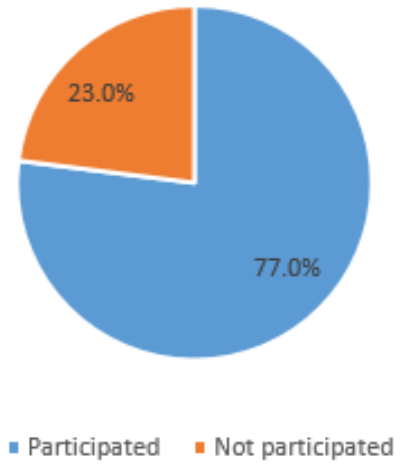
discussions thus cannot be excluded from the option 'Seriously debating the films'. Therefore, this option also cannot be excluded from our list of transmedial user practices.

In our analysis of the survey data, we also discovered that these participatory practices that are not clearly related to any particular media were often accompanied by practices that were connected to media – for example, this was always the case with visiting filming locations and often in the case of debating the films. Indeed, while participatory culture as a phenomenon expands beyond popular culture to areas such as political, educational or economic cultures, the common thread in all of these is the presence of media and technology (see e.g. Jenkins 2006, 170). In the following, we will, firstly, present the basic information on the Finnish transmedia users of *The Hobbit* films (i.e. respondents of Q12), also comparing it to the rest of the Finnish respondents, and the transmedial user practices that emerge from our data and, secondly, move onto a more sophisticated analysis of the experiences and meanings connected to *The Hobbit* films and their broader universe as expressed in our data.

## *The Hobbit* Films and Transmedial User Practices

In order to grasp what kinds of transmedial user practices – and transmedia users – emerge from our data, we examined how many of the Finnish participants chose at least one of the options in Q12, excluding the option 'none of these'. Doing so, we found that 1242 (77.0%) out of the 1614 Finnish respondents indicated that they had participated in at least one activity (**Figure 1**).

**Figure 1:** Participation in transmedial user practices




It thus appears that the Finnish audience of the *Hobbit* films has rather actively taken part in transmedial user practices. Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that it is possible that the 'active' or participatory part of the audience is also more likely to participate in the collection of this sort of survey data. From these 1242 transmedia users 70% (869 respondents) had chosen the option 'female' and 30% (373 respondents) had chosen 'male'.[3] The ratio between these two genders is similar to that of the whole Finnish data as

from all of the 1614 respondents (including those who did not choose any activities in Q21) 33.2% were male and 68.8% female. This seems to suggest that women might be more willing to participate in the collection of survey data. Of those respondents who did not take part in transmedial user practices (i.e. did not participate in any of the activities in Q12), a much larger share was male (43.8%). It should also be noted here that the survey only gave these two options for gender, which may have limited the scope of respondents or affect the choice that the respondents have had to make considering choosing their gender in the survey – two of the respondents in our research material (i.e. the transmedia users) also criticised the survey of this limited range of options.

The most common occupation chosen amongst the transmedia users was student: 57.6% of transmedia users indicated this to be the case (**Figure 2**). This was also the most common option (40.9%) chosen amongst the respondents who did not participate in any transmedial user practices (other activities in Q12), but in this group also more than one in every five respondents (23.1%) had chosen 'professional'. Moreover, 97.0% of transmedia users answered they have completed at least secondary school, which was almost the same as for those who did not participate in transmedial user practices (97.8%). The age of the transmedia users varied, but most commonly (72.4%) the respondents answered that they were between 16–35 years old (Figure 3), which was also true for the respondents who did not take part in transmedial user practices (61.6%).

**Figure 2:** Occupations of the transmedia users

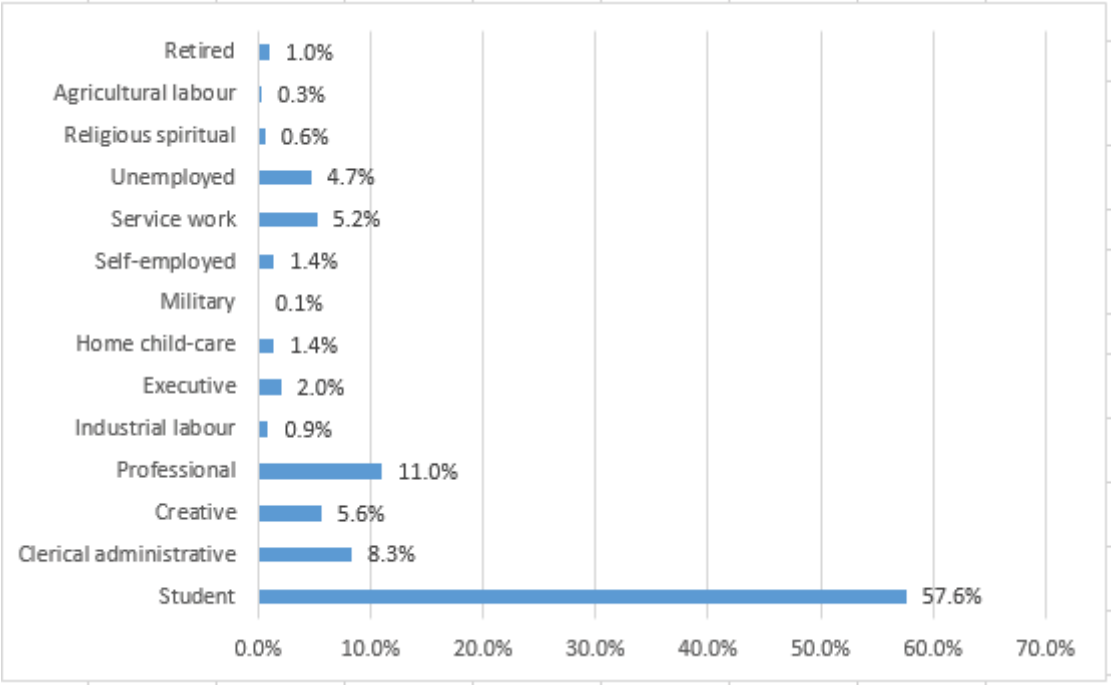
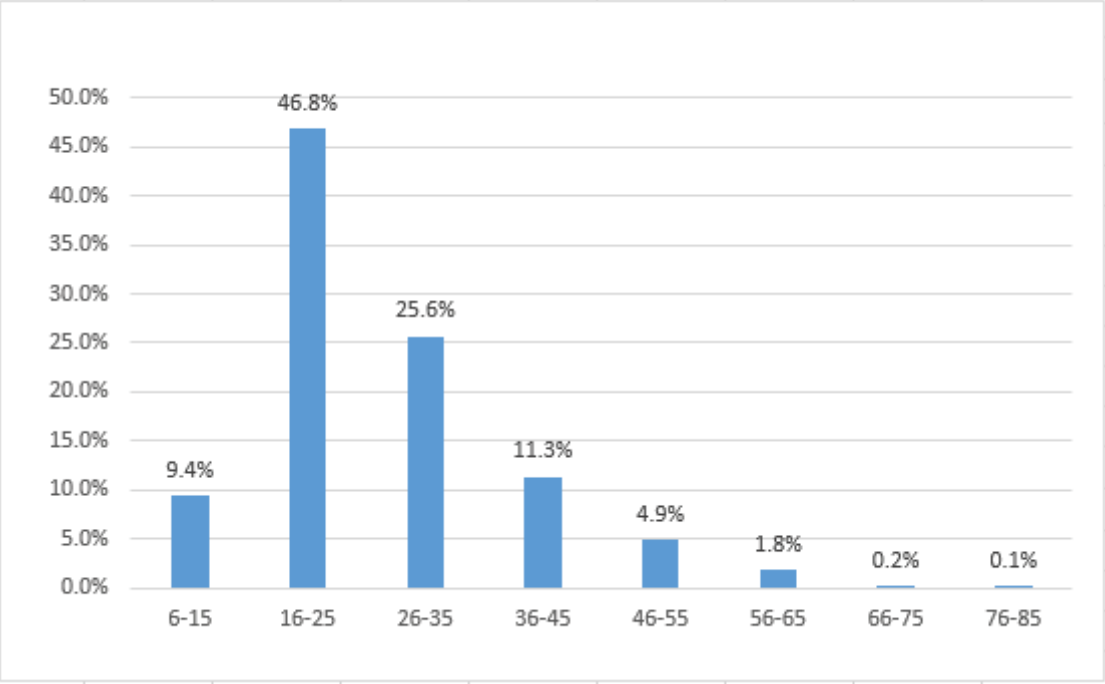


**Figure 3:** Age distribution of the transmedia users

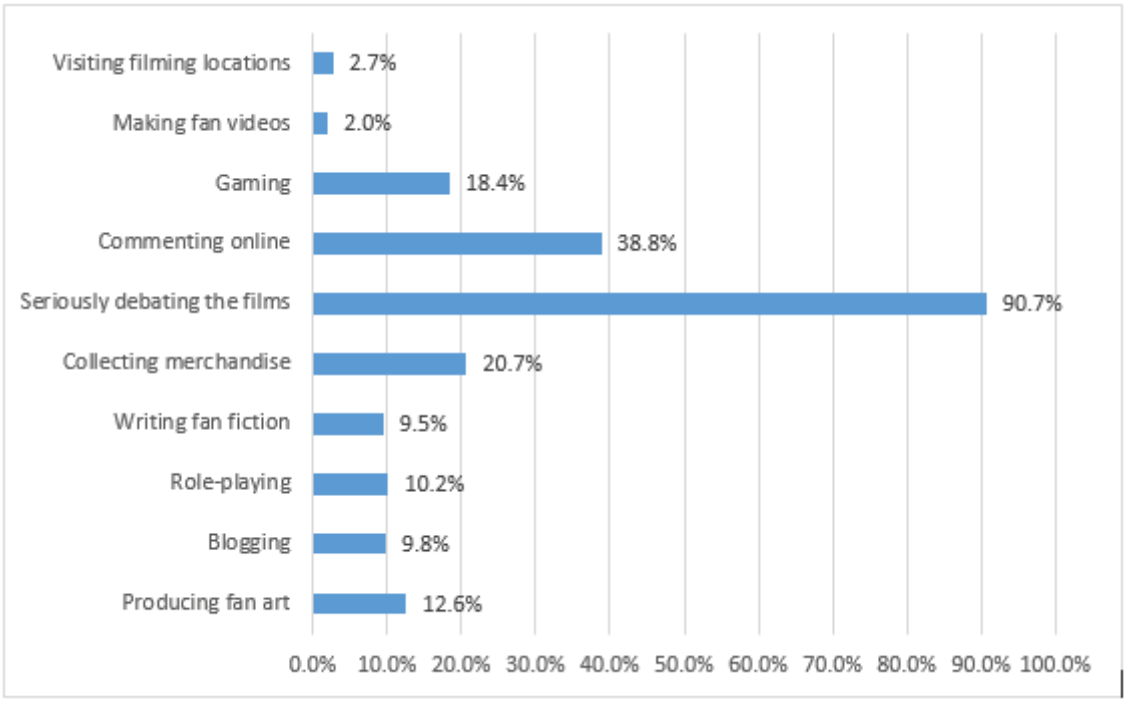



We also examined how frequently certain activities were chosen by the transmedia users. From the ten options presented in the beginning of this section (**Figure 4**), the respondents were able to choose as many as they liked. The most popular activity chosen was 'Seriously debating the films', chosen by 1127 respondents – 90.0% of those respondents who chose any activity at all (**Figure 4**). Here it should be noted that the translation of the Finnish survey may have had an effect on how many respondents chose this option, as the Finnish translation 'Elokuvista keskusteleminen' roughly translates back to English as 'discussing the films', which has a far more casual feel to it than 'seriously debating'. This was also the option most commonly chosen alone as 467 respondents chose only this activity. The second most frequently chosen activity was 'commenting online' (38.8%). Other popular activities were collecting merchandise (20.7%) and gaming (18.4%).

It is important to note that Q12 also leaves out many transmedial user practices. As one of the respondents argued, especially the seemingly more passive modes of participation were not offered among the choices:

> Since there doesn't seem to be a comments -slot anywhere, I think I should also comment about question 12 here. Why on earth is there no 'reading fan fiction' or 'watching fan vids / fan art' there as an option? The amount of fans who don't create fanworks but enjoy it is much bigger than the ones who do write/draw/create. The lack of this option feels weird to me, especially since while I do write fanfiction, I have lots of friends who do read it but don't write it themselves. [#34095]

**Figure 4:** The activities that the transmedia users participated in.




Another respondent [#22654] also mentioned appreciating other fans' creative work. Indeed, in addition to the options in Q12, transmedia users mentioned many other activities elsewhere in the survey such as following the production of the films through different media, participating in the queuing for the film tickets, which became events of their own, watching making-of documentaries and interviews, attending fan conventions and meetups, and cosplaying. They also mentioned specific merchandise such as books written after The Hobbit films and gaming on specific platforms, such as playing PC games, console games and board games. Two of the respondents even had a Middle-earth themed tattoo, making their own bodies the medium where the transmedial user practice takes place (see also Dena 2009, 62–63). Another transmedial user practice emerged in the responses to the question inquiring if the respondents followed events or debates[4] connected to the films (Q15) – altogether over half of transmedia users (51.6%) mentioned particular events or debates they found interesting and either participated in themselves or followed through different media.

What was interesting is that the transmedial user practices that the respondents mentioned in their answers to the open-ended questions included activities that were connected to *The Hobbit* book or Tolkien's work more generally, making it visible how audiences participation with Tolkien's world had been participatory – or transmedial – even before the films, at least for some. These activities included learning how to write runes, learning the Elvish language, analysing Tolkien's world with friends or playing games, from which at least gaming can be considered a transmedial user practice. Indeed, as an interesting example of transmedial user practices related to gaming, one of the respondents

[#34016] wrote that his father had made a board game based on Tolkien's world. Also, some respondents mentioned watching early Hobbit stories, such as a play based on the *LotR* book made by Finnish theatre group Ryhmäteatteri as well as their television series *Hobitit* (*The Hobbits*, 1993) – also a transmedial user practice. One respondent [#34289] even said that their family still sings the songs of that theatre piece, highlighting a sort of continuity in their user practices.

To recap, our analysis shows that a significant amount of the Finnish respondents had taken part in what we call transmedial user practices; in other words, they have somehow engaged with *The Hobbit* trilogy via different mediums and practices beyond the film trilogy. This would suggest that the way that the Finnish audience engaged with *The Hobbit* films is largely transmedial. However, as the most popular option chosen was 'Seriously debating the films', there is also the problem of not knowing, if the discussions have, in fact, included access to a medium. Because of the possibility of discussions taking place online, the option 'Seriously debating the films' cannot be excluded from the transmedial user practices, either.

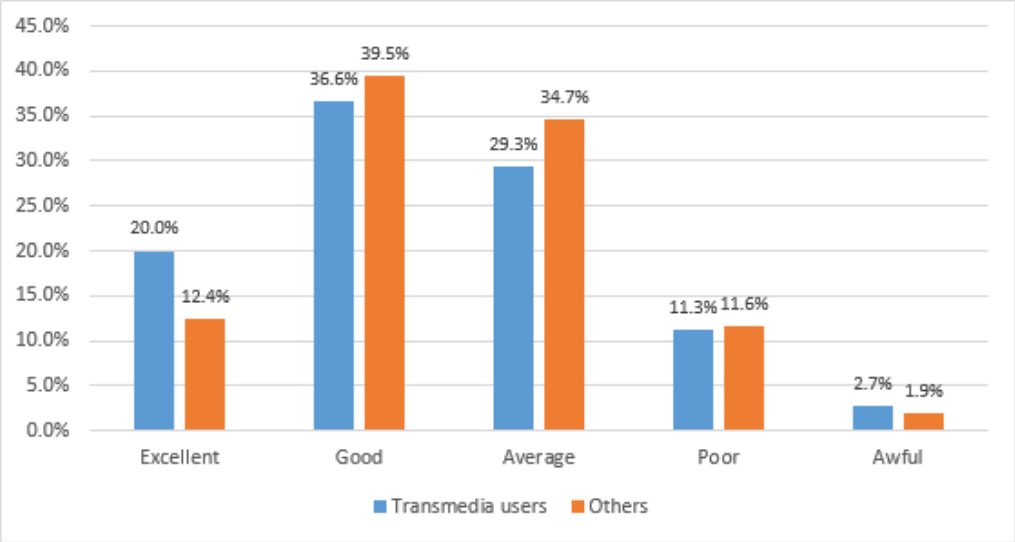
The prevalence of the transmedial user practices in our data is indicative of a larger change in media audiences, where practices previously embraced by fan communities have spread to larger audiences and have been recognised by production companies as well (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 122; Jenkins 2006, 246–248). In other words, the fact that the majority of Finnish respondents did take part in transmedial user practices implies that these have become more common in the mediascape of today. However, it could also imply transmedia users are more prone to answer to surveys – a practice that is, indeed, transmedial. What is interesting is also that in the answers to the open-ended questions, practices related to *The Hobbit* book or Tolkien's other works were also revealed, making visible practices that the users engaged with even before the films. Our research also shows that most of the transmedia users were women between the ages 16–35 who had completed secondary school and were currently students. It seems that women might take part in transmedial user practices more often than men while there were no similar differences to be perceived in connection to age, education or occupation, but due to the small amount of respondents in the group that did not choose any of the transmedial user practices, generalizations cannot be made at this stage. Further research would therefore be needed in order to examine what these findings tell of how not only gender but also age, education and occupation affect transmedial user practices.

## Experiencing *The Hobbit* Universe

In order to answer the second research question on how transmedia users receive and experience *The Hobbit* films, we examined how the respondents rated the films and how they articulated their experiences with them – or with the broader range of fantasy texts and transmedial user practices related to them. We discovered that transmedia users tended to rate the films excellent (on the scale of awful to excellent) more frequently than other respondents (i.e. those Finnish respondents who had not participated in any of the

activities mentioned in Q12), but with the lower ratings there weren't significant differences between transmedia users and other respondents (**Figure 5**). This can possibly be explained by the composition of respondents, since it is likely that those who chose to participate in the survey in the first place considered the films at least on some level important or meaningful to them – that is, important enough to take part in the survey.

**Figure 5:** How transmedia users and other respondents rated *The Hobbit* films

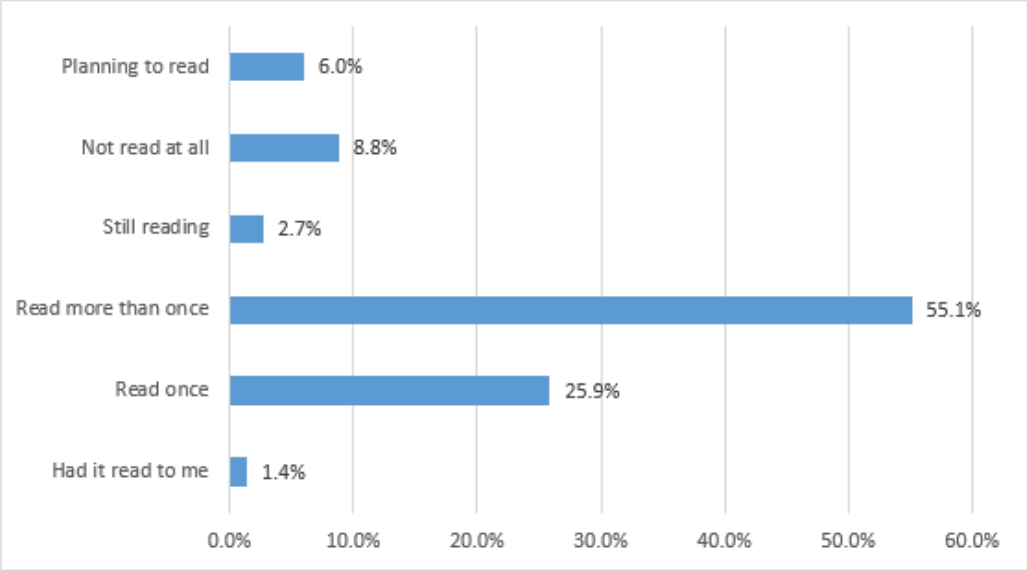



The way transmedia users experienced the films also varied depending on whether they had read The Hobbit book and whether they considered the films as adaptations of the book. When asked, 85% of the transmedia users replied that they had read or were still reading *The Hobbit* book (**Figure 6**), indicating that most of the respondents were familiar with the book when engaging with the films, thus situating the films, as well as the transmedial user practices they evoked, also in relation to the book (Q17). Indeed, more than a quarter (28.7%) of the transmedia users considered the films 'a literary adaptation' when asked to choose maximum of three from different options (Q4). Many also mentioned the original Tolkien book – and specifically used the term 'adaptation' – while they discussed the film in the open-ended questions, and loyalty to the book and its content appeared in some of the responses as important criteria when the films and their success were evaluated.

It is also worth noting, that those transmedia users who had read *The Hobbit* book tended to give the films a lower rating (Q17), while those who had not read the book or were still reading it, were more inclined to regard the films 'excellent' (**Figure 7**). This might imply that users who did not have a strong relationship with *The Hobbit* book rated the films higher. In some of the responses to the open-ended questions it was also indicated that it was the films which had inspired the respondent to read the book, not the other way around, which, in a sense, blurs the hierarchy between adaptation and the original. These findings resonate with Harvey's (2015, 91) work on vertical and horizontal memories. As stated before, for Harvey adaptations can only remember vertically from the source text to

the adaptation(s), whereas transmedia texts can remember horizontally, meaning that memories can move back and forth between different works (2015, 91). For audience members, however, the memories and experiences of adaptations are not necessarily vertical in the sense of the original preceding the adaptation and the memories can thus also move back and forth between them. Indeed, sometimes the transmedia users even called the *LotR* films 'the original works' that *The Hobbit* films refer to – complicating the idea of adaptation and its original source.

**Figure 6:** The amount of transmedia users who have read, are planning to read, or have not read *The Hobbit*

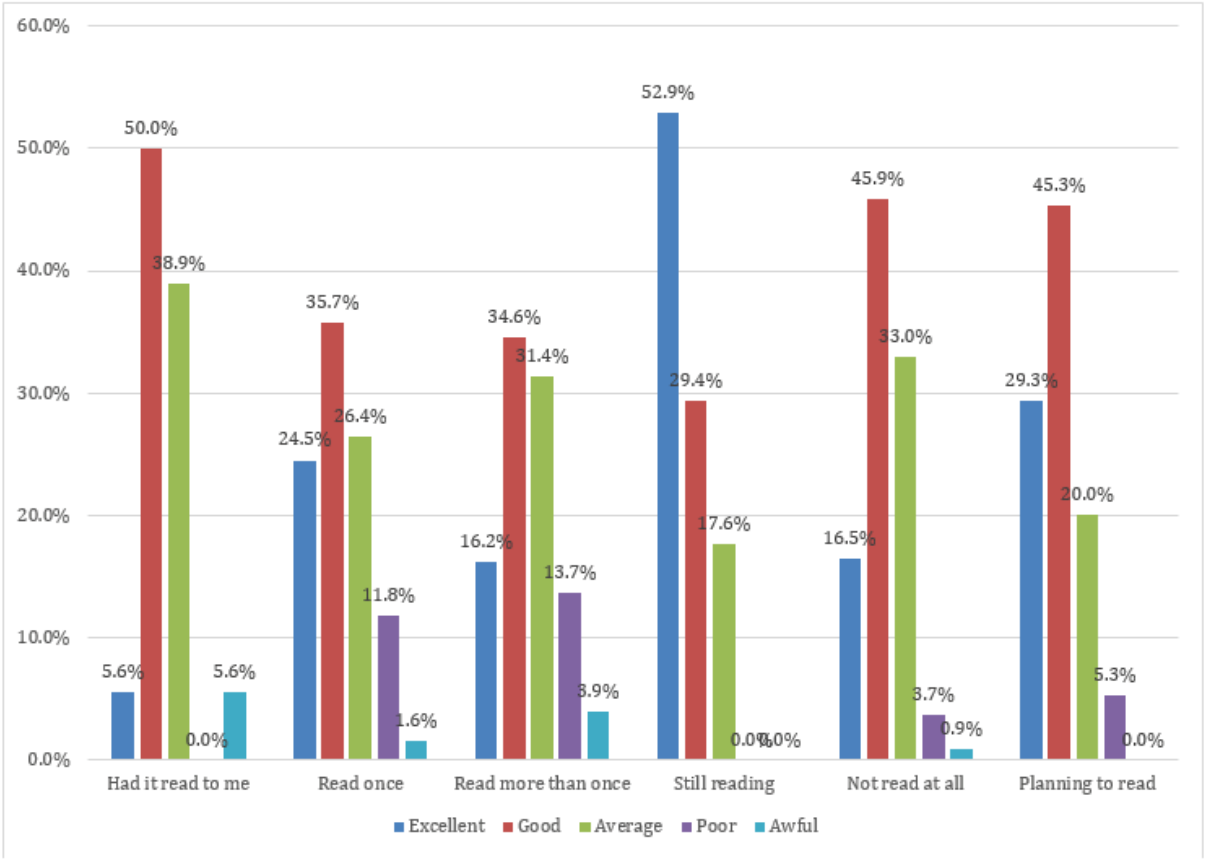



As stated before, Harvey (2015, 3) claims that the audience's past memories affect how the audience experiences elements of a transmedia storyworld as 'authentic' or 'genuine'. In our analysis of the transmedia users' descriptions of their experiences, we found that audience experiences were often connected to past memories of *The Hobbit* book, *LotR* books and/or films, Middle-earth and Tolkien's works or world more broadly. We also discovered that engaging with *The Hobbit* films was an emotional[5] experience for many of the respondents, and the experiences were articulated in relation to their experiences of these aforementioned works/world:

> I have no words, how could I in any way describe my feelings for Middle-earth. I don't understand myself, how anyone can be so divinely in love with a fantasy world. And now I have to mention that Fili's, Kili's and Thorin's death broke my heart in a thousand pieces and after those movies I'm always totally broken and crying for a couple of weeks in a row :DD. Yeah sorry I'm such a fangirl. But I'm so thankful that Tolkien wrote these stories. What would we do without Middle-earth? (Transl. from Finnish[6]) [#34215]

> *The Hobbit* was the favourite childhood book and I am speechless and bitter of how classless *The Battle of the Five Armies* was. I lost respect for Peter Jackson as a director. I still love the book, but the film series was just a 3 movie long commercial to get people to watch *The Lord of the Rings* movies again. And fuck that's what I'm gonna do just as soon as I drink some bleach to forget I've ever watched shit like the battle of five armies. (Transl. from Finnish) [#3706]

**Figure 7:** How *The Hobbit* films were rated, depending if the respondent had read the book




As the previous responses illustrate, emotional engagement often manifested either as pleasure related to being able to experience the wonderful world of specific fictional works through *The Hobbit* films, or as disappointment, which was explained by the films' lack of fidelity with these works/worlds. This also makes visible how the respondents' do not experience *The Hobbit* films only as adaptations of a specific work but the interpretive framework of their experience is formed by broader contexts – such as how they remember Tolkien's works.[7] We therefore claim that through these interpretive frameworks consisting of *The Hobbit* book, Tolkien's work/world, Jackson's films and the audience's own practices, a broader Hobbit universe emerges. In fact, the respondents sometimes used the term 'Tolkien universe' to refer to Tolkien's literary works and the works created around them and felt that *The Hobbit* films added new layers to this universe.

Writing on the *LotR* audiences, Anne Jerslev (2006, 212) has noted that emotional experiences with films can also be evoked by the mise-en-scène (i.e. the visual setting of filming) as well as the film narrative. This is evident also in the responses to several open-ended questions, where visual effects, scenery, acting, and other production aspects were mentioned as important to the emotional experience. Indeed, for some respondents mise-en-scène was the source of the previously mentioned emotions of pleasure and disappointment. Some respondents seemed to have an emotional experience also with 'different contextual practices' (Jerslev 2006, 213), such as following the production of the films, as well as the films itself:

> In connection to the first film I followed precisely all the news about the film on websites dedicated to the topic and other internet blogs. I followed the Production Diary published online, watched live the premiere of the first film and followed the main actors for example by watching their interviews online. I gathered a lot of information on the subject and discussed it with my friends and the fan community. I also followed certain award galas in the hope that the first film would win awards. After my enthusiasm disappeared and disappointment grew by the time I saw the second film, my interest in following *The Hobbit* news online / on other channels also ended. (Transl. from Finnish) [#1804]

> All the filmmakers' interviews were must-see. Also premiere broadcasts on the Internet were delicious. (Transl. from Finnish) [#34413]

> The films were written and filmed superbly and with respect to the original. Especially the first film excellently reached the same spirit I got from reading the book. The special effects were successfully executed, Smaug was astonishingly well made, filming locations were impressive and the casting was spot on. (Transl. from Finnish) [#1319]

Moreover, the respondents mentioned practices such as queuing for the premiers or special screenings and visiting filming locations. Therefore, emotional experiences were also connected to specific transmedial user practices instead of a fictional work or world – even though these practices are, of course, connected to these works/worlds – as well as to the visual setting of the films.

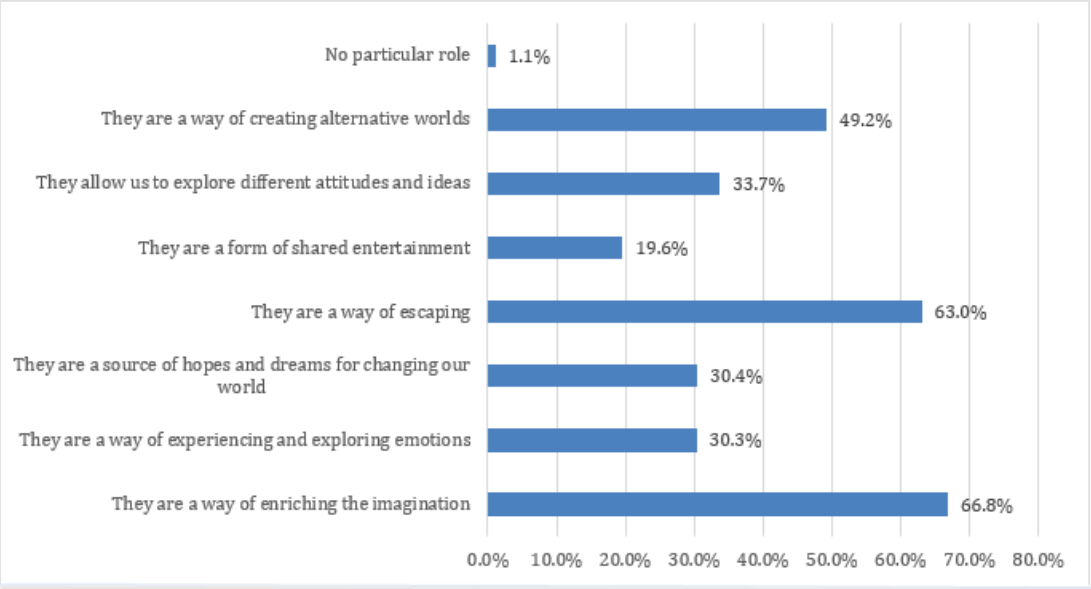
Thus, our analysis of the audience's experiences of *The Hobbit* trilogy illustrates that while the film trilogy and *The Hobbit* book do not constitute a coherent storyworld in the sense of transmedia storytelling defined by Jenkins (2006; 2013), *The Hobbit* trilogy was described and experienced with more variety than simply as an adaptation. In fact, in many of the responses we analysed the original work was not mentioned at all. This makes visible how shifting the focus to transmedia users and user practices can also bring new

perspectives onto analysing the sometimes fluid boundaries between adaptations and transmedia and the way these boundaries are constructed, but also broken, by the audiences. Indeed, we discovered that audience experiences were often articulated as an emotional engagement with specific texts or a broader storyworld. This often manifested either as pleasure or disappointment on how that world or those texts had been dealt with in the *Hobbit* films, resonating with Harvey's (2015, 3) ideas how audiences judge the authenticity of a transmedial world. Thus, the responses construct a broader *Hobbit* universe, where *The Hobbit* films are experienced in broader interpretive frameworks.

## There and Back Again – Meanings of Fantasy

To return to the final research question concerning the meanings and uses of fantasy, we discovered that the respondents assigned various meanings to *The Hobbit* films and these meanings were often explicated through references to emotional experiences in their lives. In fact, when asked 'What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today?' (Q13), 30.3% chose 'They are a source of experiencing and exploring emotion', making emotional experiences one important meaning of fantasy (**Figure 8**). Furthermore, it was found that the meanings articulated by our respondents can be roughly divided into two categories: personal and societal meanings, emotional experiences belonging to the former. We read personal meanings in the respondents' descriptions of their personal lives, including those more related to the self, such as emotions, values and identity, as well as those related to life events, such as relationships and experiences with other people, and societal meanings from descriptions dealing with the broader themes that fantasy can discuss. In addition, we used multiple-choice questions to support our analysis. As our analysis shows, explicit mentions of societal meanings were somewhat scarcer than those of personal meanings and demanded more interpretative reading.

**Figure 8:** The role of fantasy (respondents could choose up to 3 options)



For *personal meanings*, perhaps the most significant question was 'Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?' (Q21), but these meanings were also evident in responses to other questions in the survey. We discovered that the way the respondents negotiated personal meanings can be categorised under three overlapping themes:

### 1. *The context of life narrative:*

It was expressed in many of the answers that the transmedia users had a long history with Tolkien's work, or that Tolkien, *The Hobbit* book or the *LotR* films and book had somehow influenced the respondents' personal history. In other words, in many responses these fictional works were situated within the respondent's life narrative. These responses resonate with the so called becoming-a-fan narratives that are typical in media fandoms; for long-term fans the fan object can also create structure to life narratives (Harrington and Bielby 2010, 438–439). For example, many respondents considered it worth mentioning that they had first come across Tolkien's world or the *LotR* films when they were young, or that they had enjoyed Tolkien's work already for several years – in some cases, even decades. Some even said that Tolkien's work had had a significant impact on their values and their growth as a person:

> Ever since we watched *The Fellowship of the Ring* in a lesson at primary school right after it was released to be sold, love for Tolkien has been one of the factors that define me most as a person. Someone might say that it could even be a small obsession… Indeed, I was in primary school when *LotR* movies came out, so I couldn't yet understand their significance and the whole of their greatness, or participate in the surrounding communal activity, so I am eternally grateful that now with *The Hobbit* films at a bit later age I have been able to experience the unbelievability of it all. But on the other hand I now also realize better the ending of this all, which hurts and grieves me now even more than with *LotR* then. (Transl. from Finnish) [#12763]

> Ever since I was little I have been a Tolkien fan and read many of his books. *Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* I have read several times. For me his books are important and they have affected the kind of person I became as an adult. (Transl. from Finnish) [#3679]

Some respondents also explained their emotional experiences of pleasure or disappointment with *The Hobbit* films specifically in relation to their life narratives. There it became evident that long history with *The Hobbit* book or the broader *Hobbit* universe often

made it hard to accept *The Hobbit* films as part of Tolkien's fantasy world. Some responses, on the contrary, implicated that *The Hobbit* films were a welcome return to this world:

> I have loved Tolkien's work since I was a child - I grew up with it and it made me into the person I am today. I'm also very by-the-book type of person, and the changes that have been made from books to movies have been hard for me to accept. [#28233]

> I grew up with Tolkien's work. Consider that when thinking where this resistance [to *The Hobbit* films] comes from. (Transl. from Finnish) [#13711]

In these two quotes, Tolkien's work is connected to growing up, transitioning from child to adult, and the same connection is made in several other responses. It has been suggested 'that as normative adult life destabilizes, cultural objects are increasingly providing a reference point for navigating the trajectory through adulthood and later life' (Harrington and Bielby 2010, 445). Indeed, it seems that for some respondents Tolkien's works did serve as reference points for the narration of their life trajectory. Many of these responses could also be called nostalgic in the sense that the meaning of *The Hobbit* films was connected to feelings of the past (see Cashman 2006, 138).

In addition to connecting *The Hobbit*, *LotR* book or films, or Tolkien's works to a certain age or transitions between life stages, some respondents (Q21) told that Tolkien's world had helped them get through difficult times in their life, marking the importance of these fantasy texts, as comes across from these following quotations:

> I've been suffering with anxiety for several years. Both the books and the movies are a way for me to escape reality, calm down and immerse myself in a great world. These movies have helped me a lot with my mental health. [#22275]

> For me Tolkien's work, both in films and books, and other big phenomena, such as *Harry Potter*, have functioned as a place of escape from my everyday reality as a bullied and depressed youth. These worlds give a world where one can immerse completely and forget oneself, to even for a moment imagine being an elf warrior or elf maiden or fighting beside one's people. (Transl. from Finnish) [#28473]

> I am a bit antisocial and secluded, so for a long time these movies were all that I had. When the film series ended, I was left afloat. (Transl. from Finnish) [#23458]

> I read *The Hobbit* very young, and my bond with Tolkien's world has been strong for years. I read *LOTR* on the same Christmas when my grandmother died, after which I clung to the book even more closely. My experience of the books, and that way also of the films made out of them, is thus coloured by childhood enchantment and the need for an escape after a death in the family. (Transl. from Finnish) [#1022]

These quotations make visible that the way the respondents situate various works of *The Hobbit* universe in their life narratives is telling of the personal meanings of these fantasy texts. In our analysis, specific meaningful experiences arise from the responses: at certain points of the respondents' lives, these fantasy texts have affected their growth as human beings, helped them through difficult times, or served as portals to nostalgic return into the past.

## 2. *Escape or immersion in Tolkien's world or fantasy worlds in general:*

The previous responses concerning escape during difficult times are also intertwined with the next theme: immersion and escape in a fantasy world. For example, one respondent wrote:

> Perhaps my identifying myself with Tolkien's world, where even a small hobbit can achieve great things, is somehow connected to the fact that I feel completely trivial and useless in the reality I live in. It is comforting that someone succeeds in creating a fictional world, where one can escape to even for a few hours. The films made of Tolkien's world have also without exception managed to emphasise genuine friendships with different people, which always makes me hope that these kinds of friendships would really exist. If I cry watching these films, it usually doesn't have to do with characters dying or other unpleasant events, but rather to the wonderful great and small acts of friendship and working together, that my own life is irretrievably lacking. (Transl. from Finnish) [#34082]

Here, the meaning of a fictional world is described as bringing something more to one's life; something that the respondent's life is lacking. Immersion and escape in fictional worlds are also connected to nostalgia. According to Svetlana Boym, '[n]ostalgia (from nostos – return home, and algia – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed … a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with our own fantasy' (Boym, 284). In her keynote lecture at the Transmedia Use(r)s Summer School (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Lisbeth Klastrup used Boym's definition to argue that nostalgia can be focused on the first time we encountered a transmedial world, and our fascination with that world has to do with returning to that first encounter (Klastrup 2016). Moreover, following Klastrup and Tosca, some transmedial user practices, such as roleplaying and cosplay, are

performative in nature and can also be seen as manifestations of 'a sort of playful desire to re-live certain experiences, prolong them and give them a manifestation in the real world' (Klastrup and Tosca 2016, 119). In this sense, the personal meanings of transmedia can be connected to – as pronounced in the very title of the *Hobbit* book – the performance of going there and back again. One respondent [#23503] described that watching *The Hobbit* films felt like returning to home after an absence of ten years, whereas another wrote that:

> I read Tolkien's work and saw the *LotR* films when I was in junior high. They had a huge influence on a growing person. *The Hobbit* films were also associated with a sort of nostalgic longing to get back to those feelings which they, being so bad, could only make happen from time to time. Jackson did what Lucas had done. And it's not about some You have grown past it effect; John Carter did the same for me at my adult age than the original *Star Wars* trilogy did when I was a child and the *LotR* trilogy when I was a teenager; transported me to a totally different world. (Transl. from Finnish) [#14898]

This emphasis on immersion and escape in fictional worlds implies that world-building, which is the very core of fantasy, is important for the immersion of audiences. This is also emphasised by the frequency of gaming connected to *The Hobbit* among the respondents, as games are often considered to take place in a so called magic circle, which has its own rules, time and space, forming a temporary world (Huizinga 1955; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). The centrality of these meanings is also enforced in responses to the survey question about the roles that fantasy can play today (Q13), where the respondents were able to choose three options. The option chosen second most often was 'They are a way of escaping' (Q13.4), chosen by 63.0% of the respondents (see **Figure 8**), and the third most popular choice was 'They are a way of creating alternative worlds' (Q13.7), chosen by 49.2%. It is also interesting that escapism, of which fantasy has often been criticised, comes across in our data as an important resource for fantasy users, making escapism not just a childish pastime but a tool for coping with the world we live in.[8] Escape or immersion thus also became an important use of fantasy.

### 3. *Shared experiences:*

The responses also indicated that engaging with The Hobbit universe was a shared social experience. In many responses it was articulated that transmedia users had seen the films with their family and/or friends. Many also had had their parent read *The Hobbit* to them as a child, making it a cross-generational experience. Also, in one response [#1200], it was told that the respondent had met their future spouse in the meeting of the Finnish Tolkien society, which made the 'Middle-earth very close to [the respondent's] heart' (transl. from Finnish). Indeed, these fantasy texts were for many respondents connected to shared experiences with specific people or a group of people.

> *The Hobbit* films are important to me, because I went to see all of them at the cinema with my closest friends. We all live in different places in Finland and seldom see each other, so getting together to watch the *Hobbit* films each year at the same time became very important for us all. (Transl. from Finnish) [#3264]

> One of my first memories is my father reading *The Lord of the Rings* to us as a bedtime story. I have spent six birthdays taking my closest friends to watch the premiers of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, then the *Hobbit* trilogy. (Transl. from Finnish) [#3854]

> I've been involved with The Finnish Tolkien Society for years … Tolkien's work has had crucial meaning for my life; I have found most of my friends through the Tolkien fan community. (Transl. from Finnish) [#1922]

Some responses also indicate that their writers identified as Tolkien fans, emphasising their belonging to a group of Tolkien enthusiasts, fans of *LotR* book or films, or fans or nerds more generally, which implies identification within a community. While discussing/debating the films and commenting online were the most popular activities for the respondents, as mentioned previously (**Figure 4**), particularly interesting for many were discussions with friends and family, or amongst fans (Q15). When asked (Q11), if they thought there are people who would share their ideas about *The Hobbit* films and what are they like, 15.7% of respondents mentioned specific people or communities, some even emphasising that they were referring to actual people instead of merely speculating. These responses would, then, suggest that the personal meanings assigned to *The Hobbit* universe are, for some, connected to communal feelings of belonging.

In addition to self-identified fans, an interesting group emerging from the responses is that of viewers and fans, who describe themselves as 'non-fanatic' or 'not hardcore fans', defining themselves through the (lack of) intensity of their relationship to *The Hobbit* universe. Interestingly, these distinctions are in some responses made between the respondent and those fans who have strongly criticised *The Hobbit* film trilogy, and in others between the respondent and the fans who passionately love the films:

> There are a lot of people, who think about *The Hobbit* like I do. I would categorize this group – that I belong to – as great Tolkien fans, although not extreme fans. (Transl. from Finnish) [#34532]

> Perhaps other *Lord of the Rings* fans who have turned into adults also watch *The Hobbit* with nostalgic acceptance, perhaps without getting too excited (or at least not like they would have when they were 15), but lovingly. (Transl. from Finnish) [#29822]

> I am sure there are. They are not superfans, who can't admit that anything coming from Tolkien / Peter Jackson could be anything but perfect. (Transl. from Finnish) [#34286]

Klastrup and Tosca have emphasised the shared nature of engagement with transmedial worlds using the concept of 'networked reception', where '[a]cts of reception … are nearly always related to other people's experience of the same media products' thus powerfully impacting the transmedial experience (2016, 110, 120). This resonates with accounts of experiences and participation in transmedial activities we found among *The Hobbit* viewers in the whole of our data as well as the aforementioned 'non-fanatic' fans, who shared an emphasis on the moderate nature of the emotional reaction to the films and their awareness of the more passionate reactions of others. Interestingly, compared to this, only 19.6% of the respondents considered 'They are a form of shared entertainment' (Q13.5) as a role that fantasy can play today. However, it could be argued that, perhaps, the shared experiences explicated by the responses are more than 'mere entertainment'.

Besides these three themes, another personal meaning for *The Hobbit* films is indicated in responses to the survey question on the role of fantasy (Q13) where the most popular option was 'They are a way of enriching the imagination' (Q13.1), chosen by 66.8% of the respondents. Interestingly, in the open-ended questions, only a few of the respondents specifically mentioned *The Hobbit* or other Tolkien's works/world having enriched their imagination.

In addition to the personal meanings outlined above, societal meanings were most clearly articulated in the responses to the question 'Do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?' (Q10). The most frequently mentioned themes were greed (or materialism) and hunger for power, and friendship and caring. Other, less frequently mentioned themes were moral values (usually expressed through the dichotomy of good versus evil), multi- and inter-culturalism (and tolerance/difference more broadly), security and stability (such as the juxtaposition of adventure with a simple life with friends and family), trust and integrity, the importance of individual choices (including the 'smallest person's' ability to make these choices), power relations, war, and gender issues.

The aforementioned societal themes are also telling of broader cultural values, for example considering if we value material assets or care, as well as fantasy genre's potential to address pressing cultural concerns like inter- and multiculturalism.[9] Also, the question (Q10) specifically asked for 'broader themes', which, we would argue, connects these responses to a broader societal framework. Some respondents also noted that there could have been broader themes in the films, while 16.9% of the respondents said that there were no broader themes or that they could not think of any. Interestingly, thirty respondents also said that they did not want to comment (or could not comment as, for instance, there was not enough space in the survey). It is also interesting that while less than half of the

transmedia users, 39.0%, mentioned broader themes in Q13 when asked about the role of fantasy stories, only 0.1% chose the option that they have no particular role. From the options available in Q13, the ones most clearly connected to the broader societal meanings of fantasy were 'They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world', which was chosen by 30.4% respondents, and 'They allow us to explore attitudes and ideas' chosen by 33.7% of the respondents. These results support the argument for broader societal themes connected to the way transmedia users experience *The Hobbit* films, the broader *Hobbit* universe, or fantasy more generally.

Here it should be noted that the boundaries between societal and personal meanings are, of course, fluid and overlapping. This is evident from the responses to open-ended questions as well as the more multiple choice question on the role that fantasy can play today (Q13). For instance, the option 'They are a way of creating alternative worlds' (chosen by 49.2%, Q13) is linked to both personal and societal meanings: whereas many respondents specifically emphasised how the escape and immersion into alternative worlds was meaningful for their life narratives, if one thinks of fantasy's potential for political commentary through the imagining of alternative worlds (see Jackson 1981, 19; Bould and Vint 2012, 110), the option is also clearly connected to broader societal meanings.

To sum up, we found that the meanings assigned to *The Hobbit* films or universe – and fantasy more generally – as expressed in our data can be roughly categorised into personal and societal meanings. Personal meanings were most often connected to three themes: the context of life narrative, escape or immersion in Tolkien's world or fantasy worlds in general, or shared experiences. Within these themes, meanings were articulated in relation to times spent with family or friends, hardships weathered and pleasure gained by escaping reality to Tolkien's fictional world, or belonging to a certain group or community. Personal meanings were also often expressed emotionally as the respondents' experiences were connected to the discussions of pleasure or disappointment with *The Hobbit* films. The personal meanings that our respondents attached to *The Hobbit* films were also not separable from the meanings attached to the broader Hobbit universe, which becomes clear in the recurring references to *LotR* book and films or Tolkien's works/world in general. In addition to these, the option 'enriching the imagination' was chosen as the most important role for fantasy in Q13, but as it was not mentioned in many open-ended questions, its broader meanings for the respondents are hard to analyse. The most commonly mentioned societal meanings were greed (or materialism in general) and hunger for power, and friendship and caring, but other interesting themes, such as multi-/inter-culturalism and tolerance more broadly were also mentioned. These answers make it clear that audience members use fantasy texts in order to give structure to their life narratives, cope with personal issues, bond with other people or enjoy the rich fantasy worlds, but they also see fantasy as having potential to discuss important societal questions. For instance, multi- and inter-culturalism surely are among those important themes today, as xenophobia seems to be gaining ground all over the world.

## Conclusions and Further Research

In approaching the transmedial user practices of the Finnish *Hobbit* audience we asked the following research questions: Firstly, what kinds of transmedial user practices – and transmedia users – emerge from our data? Secondly, we asked the following questions: How do the transmedia users receive and experience the films? What are the meanings assigned to these fantasy texts and the practices related to them, and what this tells of the broader meanings and uses of fantasy?

Examining the data, we found that a significant amount of the Finnish respondents had taken part in what we call transmedial user practices; the most popular activity being debating/discussing the films (which, however, may have been affected by the Finnish translation of the survey). Other most frequently chosen activities were commenting online, collecting merchandise and gaming. Thus, it would suggest that the way the Finnish respondents use fantasy, or engage with fantasy texts, is transmedial. This conclusion may, however, be a bit skewed because of the fact that the survey does not specify if debating/discussing the film takes place online or in a face-to-face setting. Since most of the respondents were female students between ages 16–35, our research suggests women might take part in transmedial user practices more often than men. There were no similar differences to be perceived in connection to age, education or occupation. Due to the small amount of respondents in the group that did not choose any activities, generalizations cannot be made at this stage. Further research would thus be needed in order to examine, how gender, age, education and occupation affect the Finnish *Hobbit* audience's transmedial user practices.

We also discovered that engaging with *The Hobbit* films was an emotional experience for many of the respondents, and these emotional experiences were articulated in relation to their past experiences of Tolkien's work/world or the *LotR* films. This often manifested either as pleasure or disappointment on how that world or those texts had been dealt with in the *Hobbit* films. However, we also found that *The Hobbit* trilogy was described and experienced with more variety than simply as an adaptation. Thus, the responses construct a broader *Hobbit* universe, where *The Hobbit* films are experienced in broader interpretive frameworks. Our analysis therefore makes visible how shifting the focus to transmedia users and user practices brings new perspectives onto investigating the sometimes fluid boundaries between adaptations and transmedia and the way these boundaries are constructed, but also broken, by audiences.

When it comes to the meanings of fantasy, we found that these can roughly be categorised into personal and societal ones. Personal meanings were most often negotiated in reference to three themes: the context of life narrative, escape or immersion in Tolkien's world or fantasy worlds in general, or shared experiences. Within these themes, meanings were articulated in relation to personal growth and nostalgia, giving structure to life narrative, hardships weathered and pleasure gained by escaping reality into Tolkien's fictional world, times spent with family, or belonging to a certain group or community. Personal meanings were also often expressed emotionally as the respondents' experiences

were connected to the discussions of pleasure or disappointment with *The Hobbit* films, or *LotR* book and films or Tolkien's works/world in general. Thus, these meanings are also not separated from the meanings attached to the broader *Hobbit* universe, which becomes clear in the recurring references to texts beyond *The Hobbit*. 'Enriching the imagination' could also be considered as one of the personal meanings of fantasy as it was chosen by the respondents as the most important role of fantasy in Q13. Imagination was, however, rarely mentioned in the open-ended questions, making it harder to interpret the meanings that respondents assigned to it. The most commonly mentioned societal meanings were greed (or the overall focus on materialism) and hunger for power, and friendship and caring, but other interesting themes such as multi-/inter-culturalism and tolerance more broadly were also mentioned. These answers make it clear that fantasy texts have potential to discuss not only personal but also important topical questions.

It therefore becomes clear that engaging with *The Hobbit* universe was a meaningful experience for the respondents of the survey, both on a personal and a societal level. In our data, personal meanings were more emphasised. Thinking of the broader meanings and uses of fantasy, our analysis suggests that fantasy as a genre can create meaningful experiences for the users, and these experiences range from deeply personal to broader societal ones. It could also be argued that fantasy's potential for creating meaningful experiences is tied to the very features of the genre, as it seems that the meanings expressed by the respondents are often connected to fantasy's potential of world-building and escapism. Further research should, thus, pay even more attention to these meaningful experiences evoked by fantasy texts in order to find out the roles that transmedial fantasy worlds can play in today's societies – and to what cultural fantasies they tap into.

We suggest that further research should aim to combine the user perspective with analysis of transmedial fantasy worlds in order to tackle these questions. As our analysis of *The Hobbit* audience has shown, focusing on user practices is important in order to grasp how transmedial worlds or universes are built and how users assign meanings to them. The focus on users also raises interesting questions concerning transmediality, such as how practices that go beyond the traditional conceptions of a medium take part in producing a transmedia universe and how should we then, in the end, define a medium when discussing transmedia. Indeed, during our research process we had many discussions on what kinds of practices can be defined as transmedial. Also, is accessing a universe via two mediums enough to talk about transmedial user practices, or should there be a more complex cluster of media use? Thus, the concept of transmedial user practices also needs further developing.

There are also other more specific ideas for further research considering the analysis of our data: the next step in our research could be to investigate if there are specific groups of transmedia users that emerge from our data. Then it would be useful to compare the Finnish data to the global data, in order to discover what kinds of cultural differences can be found in terms of transmedial user practices and the experiences, meanings and uses of *The Hobbit* universe, or fantasy more broadly. Further research could also go deeper into the

emotional experiences evoked by *The Hobbit* universe as well as the sense of belonging that seemed to be important for the users. It could be interesting, for instance, to analyse if transmedia users in particular are the ones that express their engagement with *The Hobbit* through emotional experiences and a sense of belonging, or if this is common for all Finnish respondents – and if this is, in fact, typical for fantasy users in general. It would also be interesting to go deeper in the question of how audiences understand adaptation, as a significant amount of the Finnish respondents somehow comment on *The Hobbit* films as adaptations. In addition, further research could explore more how audiences experience *The Hobbit* as belonging to different (transmedial) worlds, as it becomes evident from the research material that respondents consider the Hobbit as belonging or not belonging to different worlds, such as the world of Tolkien, Middle-earth, or the world of Jackson's *LotR* films. In other words, it would be intriguing to analyse what kinds of worlds emerge within the broader *Hobbit* universe, and do different worlds also imply different transmedial user practices.

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## Notes:

[1] Barker, Martin, et al. *The World Hobbit Project*. Online-Survey. Aberystwyth, UK. 2014–15. Finnish translation by Irma Hirsjärvi, Jyrki Korpua and Urpo Kovala.

[2] In her keynote lecture at the Transmedia Use(r)s Summer School (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Lisbeth Klastrup used the term 'transmedial world tourism' in order to connect visiting filming locations to transmedial worlds (Klastrup 2016).

[3] From now on we call these respondents 'female' and 'male' or 'women' and 'men' to make our text more readable – even though we are aware that the choice of gender may not coincide with the gender identity of the respondent, particularly as the survey only gave these two options to define one's gender with.

[4] Here it should be noted that there are slight differences between the English and Finnish survey. Whereas in the English survey, this option reads 'Which stories or debates have most interested you?', the Finnish translation, 'Mitkä tapahtumat ja keskustelut ovat kiinnostaneet sinua eniten?', can be roughly translated back to English as 'Which events and discussions have most interested you?' Out of the 1242 transmedia users 1134 filled the survey in Finnish, 87 in English, and there were also responses in other languages: 18 in Swedish, 1 in Russian, 1 in Danish and one in Spanish. It is likely that those answering in other languages than Finnish answered to the questionnaire in that particular language, and therefore differences in the choices of words in these surveys may have caused different interpretations of the questions. From the answers to the open-ended questions we only analysed the ones given in Finnish, Swedish or English.

[5] We chose the term 'emotion' here instead of, for example, 'affect' or 'feelings' because emotion was the term used by the respondents. For more on the discussions on the conflicting definitions of these terms, see e.g. Ahmed 2014; Grossberg 1992; Massumi 2002.

[6] All translations by the authors. In the translations we have attempted to preserve the spirit of the original Finnish quotations with their nuances of (and occasional imperfections in) the Finnish language, sometimes at the expense of English spelling and grammar.

[7] The way transmedia users experience *The Hobbit* films is thus affected by the way they make intertextual connections between the films and other texts (see also Harvey 2015, 21; Korpua forthcoming). Although these connections the audience makes may be best called intertextual, the way the audiences take part in different practices and experiences through various mediums make *The Hobbit* universe not only an intertextual but also a transmedial one.

[8] For more on the discussions on fantasy and world-building, see Jackson 1981, 19; McHale 1987; Harvey 2015, 40–62; Korpua 2015, 21–22, 34; on escapism, see Jackson 1981; Shippey 2001, viii, cited in Korpua 2015, 119.

[9] On the potential of fantasy works to discuss societal and political issues, see Jackson 1981; Bould and Vint 2012.

# II

# ENGAGING WITH FILM CHARACTERS: EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE RECEPTION OF CHARACTERS IN THE HOBBIT FILMS

by

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# Engaging with film characters: Empirical study on the reception of characters in *The Hobbit* films

*Tanja Välisalo*

*Abstract: Characters are important for the audience reception of films, but little empirical research on actual audiences has been conducted on the topic of character reception. Are characters important for all audiences, and if not, what are the possible reasons and implications? How do audiences construct their engagement with characters? I argue that in addition to elements in Murray Smith's classic model, structure of sympathy, other elements should be included when studying character engagement. This article presents an empirical study on the reception of characters using the Nordic responses (4,879 total) drawn from the global audience survey on The Hobbit fantasy film trilogy (Jackson, An Unexpected Journey; The Desolation of Smaug; The Battle of the Five Armies). Based on the data, this study identifies two additional elements of character engagement. Firstly, aided by Anne Jerslev's model of emotions attached to fictional universes, the making of fictional characters is recognized as an essential element of character engagement, something audiences are drawn to. The second element is formed by connections outside the story, such as other works of fiction, conventions of the fantasy genre, and discussions and debates about the films. Including these contextual elements results in a more comprehensive understanding of emotional engagement with characters.*

*Keywords: characters, engagement, The Hobbit, audience reception*

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Characters have a central role in the reception of fictional content. In films, characters are important in carrying the plot and building empathy in the viewers (Mikos et al.). While fictional characters in general and film characters specifically have been theorized by many researchers (e.g. Forster; Phelan; Smith; Michaels) and research on film stars has a long tradition as well (e.g. Dyer) there is still relatively little empirical research on the reception of film characters.

This article presents an empirical study on the audience reception of characters of the fantasy film trilogy *The Hobbit* (Jackson, *An Unexpected Journey*; Jackson, *The Desolation of Smaug*; Jackson, *The Battle of the Five Armies*). The multiple protagonists as well as the plethora of other characters create opportunities for diverse modes of character reception. *The Hobbit* film series also provides an excellent case for analysing the reception of film characters, because it is simultaneously an adaptation of a classic fantasy book *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937) by J. R. R. Tolkien as well as a prequel to the earlier film trilogy *The Lord of The Rings* (Jackson, *The Fellowship of the Ring*; *The Two Towers*; *The Return of the King*; from now on *LotR*) also based on Tolkien's books. *The Hobbit* films are in fact a part of a "Tolkien universe" (Koistinen, Ruotsalainen & Välisalo 364) comprised of the aforementioned works as well other works by Tolkien, and the multitude of works and products created around them. The films, thus, provide audiences with several possible interpretational contexts, including the films themselves as well as the book they are based on, Tolkien universe, and the fantasy genre in film and fantasy literature.

I will approach the character reception of *The Hobbit* through the following questions: Are characters important for all audiences? How do audiences construct their engagement with characters? I seek answers to these questions by analysing survey data collected from the Nordic countries as part of a global audience study survey on the reception of *The Hobbit* film trilogy.[1]

## Theoretical approaches to character reception

When beginning to study audience reception of characters one cannot avoid the concept of *identification*. While the concept has been widely used to describe audience response to fictional characters, it has also been criticized by researchers, often because of its undefined nature and its function as "a blanket term covering too diverse a range of practices" (Rushton and Bettinson 165; cf. Cohen 254; Barker, "Identification" 354). An influential approach by Murray Smith (*Engaging* 75, 81–84) based on cognitive theory and textual analysis suggests replacing identification as a concept with *engagement*. Smith created what he called a "structure of sympathy" with three levels of engagement with characters: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. By *recognition*, Smith refers to the viewer's process of constructing a character, a necessary process for the other two levels: *alignment* consists of the ways the viewer gains access to the feelings, knowledge and actions of the character; *allegiance* refers to the viewer's moral evaluation of a character, how the viewer relates to the attitudes and values of the character. A viewer may align with a character but not necessarily ally with them and vice versa. Smith also differentiates between empathy and sympathy for a character: while sympathy is "acentral imagining," imagining from outside the character, empathy, "central imagining", consists of a range of mechanisms including involuntary reactions like the startle response, motor and affective mimicry of a character, and voluntary simulation of the character's perceived emotions (Smith, *Engaging* 96, 99, 103).

Smith's theory was an important step towards understanding different levels of reception of film characters. Still, excluding his mention of star system as an influence on character reception (*Engaging* 119, 193), Smith's model does not help us understand the impact of contextual factors outside the films themselves. Martin Barker ("Identification" 360) has criticized Smith's approach for dismissing the existence and meaning of spectator's previous knowledge or perceptions. Barker has called for retheorization of the audience-character relationship ("Identification" 374).

Anne Jerslev (207) has noted based on her empirical research on the audiences of *LoTR* film trilogy that, following Ed Tan's concepts of fiction emotions and artefact emotions, emotional engagement with films can be divided into two main categories of 1) emotions attached to a

[1] Barker, Martin, et al. The World Hobbit Project. Online-Survey. Aberystwyth, United Kingdom. 2014–2015.

fictional universe, and 2) emotions attached to the making of a fictional universe, with the former further divided into emotions attached to the narrative, and emotions attached to the mise-en-scène, that is, the visual realization of the films. Fiction emotions attached to the narrative, such as absorption in the story, or pity or joy for a character, are for Jerslev empathetic, and fiction emotions attached to the mise-en-scène, such as enjoyment of landscape, are non-empathetic; making of the fictional world is marked by mostly non-empathetic artefact emotions, such as admiration of technical skills (Jerslev 214–215). In her study, Jerslev (207) noted that enjoyment of films consisted of both kinds of emotional responses, empathetic and non-empathetic.

I argue that audiences conceptualize and structure their own responses to film characters in ways that are only partially mapped by Smith's theory, but can be understood more comprehensively by combining it to Jerslev's model. Even though Jerslev (215) associates characters with empathetic emotions, I will argue that there are also non-empathetic emotions connected to characters, thus resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of emotional engagement with them.

## Character-oriented audiences

To delve into the reception of *The Hobbit* characters I used data collected from the audiences themselves. For this study, I used both quantitative and qualitative data gathered as part of *The World Hobbit Project*, a global audience study survey (see Appendix 1) on the reception of *The Hobbit* film trilogy. The survey gathered 36,000 responses from 48 different countries through opportunistic recruitment.[2] My analysis is based on the data from Nordic countries consisting of the responses from Finnish, Swedish and Danish participants.[3] The data includes 1,191 Danish, 1,614 Finnish and 2,074 Swedish, altogether 4,879 responses.

In analysing the data, I used a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. To the written responses, I applied open coding, where codes are based on the data instead of existing theories or models, to identify different categories among the responses (Given 86). Coding was chosen due to its ability to reduce the massive amount of qualitative data. Coding also enabled descriptive statistical analysis of these responses, as well as cross tabulating between qualitative and quantitative data, the latter derived from the closed questions in the survey.

When studying the reception of *The Hobbit* characters in the survey data, the first step was to identify the respondents who found characters somehow meaningful for their viewing experience. I did this by analysing the responses to the question Q7 "Who was your favourite character, in the book or the films? Can you say why?" Altogether 4,075 participants (83.46%) mentioned favourite characters,[4] typically one (55.93%) or two (17.24%). Even though a direct question is likely to elicit mentions of favourite characters, the amount of responses to this open-ended question along with the multitude of descriptive comments demonstrates the significance of characters for the respondents.

Are there differences between the respondents who chose a favourite character and those who did not? For now, I will call these two groups *character-oriented (CO)* and *non-character-oriented (NCO)* audiences. The names of these groups are not meant to indicate a comprehensive approach to characters by these respondents but rather represent a practical division of the data into

[2] More on the recruitment of respondents, see Barker & Mathijs.
[3] Responses from Norway and Iceland were excluded from the data because of the small amounts of responses in comparison to other Nordic countries.
[4] This includes respondents who, instead of or in addition to naming a particular character, mention groups of characters, such as elves, dwarves or hobbits. Altogether 561 respondents left the question unanswered, with 246 respondents expressing that all characters were their favourites, or that they could not choose a favourite character.

respondents who articulated attachment to characters and to those who did not. At the very least, these groups differ in relation to how important characters are for their engagement with *The Hobbit*.

Comparison of demographic data (see Table 1) reveals that somewhat more of CO respondents belonged to youngest age groups, that is, under 26 year-olds, in comparison to NCO respondents. A more significant difference can be found in connection to gender with a clear majority of "males" among the NCO respondents and a small majority of "females" among the CO respondents. When taking both age and gender into consideration "female" CO respondents were younger (56.57% in the youngest age groups) than "male" CO respondents (48.42%). These results could indicate that "male" audiences are less likely to find a particular character or characters meaningful.[5]

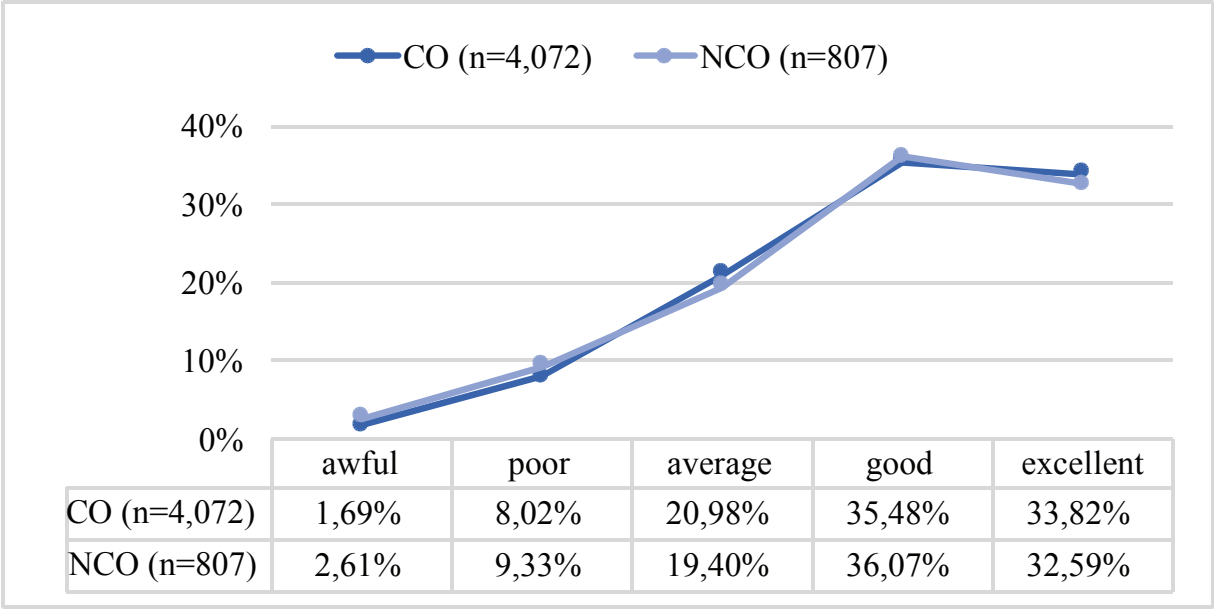
*Table 1. Character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences by age and gender (N=4,879)*

| | **Character-oriented (n=804)** | | | **Non-character-oriented (n=4,075)** | | | **Grand Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Age** | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** | |
| 6–15 | 5.74% | 7.17% | 6.53% | 2.39% | 3.97% | 2.99% | 5.94% |
| 16–25 | 42.68% | 49.40% | 46.38% | 40.84% | 47.68% | 43.41% | 45.89% |
| 26–35 | 22.30% | 22.54% | 22.43% | 23.71% | 23.18% | 23.51% | 22.61% |
| 36–45 | 17.16% | 11.09% | 13.82% | 16.53% | 11.26% | 14.55% | 13.94% |
| 46–55 | 8.47% | 6.41% | 7.34% | 9.36% | 10.60% | 9.83% | 7.75% |
| 56–65 | 2.62% | 2.76% | 2.70% | 5.38% | 2.65% | 4.35% | 2.97% |
| 66–75 | 0.98% | 0.53% | 0.74% | 1.79% | 0.66% | 1.37% | 0.84% |
| 76–85 | 0.00% | 0.04% | 0.02% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.02% |
| 86–95 | 0.00% | 0.04% | 0.02% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.02% |
| Over 95 | 0.05% | 0.00% | 0.02% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.02% |

Ratings of the films were very similar by both, CO and NCO respondents, so attachment to a character does not seem to have a connection to how the respondent evaluated the films (see Figure 1). The situation is different when it comes to the book *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. CO respondents were much more likely to have read the book and also more likely to have read the book more than once (48.25%) in comparison to NCO respondents (35.95%). CO respondents were also much more likely to rate the book *excellent* than NCO respondents (see Figure 2). These statistics indicate that being familiar with a character before seeing them on the screen had an influence on the importance of characters in the reception of *The Hobbit*. Similarly, CO respondents rated the *LotR* films as *excellent* more often in comparison to NCO respondents (see Figure 3). This difference could be the result of re-engaging with familiar characters but it can also echo the derived from re-entering a familiar fictional world.

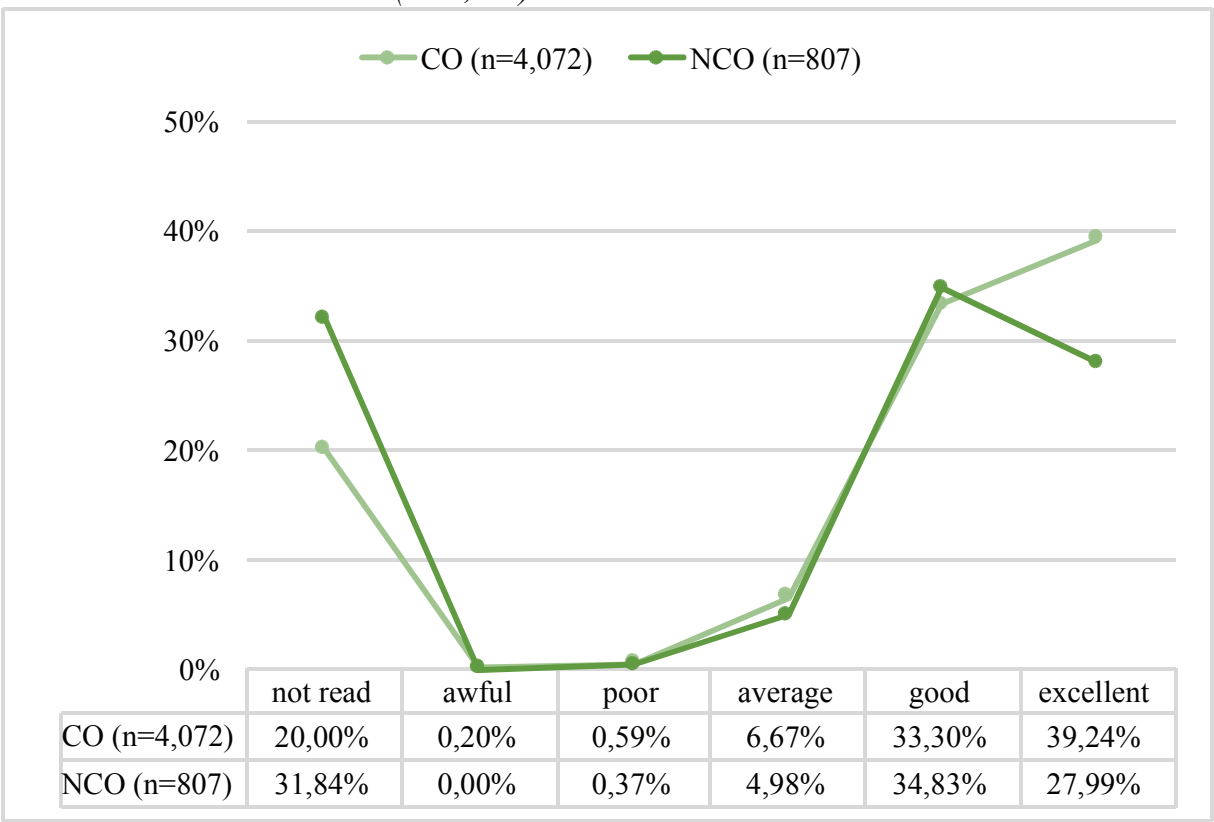
[5] The survey only gave options "male" and "female", so the choice of gender may not coincide with the gender identity of all respondents.

*Figure 1. Ratings of The Hobbit films by character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences. (N=4,879)*




| | awful | poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CO (n=4,072) | 1,69% | 8,02% | 20,98% | 35,48% | 33,82% |
| NCO (n=807) | 2,61% | 9,33% | 19,40% | 36,07% | 32,59% |

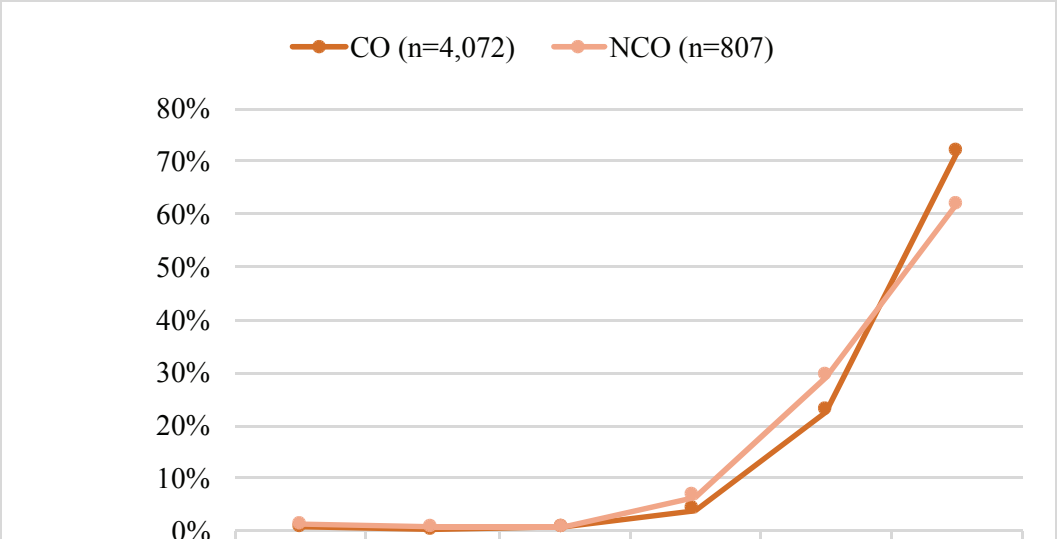
*Figure 2. Ratings of The Hobbit, or There and Back Again by character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences. (N=4,879)*




| | not read | awful | poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CO (n=4,072) | 20,00% | 0,20% | 0,59% | 6,67% | 33,30% | 39,24% |
| NCO (n=807) | 31,84% | 0,00% | 0,37% | 4,98% | 34,83% | 27,99% |

*Figure 3. Ratings of The Lord of the Rings by character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences. (N=4,879)*




| | not read | awful | poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CO (n=4,072) | 0,83% | 0,10% | 0,81% | 3,95% | 22,65% | 71,66% |
| NCO (n=807) | 1,24% | 0,75% | 0,62% | 6,59% | 29,10% | 61,69% |

CO and NCO respondents exhibited differences also in their engagement in other activities connected to the films. In the survey, the question pertaining to these activities (Q12) included several options: producing fan art, blogging, role-playing, writing fan fiction, collecting merchandise, seriously debating the films, commenting online, gaming, making fan videos, and visiting filming locations. These activities have been previously characterized as transmedial user practices, which, in addition to being mediated in some way, are defined by their ability to give new entrance points to the storyworld of *The Hobbit* (Koistinen et al. 357–358). The majority of CO respondents (67.09%) had taken part in some of these activities, while the same was true for less than half of NCO respondents (47.26%). The most popular activities were the same for both CO and NCO respondents, seriously debating the films and commenting online, as was the least popular activity, making fan videos. Commonly character-centric activities, such as producing fan art and writing fan fiction (Jenkins 235), were almost exclusive to CO respondents.

Making comparisons between CO and NCO respondents indicates that previous knowledge of the storyworld makes characters more meaningful for film audiences, whether or not they liked the film. In addition, participating in other activities was more common for CO respondents. These results show a connection between using multiple entrance points to the fictional storyworld and stronger engagement with characters, thus, making division of audiences into character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences plausible. Next, I will go on to analyse how *The Hobbit* audiences articulate their orientation towards characters.

## Reception of *The Hobbit* characters

Who were the favourite characters of *The Hobbit* audiences and why? The characters mentioned most often were, not surprisingly, Bilbo (1933 respondents), the name character of the films and the book, a home-loving hobbit taken on an unexpected adventure, and the wizard Gandalf (1088), also

a central figure in *The Hobbit* book and films. In addition to them, twelve other characters were mentioned by a significant amount of respondents (see Table 2).

*Table 2. Favourite characters in The Hobbit mentioned by at least 2% of the respondents (N=4072).*

| Character | Mentions | % of all respondents (N=4,879) |
|---|---|---|
| Bilbo | 1933 | 39,62% |
| Gandalf | 1088 | 22,30% |
| Thorin | 476 | 9,76% |
| Legolas | 352 | 7,21% |
| Smaug | 332 | 6,80% |
| Kili | 299 | 6,13% |
| Thranduil | 241 | 4,94% |
| Tauriel | 191 | 3,91% |
| Fili | 178 | 3,65% |
| Gollum | 169 | 3,46% |
| Beorn | 145 | 2,97% |
| Bard | 136 | 2,79% |
| Galadriel | 124 | 2,54% |
| Radagast | 103 | 2,11% |

Explanations given by the respondents for their choice of favourite characters give insight into how audiences engage with characters and how they construct this engagement. The stated reasons for choosing a specific character as favourite are diverse, from short matter-of-fact mentions to long explanations, or something in between. Through data-driven analysis I identified eleven categories of character engagement.[6] One mention of a character could include elements from several different categories. For example, the following was categorized into *physical and personality traits, embodiment of character type,* and *scenes and events*.

> Legolas. As a forest elf he has qualities that people do not have such as a superior vision and hearing, he moves silently and is unmatched with his bow as well as in a close combat. That he as a prince chooses to leave the elf king to search his own way indicates character. That he also overcomes his own prejudices about dwarfs is a sign of characteristics of self-awareness and ability to change. It gives Legolas as a character even more life. (#16750)[7]

*Empathy/sympathy* category includes responses where an empathetic or sympathetic response to a character's emotions, actions or circumstance was explicitly indicated, often expressed as "identifying" with a character. This category is the largest in the data (2324 mentions of a

[6] Similar categories were used by Martin Barker ("Identification"; "Legolas") in his earlier study on *The Lord of the Rings* audiences and they were used to iterate the categorization in this study: the categories of *actor/performance* and *technical creation* were separated whereas originally I used one category of *character realization* to describe these responses.
[7] In this article, when I use citations from the survey data I will give an identifying number (*#00000*) for each respondent.

character), and Bilbo (848) is the character mentioned most often. Jyrki Korpua (245) has suggested that hobbits in Tolkien's works function as mediators between Middle-earth and the reader, familiarizing us with the world of fantasy. This is also evident in the responses, with Bilbo described as 'identifiable' or 'relatable'.

> Best character is Bilbo, both in the book and the movie adaptation, as we can identify ourselves as him, unlike the wizards, dwarves and elves.... (#12261)

Typical responses in the category of *physical and personality traits* (2050 mentions) consist of lists of adjectives, for example "Gandalf is old, wise and therefore good" (#34607), or "Thorin was surly but good inside" (#7728). Physical traits are usually mentioned in concurrence with personality traits, while personality traits can be mentioned alone. Mentions of physical traits of the actors were categorized as mentions of *actor* or *performance*.

*Actor/performance* category (1040 mentions) holds references to the portrayal of a specific character in these films as well as references to a specific actor as a reason for the choice of favourite character. Mentions of Martin Freeman (424), the actor of Bilbo, dominate this category. When details of the acting style are mentioned, they fall in line with aspects commonly considered central in an actor's performance: gestures, facial expressions, and voice (Marcell 59). There are also mentions of the attractiveness of the actors. Barker has noted how among *LoTR* audiences mentions of sexual attractiveness were centered on the character of Legolas and how these responses often included mentions of the actor Orlando Bloom as well ("Identification" 372; "Legolas" 112). Among *The Hobbit* audiences similar engagement is evident in mentions of Legolas, but especially elven king Thranduil (Lee Pace) and dwarf Thorin, as in the description of Thorin as "an interesting character and, being played by [Richard] Armitage, very handsome" (#31889).

*Character adaptation from the book* (390 mentions) is connected to several different characters with comments ranging from very positive to very negative ones. Critical attitudes are connected to the reduced or expanded role of the character in the film adaptation or the perceived infidelity to Tolkien's work in the character design. For example, one in four respondents (34) naming Beorn as their favourite are disappointed in the small amount of screen time he has or the way his character looks in the films, whereas the adaptation of Thorin is mentioned (40) as a successful one with the character gaining depth or becoming more interesting.

References (313) to *a particular scene or event* are made in connection to both the book and the films. Respondents mention dialogue as a source of pleasure in certain scenes, such as the scene from the first film (*An Unexpected Journey,* 2012), where Bilbo and Gollum exchange riddles. Mentions of beautiful or "epic" (#857) fighting scenes by Legolas or Thorin are made as well. In addition to particular scenes, there are references to events unfolding over longer periods, such as the romance between dwarf Kili and elf Tauriel.

*Character development* is mentioned (231) almost exclusively in connection to Bilbo (181) and Thorin (36), whose journeys are seen as both physical and psychological. Bilbo's journey is described as that of finding himself or changing as a person for the better, and these narratives are sometimes accompanied by mentions of respondents identifying with him (13). Slightly darker descriptions concern Thorin following his goal of reclaiming his home, his descend to greed and madness, and his victory over his inner struggle**.**

*Embodying a character type* (220 mentions) is a category with responses describing a character as being a favourite due to how they represent a particular fictional character type. *Type* means both a cinematic stereotype such as a hero or a mentor that easily delivers the role of the character to the audience (Michael 10), and more often, a narrative stereotype from the fantasy genre (Schweinitz 283–284). The respondents were very aware of narrative stereotypes in fantasy and considered it a merit to the characters if they adhered to these models (Herman et al. 126) of

wizards, elves, dragons and other creatures. Responses in this category indeed included several different fantastical species, with most mentions for Gandalf (70), dragon Smaug (44) and Legolas (33).

*Character's central role in the narrative* (181 mentions) is a category consisting mostly of mentions of Bilbo (131) including simple statements of "he's the main character" (e.g. #8301). This category also includes descriptions of the story being told from his perspective, in both the book and the films. There are also similar mentions of Gandalf (40) but with a slightly different tone – he is characterized as someone who is more important to the story than he seems.

Mentions of favourite characters are sometimes accompanied with references to Tolkien's other works, for example *The Silmarilllion* (1977). Indeed, many respondents referred (182) to the whole of *Tolkien universe*, formed by the books, the films and other media products. These mentions are frequently connected to Gandalf (63).

The most common references to Tolkien universe are mentions of *LoTR* films (180), mostly in connection with Legolas (55) and Gandalf (57). Respondents offer their familiarity with the characters as reason for liking them, or they express enjoying the new information about these characters provided in the *The Hobbit*. It is also worth noting that some respondents mention favourite characters who in fact do not appear in *The Hobbit* films or the book, even though they are created by Tolkien, such as Aragorn (23) and Tom Bombadil.[8] References to *LotR* also include comparisons between the protagonists of *LotR* and *The Hobbit*. This indicates that the respondents consider these two trilogies strongly intertwined.

When *technical creation* (108 mentions) is given as a reason for choosing a favourite character, it usually refers to the animated characters of the films, Smaug in particular (65), but also to the make-up and design of the characters. The respondents might express criticism towards computer animation in general, but still feel that a particular animated character makes an exception.

Different interpretational contexts are actualized in these categories. *The Hobbit* films and the book *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* form a single interpretational context, as seen in the categories of particular scenes or events, character development, central role in the narrative, physical and personality traits, and character adaptation from the book. The second context is Tolkien universe comprising of all his works and their adaptations and transmediations, evident in the categories of connections to *LotR* and connections to Tolkien universe. The third context of fantasy film and fantasy genre is present in categories embodiment of character type and technical creation.

## Constructing character engagement

How do theories of audience engagement reflect on *The Hobbit* audiences responses to characters? When considering Murray Smith's structure of sympathy, it is readily evident that different categories are connected to different levels of this structure. As described above, Smith's model of character engagement is constructed of three levels: recognition, alignment and allegiance, where recognition is the basis for either alignment, allegiance, or both. Recognition is, for Smith, a typically automated process of conceptualizing an individual agent that is continuous or re-identifiable; it is usually focused on physical traits, including body, face, and voice, and is sometimes aided by language, such as a character's name (*Engaging* 110, 116-118). Generic schemata concerning fantasy or adventure films may activate expectations about the characters (Rushton and Bettinson 170), which is evident in responses to the category of *embodying a*

[8] Aragorn is mentioned in the third *Hobbit* film (*The Battle of the Five Armies*), where he is referred to by the name Strider.

*character type*, where conforming to a narrative stereotype was a sign of a plausible character and a source of pleasure for the respondents, as in the following quotations:

> In both the book and the films I liked Smaug for its character. A traditional fantasy dragon, who likes treasures and riddles. (#25592)

> Smaug because he is the best dragon I have seen in films. (#17218)

> He is exactly as I imagined a dragon. (#16949)

While recognition is merely the foundation for other processes of engagement, in the audience perception it is clear that this particular form of recognition, based on former knowledge of the genre and its stereotypes, can be pleasurable for audiences.

Alignment with a character is produced by two features of the narrative, spatio-temporal attachment, which can be described as the way narration follows a particular character, and subjective access, access to the character's thoughts and emotions (Smith, *Engaging* 142). In the *The Hobbit* data, alignment is most obvious in the categories connected to the narrative: character's *central role in the narrative, character development,* and *particular scenes and events*. In the first category, the choice of Bilbo is explained by him being the main character, the story following him, in what is an obvious case of spatio-temporal attachment. One of the respondents was even very conscious of the personal effect of narration for their own reception: "I tend to sympathize with the main character" (#16765).

Smith (*Engaging* 187-189) considers allegiance to a character a result of a cognitive and emotional process, where the viewer morally evaluates a character and has an emotional response and a specific moral orientation towards the character. It is not always possible to distinguish *sympathetic* and *empathic* stances from the written responses. Indeed, for Smith, empathy and sympathy are intertwined in a sense that "we flit rapidly in and out of characters empathically, moving with imaginative agility through a variety of perspectives which are then aggregated and interrelated to produce the structure of sympathy" (Smith, "Further" 232). Nevertheless, the responses in this category are telling of an allegiance with these characters, for example:

> Thranduil Oropherion, elven king of Mirkwood. I have a fascination of elves in general, and Thranduil truly captured me. He has a back story that captured my feelings, plus he is so fantastically gracious and beautiful. It was also interesting after *LotR* trilogy to see Legolas' family, home and backstory. (#7697)

Despite the usefulness of the structure of sympathy in understanding character engagement and how actual audiences construct it, some of the responses to *The Hobbit* survey have elements not fully addressed in Smith's model. Returning to Jerslev's (214-215) model of emotional responses to films sheds light on these elements. The model can be applied to characters, resulting in a division of 1) emotions attached to a fictional character, both a) empathetic and b) non-empathetic, and 2) emotions attached to making of a character, mostly non-empathetic in nature. Empathetic emotions are defined in more detail by Smith – in fact, Jerslev uses "empathetic" in a way that encompasses Smith's "sympathetic" and "empathic" responses, but it is her introduction of non-empathetic emotions that is especially valuable here. One category of *The Hobbit* responses specifically is better understood by applying Jerslev's model rather than through Smith's phenomenology, and that is the category of *technical creation*:

> Thanks to wonderful CGI (it's not all bad after all) Smaug was just as magnificent and massive as I had always imagined him to be. (#30870)

> Smaug. Amazingly made in the film, and really good voice acting. (#8265)

> In the film my favourite was Thranduil even though his role was small, because I think Lee Pace is a good actor and this character's make-up and character design in general were a perfect success. (#32844)

The emotions attached to Smaug and Thranduil in these examples are non-empathetic in nature. They are not emotions born from recognizing, mimicking or responding to the character's emotions but are directed to the "spectacle" of the film (Jerslev 214), and to the creation of that spectacle. Non-empathetic emotions manifest as admiration for the skills needed in technical creation of characters and character design, as well as for the results of those skills. These responses contradict Jerslev's claim of characters being solely connected to empathetic emotions.

*Actor/performance* category is clearly connected to making of the character and shows the effects of the star system – but perhaps not quite as clearly as Smith described it: "the process by which we evaluate characters and respond to them emotionally is often framed or informed by our evaluation of the star personae of the stars who perform these characters" (Smith, *Engaging* 193). Actor or performance is most often mentioned in connection to the most popular characters, Bilbo (424 mentions) and Gandalf (172). Also in the responses to question (Q3) where the respondents could choose an actor they particularly liked as a reason for seeing the films, their actors were mentioned most often, Martin Freeman (Bilbo; 11.82% of respondents) and Ian McKellen (Gandalf; 10.96%). Even though both of these actors are well known, respondents do not mention their other works or describe their star personae, except for brief mentions of liking the actor already before *The Hobbit*. Indeed, there were overall very few mentions of other films or works by *The Hobbit* actors, in addition to *LotR*. Instead, the mentions of actors focused on admiration for their performance, also non-empathetic in nature, as in this response: "I must praise Richard Armitage for his character acting of Thorin, it is not easy to play crazy" (#17364).

*Character adaptation from the book* is the third category connected to making of character, and includes, as well as in the previous ones, evaluating the skills of the creator, be it an actor, director, or writer, named in some responses but merely implicated in others. Respondents express emotions such as admiration for the creators – or disappointment when the adaptation of a book character they liked failed to fill their expectations in the films. Even though these responses are analysed as non-empathetic, they can be as passionate as the responses in other categories (Jerslev 213).

Emotions connected to characters also derive from connections outside the text. Characters in *The Hobbit* are adaptations from *LotR* films as well as from Tolkien's book, and this forms the first, most obvious connection. The most popular characters Bilbo and Gandalf were familiar to audiences from *LotR*, and Gandalf, Legolas and elf Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) were even portrayed by the same actors. Legolas makes an intriguing example as those mentioning him were exceedingly generous in evaluating the films, with 62.39% giving an *excellent* rating to *The Hobbit* (all CO respondents 33.84%), and as many as 40.17% had not read the book (all CO respondents 20.00%). Attachment to Legolas originates exceptionally strongly from *LoTR* films and effects audiences' perceptions of the character in as well as well their engagement with *The Hobbit* films in general.

Other *connections to Tolkien universe* include references to narratives, places, and names not mentioned in *The Hobbit* films or the book. Using these enabled respondents to distinguish themselves as Tolkien connoisseurs, as this respondent referring to Gandalf as a favourite character without actually mentioning the character's name: "Mithrandir - for having patience with mortals and elves" (#2763).

Another manifestation of outside contexts occurs in the category of *embodying a character type*. Connections to the fantasy genre as well as awareness of narrative stereotypes of the genre are evident in this category. In addition to the pleasures of recognition mentioned above, further

connections to narrative stereotypes outside fantasy genre were significant for the respondents. Tauriel, a new character created for the films, was criticized for representing the stereotypical female role of a love interest and becoming subordinate to the romance plot. Criticism was evident in question (Q9) "Did anything particularly disappoint you about the films?", where 401 respondents (8.39%) mentioned Tauriel. Even though genre-specific character stereotypes were welcomed by the audiences, this stereotype was seen as a negative one, foreign to the fantasy genre. It differs from the narrative stereotypes described above in that it occurs also outside of the fantasy genre, reflecting the everyday lives of audiences (Schweinitz 287–288). The negative perception was strengthened by Tauriel being a new character created for the films, which was also commented on by the respondents. The case is a reminder of the existence of negative emotions connected to character engagement. Nevertheless, altogether 191 respondents also mentioned Tauriel as a favourite character:

> Tauriel was a welcome addition to the macho crowd, and a wonderful role model for girls watching the film. (#1080)

Respondents specifically mentioned that the films needed strong female figures and the story should be "updated" (e.g. #34433). Doing so they drew from cultural discussions of gender representation in films as well as indicated comparisons between *The Hobbit* and other films, thus, connecting their reception of characters to contexts beyond narrative stereotypes of the genre discussed earlier. Even the respondents mentioning Tauriel as favourite were often quite aware of the general criticism towards her addition to the story. This brings forth the final contextual element, *discussions and debates* about the characters.

Even though social context undoubtedly influences all audience-character relationships, specific debates of the fan community are mentioned repeatedly in *The Hobbit* data: the addition of Tauriel and Legolas to the story, the romance between Tauriel and Kili, and the handsome youthful appearances of some of the dwarves. The mentions of these debates are not surprising considering that character-centric user practices, such as writing fan fiction and creating fan art, have a strong social element, being based in fan communities and their interpretative practices (Jenkins 156, 248–249; Kaplan 151). Indeed, the significance of social context in connection to character reception needs further research in the future.

## Conclusions

To understand audience engagement with *The Hobbit* films I analysed the responses of nearly 5,000 Nordic respondents to a reception study survey. Firstly, I identified segments of character-oriented and non-character-oriented audiences in the respondents, with the former being the majority in this data. Those mentioning a favourite character were more often familiar with *The Hobbit* book or other parts of the Tolkien universe and more likely to participate in other activities connected to the films, such as commenting online or writing fan fiction. Even the respondents who gave low ratings to *The Hobbit* films were more likely to name a favourite character, if they had enjoyed other parts of Tolkien universe. The results indicate that characters are not equally important to all audiences, but vast storyworlds and transmedia universes increase engagement with characters. Further analysis of the actual processes is needed in order to understand how characters are positioned in audience engagement with fictional worlds. Indeed, the object of transmedia research has in recent years moved from transmedia production towards transmedia audiences (e.g. Evans; Harvey). The results of this study pose the question of whether character engagement described here is perhaps unique to fantasy film or transmedial production, and is character engagement different in nature or intensity in, for example, other film genres or stand-alone films with original scripts and characters.

Audiences construct their engagement with film characters in ways that are only partially mapped by Smith's structure of sympathy, but can be understood more comprehensively using Jerslev's conceptualization of emotional attachment, which includes non-empathetic emotions. In *The Hobbit* data this is evident in emotions connected to *making of characters*, that is, technical creation, character design, actor's performance, and character adaptation. *Contexts outside the text*, including connections to *LotR* films, the whole of Tolkien universe, narrative stereotypes, and fan communities, provide another new element to character reception. These results support Barker's demand for retheorization of the audience-character relationship to encompass diverse forms of character engagement. Indeed, further research should include deeper analysis of these contextual elements of character engagement to form a comprehensive understanding of emotional engagement with characters. Research should also look more in depth into the concept and cultural practices of non-character-oriented audiences. Who are the audiences who could not choose a favourite character? Does their engagement with films differ from that of other audiences?

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## Appendix

### THE WORLD HOBBIT AUDIENCE PROJECT

1. What did you think of the *Hobbit* films overall?

• Awful • Poor • Average • Good • Excellent

2. Can you sum up your response to the films in your own words?

3. Please choose *up to three* reasons for seeing *The Hobbit* films, from among the following:

- I wanted to experience their special features (eg, high frame rate, 3D)
- I am connected to a community that has been waiting for the films
- I love Tolkien's work as a whole
- I like to see big new films when they come out
- I wanted to be part of an international experience
- I love fantasy films generally
- There was such a build-up, I had to see them
- I was dragged along
- I knew the book, and had to see what the films would be like
- I love Peter Jackson's films
- No special reason
- An actor that I particularly like was in them:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| • Richard Armitage | • Cate Blanchett | • Orlando Bloom |
| • Benedict Cumberbatch | • Martin Freeman | • Ian Holm |
| • Christopher Lee | • Evangeline Lilly | • Sylvester McCoy |
| • Ian McKellen | • James Nesbitt | • Jeffrey Thomas |
| • Aidan Turner | • Hugo Weaving | • Another? Please specify: |

4. Which of the following come closest to capturing the *kind of films* you feel *The Hobbit* trilogy are? Please choose up to three. (They are in random order.)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| • Children's story | • Fairytale | • World of fantasy |
| • Prequel / sequel | • Star attraction | • Part of Tolkien's legend-world |
| • Multimedia franchise | • Family film | • Digital novelty cinema |
| • Action-adventure | • Peter Jackson movie | • Literary adaptation |
| • Stunning locations | • Coming-of-age story | • Hollywood blockbuster |

*If you are unsure what we mean by one of these, hover your cursor over it, to see a short explanation.*

Is there another? Please specify:

5. Are there any of these that you definitely would *not* choose? Again, please pick up to three.

- Children's story
- Prequel / sequel
- Multimedia franchise
- Action-adventure
- Stunning locations
- Fairytale
- Star attraction
- Family film
- Peter Jackson movie
- Coming-of-age story
- World of fantasy
- Part of Tolkien's legend-world
- Digital novelty cinema
- Literary adaptation
- Hollywood blockbuster

6. Can you tell us why you've made these choices in Questions 4 and 5?

7. Who was your favourite character, in the book or the films? Can you say why?

8. What element of the films impressed or surprised you most? Can you say why?

9. Did anything particularly disappoint you about the films? Can you say why?

10. Do *The Hobbit* films raise any broader issues or themes on which you would like to comment?

11. Do you think there are people who would share your ideas about *The Hobbit*? What are they like?

12. Have you taken part in any of these other activities connected with *The Hobbit* films?

- Producing fan art
- Role-playing
- Collecting merchandise
- Commenting online
- Making fan videos
- None of these
- Blogging
- Writing fan fiction
- Seriously debating the films
- Gaming

 

- Visiting filming locations

13.What is the role that you think fantasy stories can play today? Choose *up to three* which are nearest to your opinion:

- They are a way of enriching the imagination
- They are a way of experiencing and exploring emotions
- They are a source of hopes and dreams for changing our world
- They are a way of escaping
- They are a form of shared entertainment
- They allow us to explore different attitudes and ideas
- They are a way of creating alternative worlds
- No particular role

14. How important was it for you to follow stories and debates around the films?

- Not at all
- Slightly
- Reasonably
- Very
- Extremely

15. Which stories or debates have most interested you?

| |
|---|
| |

16. What did you think of the *Lord of the Rings* films overall?

- Not seen
- Awful
- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Excellent

17. Have you read *The Hobbit*?

- Had it read to me
- Read once
- Read more than once
- Still reading
- Not read at all
- Planning to read

18. If you did, what did you think of it?

- Not read
- Awful
- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Excellent

19. In which formats have you seen the *Hobbit* films? Please pick as many as are relevant for each film.

| | Original cinema release | Dubbed | TV | Subtitled | IMAX | 3D | 48 fps | DVD/ Blu-Ray | Downloaded | Stream on demand | Mobile device | Not seen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unexpected Journey | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Desolation of Smaug | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| There and Back Again | | | | | | | | | | | | |

20. In what format do you *prefer* to see films like *The Hobbit*? (Please pick up to two.)

| Cinema release | IMAX | Home theatre system | DVD/Blu-Ray | TV | Stream on demand | Down-loaded | Mobile device | Doesn't matter |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | |

21. Is there anything particular about you personally that would help us understand your feelings about the book or the films of *The Hobbit*?

Finally, a few simple facts about yourself:

22. In which year were you born? [Pull-down year list, beginning 2014 back to 1915]

23. Are you:

- Male
- Female

24. Which of the following comes closest to describing your position?

- Student
- Professional
- Home/child-care
- Service work
- Clerical/administrative
- Industrial labour
- Agricultural labour
- Unemployed
- Creative
- Executive
- Self-employed
- Retired

25. What level of education have you reached?

- Primary school
- Secondary school
- Vocational qualification
- University degree
- Higher qualification

26. What are your top three most common cultural activities? They can be of any kind – sports, reading, gardening, surfing the internet, whatever.

27. What are your three all-time favourite cultural or media experiences or products? Feel free to name any kind that you like.

28. What is your country of residence? PULL-DOWN LIST

29. What is your nationality? PULL-DOWN LIST

**SUBMIT**

 

# 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.

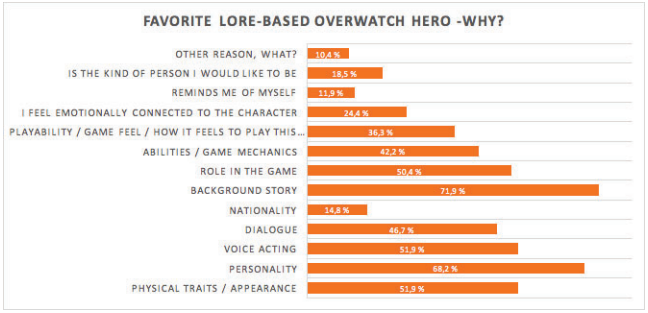


**Figure 1: Reasons for choosing a favorite lore-based *Overwatch* hero.**

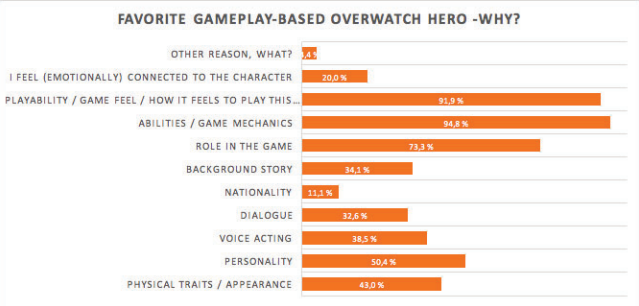


**Figure 2: Reasons for choosing a favorite gameplay-based *Overwatch* hero.**

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?"

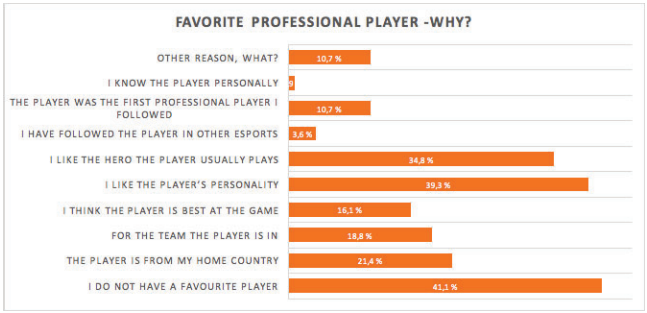


**Figure 3: Reasons for choosing a favorite professional *Overwatch* player.**

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

# PLAYER RECEPTION OF CHANGE AND STABILITY IN CHARACTER MECHANICS.

by

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CHAPTER 5

# Player Reception of Change and Stability in Character Mechanics

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Theory

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

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

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

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

## Materials and Methods

In order to understand character reception among players of a particular game we must begin with an understanding of the characters themselves. We analyze the characters ReinhardtReinhardt and BrigitteBrigitte through materials both in the game and in the broader transmedial world. In-game materials include all the representations of the characters in the game (heroHero gallery, skins,1 voice lines, emotesEmotes, sprays2), character mechanics, and gameplay. This material is gathered through close-playing the game and analyzing the gameplay with these particular characters. Other materials include all relevant information about the characters on the official Blizzard Entertainment website, such as character description, description of mechanics, background story, introductory videos, animated short stories, comics, and short stories. These materials include both narrative and non-narrative content. Even though *Overwatch* gameplay does not replicate or depict events described in the background stories of its characters or other fictional narratives from its transmedial diegetic universe, it does draw from them in multiple ways. The game maps are connected to the lore and often to particular characters. However, in order to win, and also in order to not get reported for bad behavior by other players, each player is expected to follow the main goal of each map, a goal that has no narrative explanation or connection. Different character elements, such as voice lines and skins reference their character's histories. In addition to these, there is an abundance of unofficial player-created material, such as fan fiction and fan art, that were excluded from our analysis, since here we focus on the official content.

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

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

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

## Reinhardt: Steadfast Warrior

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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


**Image 5.2** Reinhardt's skin "Crusader" in the skin menu with the accompanying background information

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

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

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

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

## Brigitte: Introducing a New Playable Character

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


**Image 5.3** Brigitte in the *Overwatch* hero gallery

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apparently, as a result of community feedback, Brigitte's abilities have been under constant change since her launch. Her offensive abilities have been weakened and her healing abilities have been changed back and forth. Many of these changes took place during the running of our survey, and this is evident in comments about her being too strong and "being constantly nerfed[5] for that reason, just bad ability design from Blizzard", thus, focusing on the character as an artifact, their synthetic component, rather than their narrative or simulation. However, players who enjoy playing Brigitte would sometimes see these constant changes as an attack to everything Brigitte is and represents. In a discussion thread in the official *Overwatch* forum one player organized "Brigitte's funeral" after Brigitte received her 19th change since her introduction to the game. The player wrote:

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

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

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

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

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

## Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Notes

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

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

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# V

# "SEXUALITY DOES NOT BELONG TO THE GAME" – DISCOURSES IN OVERWATCH COMMUNITY AND THE PRIVILEGE OF BELONGING

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

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## 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 | • **Game** as service<br>• **Character:** narrative dimension inferior to mechanics<br>• **Players:** A hierarchy of players |
| Auteur discourses | • **Game** as art<br>• **Character:** narrative dimension emphasized<br>• **Players:** should respect and yield to the designers |
| | • **Game** as entertainment; game as |

| | |
|---|---|
| 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.

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## 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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