

Overwatch as a Shared Universe: Game Worlds in a Transmedial Franchise

Joleen Blom

IT University of Copenhagen
Rued Langgaardsvej 7
2300 Copenhagen S., Denmark
jobl@itu.dk

ABSTRACT

Transmedia storytelling implies that each medium is a device with the same storytelling capacity to equally contribute to a single coherent world. Specifically games become an issue when transmedial worlds rely on storytelling and the imagination, since they tend to disrupt the sense of coherence within transmedial worlds. Through a case study of the *Overwatch* franchise (Blizzard Entertainment 2016 – 2018), this paper challenges the notion of transmedial worlds central to the idea of transmedia storytelling. Based on Anderson's notion of *Imagined Communities* (1983), it proposes instead to consider transmedial universes that include games such as *Overwatch* as shared universes that take into consideration various types of worlds, such as virtual worlds, by focusing on how the *Overwatch* franchise supports the connection between consumers.

Keywords

Transmedia Storytelling, Transmedial Universe, Shared Universe, Imagined Communities

INTRODUCTION

Genji: "It is not too late to change your course, brother."

Hanzo: "You may call yourself my brother, but you are not the Genji I knew."

Overwatch (2016 - 2018)

As a team-based online multiple-player first-person shooter game, *Overwatch* enables players to engage in combat matches between two teams. The dialogue between the heroes Genji and Hanzo is one of the many conversations that can randomly occur between the game's heroes at the start of each match. It refers to the background story that the game developer Blizzard Entertainment circulates through short films and comics on their website¹. These films and comics tell stories about the history of *Overwatch* as a task force and depicts the background of the heroes, all which is absent in the game². It tells which heroes are enemies and friends, who does and does not belong to the *Overwatch* task force, or why certain heroes decided to join the task force or reject it. It seems that the films and comics, and the game in the *Overwatch* franchise represent two different kinds of worlds. While the *Overwatch* world of the films and comics tells stories about the various agents and its origins, the world of the game seems to disregard these stories and shows a world in which heroes and enemies alike can band together and fight against versions of themselves to obtain a

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certain objective³. There exists a transmedial connection between both worlds as the occasional conversations between heroes do not necessarily make sense within the game, but refer to the stories in the films and comics. The dialogue between the two brothers for example makes more sense once one has seen the short film ‘*Dragons*’ (2016)⁴ that tells their tragic history.

Because of the transmedial connection, the game, comics and films seem each to contribute to a larger universe that all the *Overwatch* worlds share, however, the *Overwatch* game does not contribute to the universe with a story. Hence, what kind of universe do we speak of when it is not solely created by stories? Could we consider the *Overwatch* franchise to be a transmedial universe? We should therefore also question if the game, comics and films even contribute to the universe on an equal level. The aim of this paper is to challenge the notion of transmedial worlds and universes central to the idea of transmedia storytelling coined by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins 2006). With stories as the main method to create a transmedial world or universe, concepts such as Ryan’s storyworld (2013), Wolf’s imaginary world (Wolf 2012), or even Thon’s transmedial universe (Thon 2015), give the impression that any medium is able to equally contribute a story to a transmedial world without taking into consideration the capabilities of the medium in question. Within this paper, I will show that the notion of transmedia storytelling as a phenomenon of convergence culture shifted the focus from McLuhan’s idea that the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964) to a focus on the content of the medium. Although it is not my goal to proclaim medium specificity, I do wish to raise awareness about the role the capabilities of a medium play, specifically when it comes to games. As this paper will show, transmedial worlds and universes’ primary focus on content overlook, or perhaps wishfully ignore, the issues games cause when the creation of transmedial worlds is regarded in terms of storytelling and the imagination for the connection between various media.

The *Overwatch* franchise is a relevant case study to address the issue of the role of games within transmedia storytelling, because the game development company, Blizzard Entertainment, places the game at the center of their franchise. At the same time, they use short films and comics as a strategic method typical for transmedia storytelling to present their consumers with a story in their product. As I will explain throughout, the world that the comics and short films show does not collide with the world of the *Overwatch* game, neither in story nor ontologically. By challenging the notion of transmedial worlds and universes, I will propose to consider the *Overwatch* franchise a shared universe that acknowledges the capabilities of games while surrounded by storytelling media within the same franchise. The idea of a shared universe provides us the possibility to perceive games in terms of what they add to a universe to which multiple media contribute, instead of focusing on how they disrupt any story coherence, as it shifts the focus from storytelling to the connection between the different media and their consumers.

The films and comics discussed in this paper are those that are deemed to stand on their own as texts independent from the *Overwatch* game. A large variety of the videos on Blizzard Entertainment’s website can be considered as game paratexts such as the gameplay overviews, gameplay trailers, introductions of game characters and more, because they are extradiegetic discourses aiming to define the pragmatic status of the game and shape the players’ experience. Mia Consalvo’s (2007) concept of game paratext is used to describe certain elements that shaped the game industry, but paratexts as marketing tools is outside the scope of this paper. Furthermore, Gérard Genette (1987) who coined the concept of the paratext stated that a paratext is always subordinate to the original text and its *raison d’être* is its function to provide additional meaning to the text (1987, 12). The comics and short films that are

discussed in this paper (the animated shorts, cinematic trailer, and origin stories)⁵ do not need the *Overwatch* game as the main text, despite being a marketing strategy, because they can be read independently from the game⁶. They are therefore not paratexts but are instead narrative discourses that construct their own world situated in the same shared universe as the world of the game.

TRANSMEDIAL WORLDS

Marshall McLuhan's concept of 'the medium is the message' provided us the insight that we should consider the role of a medium or technology in shaping human affairs (McLuhan 1964). He specifically states that the content of any medium is always another medium as it can change the construction of human society, whereas the content or the message ignores the nature of the medium (1964, 8 - 11). We may perceive his notion as an early observation for what Bolter and Grusin later called 'convergence'; remediation of older media into new types of media (Bolter and Grusin 1999). For them, technologies such as televisions, telephones, and computers would try to absorb each other while at the same time promote their own form of immediacy to create a sense of presence (ibid).

Henry Jenkins' notion of 'transmedia storytelling' seem to be of large influence (Jenkins 2006) as an approach to convergence culture. He states that transmedia stories spread across multiple media platforms, such as films, television series, and literature, in which each new text presented by the media platform provides a distinctive and valuable contribution to the world in question (Jenkins 2006, 2009). While McLuhan, and Bolter and Grusin all emphasized the medium and its affordances, Jenkins' focus on stories shifts the scale from medium to content. The content of these media platforms –that is their stories, provide a distinctive and valuable contribution to the world it creates (Jenkins 2006, 2007). In this sense, each text logically shares the same coherent world as any other media platform that contributes a text to the specific world, regardless of the medium or technology that might be used to tell such a story.

Another early approach to the idea of various media contributing to expand a world is Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup's notion 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" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004). Although they are more concrete than Jenkins in defining the idea of a world in this context, they do not define it more than it containing a sense of 'worldness' that as a mental image is shared by producers and consumers (ibid.). Furthermore, they suggest as well that each medium is equally capable of telling stories.

Klastrup and Tosca are not the only scholars who suggest that texts are able to create a world for which we need our imagination in order to access them. Mark Wolf takes up the concept of 'imaginary worlds'(Wolf 2012) deriving it from J.R.R. Tolkien's idea of subcreation, in which every human sub-creator, made in its image after the Christian God, can create a secondary world (Tolkien 1997). Wolf considers stories to be the most common means of constructing and expanding an imaginary world as they can also become the seeds for new stories set in the same world (2012, 198). Yet, it is not the sole method since he also identifies the notion of what he calls 'infrastructures'. That is, points of references that reveal similarities between the Primary World (our world) and the Secondary World (the imaginary world) (2012, 154).

The interest in stories and the role of the imagination is most striking when it comes to the construction of these textual worlds, specifically when they are transmedial. Building on Lubomír Doležel's possible worlds (Doležel 1998), Marie-Laure Ryan

introduces the concept of storyworlds to include both fictional and factual stories to create a world. The storyworld of factual stories refers to the real world, while the storyworld of fictional stories refer to imaginary worlds (Ryan 2014). Like Jenkins who considers storytelling to be at the base of transmedial worlds, Ryan considers storyworlds to be central to transmedial storytelling (Ryan 2013). A storyworld is the entity that hold transmedia texts together, but as she defines storyworlds to be mental representations build by readers during the reading of a narrative (ibid.), this means that the condition for a storyworld to come to existence is that the texts need to be a narrative. However, when the storyworld is an imagined entity holding those different texts together, does this also not imply that all platforms contribute to the same world equally regardless of their capacities to tell stories?

Transmedia storytelling and the idea of building worlds through texts do not seem to consider media affordances. While I do not want to argue completely in favor for media specificity, as that usually leads to an arbitrary establishment of a media hierarchy and does not acknowledge that media tend to remediate each other, the shift from medium to content implies that media are devices for storytelling with the same capacity to contribute to a single world. Transmedia storytelling does not seem to be concerned with the idea that certain types of media consist of different modalities that make them better or worse for storytelling, if those media can do that at all. If different media would all contribute equally to a single coherent world, why would we need to rely on our imagination to connect them? One could suggest that Wolfgang Iser's notion on gaps (Iser 1978) is exactly why we need our imagination, but that is missing my point. Instead, what I address is the connection between these texts as a single world and the affordances of the media platform that shape the discourse of the stories.

THE ROLE OF GAMES WITHIN TRANSMEDIAL WORLDS

Specifically games have the tendency to break a sense of coherence within transmedial worlds and universes. Since they have relations to other media that tend to tell stories, and thereby create transmedial worlds (Picard forthcoming), the capacity of games to tell stories and thereby create worlds of some sort has been discussed extensively. For instance, Jenkins writes in his essay *Game Design as Narrative Architecture* (2004) the following:

One can imagine games taking their place within a larger narrative system with story information communicated through books, film, television, comics, and other media, each doing what it does best, each a relatively autonomous experience, but the richest understanding of the storyworld coming to those who follow the narrative across various channels (Jenkins 2004).

Doing what each medium does best in order to come to a concrete understanding of a single storyworld seems to lack the critical stance that not every medium has the same capabilities to tell a story nor that it should tell a story. We see this tendency as well with other discussions about the role of games within transmedia storytelling as they mainly focus on games as an affordance or a prop to access the diegetic space of transmedial worlds in order to play and interact with it (Evans 2008; Wolf 2012; Bateman 2014; Harvey 2015). Although there seems to be some sort of acknowledgement of conflict between games and other media, the particular capabilities of games are mostly ignored.

In a preliminary study, Espen Aarseth takes a stance against the romantic idea that in cross-media, the cousin of transmedia in which the same content seems to hop from platform to platform, books, film, games, and amusement parks among others can

equally communicate the same single world (Aarseth 2006). Using John Cawelti's (Cawelti 1976) distinction in popular fiction between the level of cultural convention, and the level of underlying structure, Aarseth argues that amusement park rides and games tend to take over the level of cultural convention (e.g., characters, clichés, conventions, etc.), but do not seem to afford the underlying structure (series of events) (ibid.). His study is limited in the sense that he only discusses a few games and franchises, and those examples are about film-to-game transfers. He does point out however that there is a friction between the depiction of a single world between media such as films and books, and games and amusement parks, perhaps because the affordance of the latter relies more on experience rather than on storytelling (ibid.).

Jessica Aldred (2012) directs us towards the same friction in film-to-game transfers by pointing out that characters do not easily move between various media. Issues arise when movie-licensed game characters have to act as an embodiment of players in the game world and simultaneously function as film characters transported to the game. She argues that abstract characters, such as Lego figures, allow players to perceive these characters as extensions of themselves, while abstraction at the same time takes away the associations demanded by the source medium (ibid.).

To understand from where this friction arises, we should look at how games communicate their worlds. A start is Jesper Juul's book *Half-Real* (2005), in which he argues that the element where games differ from other types of media is that many video games present game worlds – that is, fictional worlds that are incomplete because the games contradict themselves or prevent players from imagining complete fictional worlds. Like Ryan, Juul's notion of a fictional world comes from possible world theory. The imagination, such as Ryan's principle of minimum departure (Ryan 1991), allows readers to make up for the incompleteness of fictional worlds in other types of media, therefore Juul states that players face difficulties imagining a complete game world, because they have to resort to the game's rules in order to make sense of it (2005). However, while the game world as Juul describes it might be intertwined with game rules, players often have a certain amount of agency and can interact with the world, which shows that the game world is not entirely dependent on the mind of the players. To which extent then, are players dependent on their imagination for their understanding about the construction of a game world? And, in a broader sense, how does the imagination fit into the idea of a game world contributing to a transmedial world?

Aarseth presents an opposite viewpoint, asserting game worlds to be of a different type than fictional worlds, because game worlds contain elements that can be acted upon, whereas fictional content cannot (Aarseth 2007). While Aarseth specifies that games do contain fictional elements, the non-fictional elements are of a different ontological nature, which he states to be virtual as “a mode of existence that is neither fictional nor real” (ibid.). He defines game worlds as follows:

Gameworlds are physical or pseudo-physical (virtual) structures that are clearly delimited and which can be described by geometry or topology. They are different from so-called fictional worlds in that they, unlike fictional worlds, have a measurable, concrete extension that can be explored directly by an independent agent. Fictional worlds depend on the imagination, whereas game worlds have objective existence, even if they only exist via computing machinery (Aarseth 2012).

From this perspective, game worlds are virtual worlds that contain three ontological layers: the real, the virtual and the fictional (ibid.). While the fictional layer relies on the imagination of the players that we see in other fictional media as well, the virtual

is real within the diegetic game world, since it can be acted upon without players having to rely upon their imagination. Aarseth's work points out that the friction lies in the reason that games do not communicate the same type of world as other media, such as novels or films, because the former relies less on the imagination than the latter.

OVERWATCH AS A TRANSMEDIAL UNIVERSE?

We might ask ourselves if we should consider game worlds to be a part of transmedial worlds at all, when transmedial worlds rely upon fictional stories that imply the necessity of the imagination, such as imaginary worlds and storyworlds (which can all be transmedial worlds)? And if so, can we speak of a balanced transmedial world when games communicate a different type of world than worlds portrayed by stories? When the transmedial world hinges on a collection of different worlds that cannot be merged, do we still speak of a single concrete world or might the term 'universe' not be in order?

Jan-Noël Thon (2015) addresses the issue of transmedial entertainment franchises presenting a single storyworld when the converging content of that world is contradictory in his essay *Converging Worlds: From Transmedia Storyworlds to Transmedia Universes*. He considers storyworlds to be intersubjective normative constructs, which are "normative abstractions about ideal mental representations based on actual medial representations" (ibid.). To overcome the problem of contradictory content in one single world, he argues that we should make a systematic distinction between the local medium-specific storyworlds of one narrative work, the glocal but non-contradictory transmedial storyworlds, and the global (and often contradictory) transmedial storyworlds, which he calls by lack of a better term, transmedial universes (ibid.). In other words, a transmedial universe, as a compound, consists of multiple narrative worlds that can contrast each other.

Thon provides us with an approach on how to tackle the issue of the unbalanced contribution of media platforms to create a transmedial world by proposing the transmedial universe as a concept that allows for multiple contradictory worlds. However, the issue at hand is that while Thon seems to acknowledge medium-specificity, his standpoint is similar to Ryan where both consider different types of media in terms of their storytelling capabilities. If we were to apply his notion to *Overwatch*, we would soon come to the conclusion that the game differs from the comics and short films because it tells a different story. That would mean however a lack of critical engagement with the question whether the *Overwatch* game as a team-based multiplayer first-person shooter actually tells a story.

A game could be a story-device, but we should be critical which games are and which are not. Certain games might be more adapt at becoming story-devices than others. For example, digital role-playing games or visual novels are game genres that have much more potential than shooters or sandbox games in terms of story-telling. Seeing how established *Overwatch* is in the circle of e-sports⁷, the game has more affinity with sport games in general, such as soccer or basketball.

The game possesses multiple play modes such as Quick Play, Competitive Play⁸, Play vs. Ai, and Arcade. Mainly, we can make a distinction between matches that revolve around escort, assault, or control. In each match (that takes about ten minutes), players are randomly assigned an offense team or a defense team consisting of themselves and other players. In the escort mode, the offense team's objective is to move a cargo from one spot to the other, while the defending team's goal is to stop that from happening. In the assault mode, both the offense team and the defense team's goal is to obtain capture points on the map. The defense team has to defend

those areas, while the offense team has to attempt to confiscate them. In the control mode, there is no clear distinction between offense and defense teams. In a three-player-format (diverging from the other modes where teams consist of six players), teams must capture the objectives on the map and defend it thereafter.

There does not seem to be a connected sequence of events between the different matches that happen simultaneously within the game. The ludic space (see Aarseth 2012) in *Overwatch* is defined by very specific cut-out arenas, and with each match, players are placed inside a new arena. Even if one arena represents the same arena as the one players were in before, nothing besides the representational layer depicts it as the same arena. In fact, players can hardly influence the ludic space at all aside from affecting the other players within it. As an online multiplayer game, many players play at the same time and each arena can only accommodate up to 12 players, which means that multiple versions of the same arena simultaneously exist. When a match is over nothing that occurred in the arena has lasting effects on the arena or the heroes, except for players obtaining experience points to level up. Yet, while players obtain rewards in the form of loot boxes, the goods itself only exist on a representational level; it does not affect the affordances of the heroes players can opt to play with. The level itself only represents how much players have played. Aside from the player maybe getting better by each match, each arena is an isolated entity with no connection to the other arenas.

Even if we were to dismiss the absence of sequences between events in the complete game, within a single match ontological differences would already show the conflict between the media formats. For example, in the comics and the short films, only one version of each character can exist whereas in the game, each arena can contain two of the same character with one in the offense team and one in the defense team. On a representational level, the heroes in the game and in the comics and films refer to each other aesthetically, and they refer to the comics and films through an occasional interaction with each other before they enter the ludic space. Yet, on an ontological layer the game's heroes are avatars embodying players inside the game's arena, whereas the heroes of the films and comics are not. For instance, two Mercy heroes that simultaneously appear in an arena do not ontologically and representationally differ from each other, besides being on different teams and manipulated by two different players, but they do differ from the Mercy in the comics and films, because according to the story told in those, there exists only one individual called Mercy.

According to the stories of the comics and films, some characters are enemies, while others are partners. In the game, players can choose any hero that they want to be on a team, despite the team consisting of heroes that are enemies in the stories. This game design choice prioritizes gameplay over story coherence, because in the game the characters are more like a set of affordances that allow players to play in a specific way rather than characters about whom the game tells a story. Even within a single match, players can don another character-as-avatar in order to have a different set of affordances, showing that we deal with a connection between the comics/films, and game only on a representational level.

A SHARED UNIVERSE

We should not argue that there exists no relation at all between the game, comics and films, since that would mean that we ignore the representational layer that is important to meaning-making in games and other media. Players, who have watched the animated short '*Dragons*', for example, would know the background story between the characters Genji and Hanzo, and have therefore the possibility of interpreting the references made to that story. It gives meaning to the brothers being

in the same or opposite team in a match, even if the heroes in the game seem nothing more than a set of affordances to play a match.

That does not mean however that we should consider the *Overwatch* franchise a transmedial universe. Transmediality is a problematic notion in this case, as it comes with the complications of storytelling; it implies a connection between storyworlds that equally contributes to the universe regardless of the media capacities. What I propose we need is a concept of a universe that does account for various types of worlds, a universe that can accept games as ergodic (Aarseth 1997) that do not have to tell a story because other types of media within the same universe do. Previous work about transmedial phenomena that addresses different types of worlds has for example been done by Lori Landay (2015), who focuses on transmedial worlds as a process comprised of individual but connected media experiences via Lego's so-called 'System of Play'. The children's Lego constructs are shaped by media representations (e.g., television series and films), but they play with a creation of their own, that is, their own world they built that exists independently from the rest of the franchise. Landay's work on Lego is however about a phenomenon in which players build the world themselves unlike the *Overwatch* game where the world is specifically designed for them. We therefore need an approach that takes this into consideration.

Based on Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities, I propose that we consider the *Overwatch* universe a *shared* universe. In his book *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983), Anderson traces the origin of the concept of nations, defining the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Ibid.). That is, a nation is a construct imagined as limited with definite boundaries, as sovereign because the concept was born after the Enlightenment and the Revolution, and as a community, because it is conceived as a comradeship (1983, 7).

What I would like to point out is that Anderson considers the nation to be an imagined construct that consists of members who cannot know every member of the same nation, yet there seems to be some prevalent connection between each member anyhow. Relevant to this is his idea that the novel and the newspaper provide the technical means to imagine a certain kind of community. To him, the novel is a device that presents simultaneity, "homogenous, empty time" that enables readers to read about events that happened at the same time without being present there themselves (ibid.). This ability transforms the novel into an analogue of the nation:

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one times. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity (1983, 26).

Anderson describes the newspaper as a similar but extremer version of the novel, because it is sold on a massive scale on a daily basis with an immense popularity (1983, 34). It is a distinct self-contained entity, identified as a single entity because it contains a specific emblem and date (ibid, 35). As a mass-produced entity, it demonstrates a homogenous, empty time by containing events and actors that act simultaneously. The consumption of the newspaper, as an allegory to the imagination, happens in private, yet every consumer is aware that other readers consume a replica of that newspaper without knowing who the other readers are, and this action repeats

fervently. The replicas that readers see give them a constant confirmation that the imagined world is rooted in everyday life (ibid.).

The readers of the novel and the newspaper are the core of Anderson's notion about the conception of the imagined community with the medium as the means to conceptualize and re-affirm that community. We can apply this perspective to the *Overwatch* franchise as well. Like the novel and the newspaper, both the *Overwatch* game, comics and films are accompanied by the same emblem and name of both the product and developer, Blizzard Entertainment. Although we can consider them 'classical' paratexts from a Genettian (1987) perspective, instead of saying that these paratexts converge the game, comics, and films as if they belong to a single coherent world, they rather support the representational layer embedded in the consumers' minds to affirm the existence of multiple *Overwatch* worlds within a single universe. As interpreters, players are able to connect events that happen inside the game with the events that happen in the comics and films on a representational level, even if those events might be contradictory. This means that the connection between the different worlds inside the *Overwatch* worlds are imagined, as consumers have to rely on their imagination to connect the game to the comics and short films. Yet, the imagination is not only supported by the Genettian paratexts, but also by the representational level of the different platforms that we can see for example in the game's arenas that represent the places where the stories take place or in-game special events like *Uprising* (2017)⁹ that have a story-telling counterpart in a comic.

The point that Anderson made is that the ability of the novel and the newspaper might allow for an imagined sense of homogeneous empty time, but the readers are aware of each other in their simultaneous, repeated actions of consumption. It creates an imagined community, yet it is a *shared* one. We should consider the same for *Overwatch*. Even though the *Overwatch* universe spreads over multiple media platforms, it overlaps with Anderson's concept of the novel and the newspaper to the extent that it relies on the consumers' imagination that they all share between each other, upheld with the support of modern technology of the internet. We can consider players as interpreters who transform the *Overwatch* universe in a *shared* universe, because not only do the players share the imagined connection between the media platforms, but this connection is also continuously re-affirmed.

As a large connected network, the internet provides Blizzard Entertainment the opportunity to expand both the *Overwatch* game, and comics and/or short films as a single shared universe. For example, the release of Blizzard Entertainment's *Overwatch* hero Moira, introduced in November 2017, was accompanied with two film clips, '*Introducing Moira*' that showed Moira's abilities as the players' avatar, and '*Origin Story: Moira*' that showed Moira's background story as a character within the world of the comics and short films. Moira is also not the only hero whom Blizzard Entertainment has introduced this way, as heroes such as Doomfist, Orisa, Sombra, and Anna were introduced in the same style. That is, with an introduction as a game avatar that we can consider a paratext, and with an introduction to their background story as a character that places them in the world of the comics and short films. The fact that Blizzard Entertainment deems it necessary to introduce their heroes in two specific ways shows that they acknowledge that the game and the comics/short films do not share the same manifestations of heroes, nor same type of world. However, Blizzard Entertainment does try to keep up the spirit of unifying their product as one shared universe that everyone can access, provided that their consumers have an internet connection. Internet users are aware that they share the World Wide Web with others as a community. Since we can assume that those who have access to the *Overwatch* comics and/or films also have access to the *Overwatch*

game, and vice versa, the idea that the comics, short films, and game belong to the same universe shared by a community is not far off.

Within the game, players are also constantly made aware of their connection to other players. As an online multi-player game, *Overwatch* is intended to be played by many players at the same time. In order to play a single match players will have to engage with least five to eleven other players, but if players decide to play more than one match (which they often do), players will notice a constant flow of different players entering and leaving matches. In fact, players are dependent on each other to play the game at all. Although they have the option to play with and against AI heroes, the game makes it specifically clear that a match against AI is to practice before playing with other players, or that it is only one single play mode within an abundance of multiplayer modes. Since the focus is on the multiplayer modes, players are bound to notice that at the same time as they are playing, other matches occur, and therefore other players exist as well. The game is able to represent what Anderson called 'a homogeneous, empty time'. It enables players to notice events that happen at the same time, without being there themselves.

While *Overwatch* might seem to be a transmedial universe at first sight, the constant re-affirmation of the connection between not only the products, but also the consumers transform the universe is a shared rather than an imagined one. The connection between the *Overwatch's* story world and virtual world inside the universe is imagined on a representational level, since it relies for its existence on the interpreters, which are the players and the readers of these media. Yet, as a large connected network, the internet is vital to our understanding of *Overwatch* as a shared universe, because all the different media depend on it in order to be accessed by the consumers. Both Blizzard Entertainment, and the consumers of their products rely on the internet for engagement with the *Overwatch* universe. Like Anderson's notion of the novel and the newspaper, consumers play the game and read the comics and short films most likely in private, but due to the internet connection, they are conscious that probably a thousand persons read and play *Overwatch* too, especially when the game continues to affirm a sense of 'homogeneous empty time'.

In short, the relation between the separate worlds is imagined, but the connection between players as a community is not. Although the virtual world of the game and the storyworld of the comics and films are two separate entities, they are connected on a presentational level, supported by the same emblem, released by the same game development company, and they all require internet connection. This demonstrates that those who play the game and notice each other can assume that they do not only share the world of the game with each other, but the storyworld of the comics and films as well. Thus, we should consider the *Overwatch* universe not an imagined nor a transmedial universe, but a shared universe that makes use of various media that relies for its existence as a coherent universe on its consumers.

CONCLUSION

This paper challenged the concept of transmedial worlds and universes expanding via different media that equally contribute to worlds and/or universes with stories. As a virtual world, the *Overwatch* game diverges from the world of the stories told in the comics and films. It should therefore be seen as an individual world placed in a universe shared with the storyworld of the comics and films of the same franchise. Considering the *Overwatch* franchise a transmedial universe would not acknowledge the different types of worlds existing inside this universe, since storytelling lies at the base of the notion of transmedial worlds and universes. Therefore, I proposed to recognize the universe as a shared universe, based on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities. The awareness of the consumers of the franchise as a

community supported by the internet as a large connected network plays a crucial role in this universe. Although they connect the game world and storyworld on a representational level, this is an imagined connection. Within the game itself, players continuously receive affirmation in the game that they share the universe with others, which creates awareness of each other, even if they are unacquainted outside the game. As a large connected network, consumers of the game have access to the comics and films as well which means that the awareness of the connection between players extends to an awareness of players as consumers of *Overwatch* as a universe. From this perspective, the *Overwatch* franchise does not depict a transmedial world dependent on stories for its existence, but it gives us a shared universe connected through players and readers engaging with their products.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See <https://playOverwatch.com/en-us/>

² At the start of the game of the Playstation 4 platform, players are shown the cinematic teaser "Are you with us", which is absent in the PC's version. Instead, PC players have to go to Blizzard Entertainment's website in order to see the short film.

³ Within a single match, two heroes can exist simultaneously, albeit only one in each team.

⁴ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=8&v=oJ09xdxzIJQ

⁵ The short films that this paper refers to are (in order as they appear on Blizzard's website):

- Cinematic Trailer. Released November 2014.
- Animated Shorts: "Honor and Glory", "Rise and Shine", "Infiltration", "The Last Bastion", "Hero", "Dragons", "Alive", and "Recall". Released between April 2016 and April 2018.
- Origin Stories: "Brigitte", "Moira", "Doomfist", "Orisa", "Sombra", and "Ana". Released between June 2016 and March 2018.

⁶ Blizzard Entertainment even released an *Overwatch* comic book called '*Overwatch: Anthology Volume 1*' in October 2017 that consist of the comics available at that time on their website.

⁷ See <https://playOverwatch.com/en-us/esports/>

⁸ Only for players of level 25 and higher.

⁹ See <https://playoverwatch.com/en-us/events/uprising/>