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**The Imagined Communities of Overwatch: Democratization of
US/Russian Cross-Cultural Communication**

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US/Russian Cross-Cultural Communication**

by

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Dedication

This work, such as it is, is dedicated to my imagined community. I spent a lot of time thinking this research wasn't possible – it was only through my interactions with them that I got the courage to bring this idea up at all.

Abstract

The Imagined Communities of Overwatch: Democratization of US/Russian Cross-Cultural Communication

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Begun in 2016, the Overwatch World Cup brings together the best players from across the globe to fight for national pride and the glory of the game. Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) create a new type of space for communities to develop. However, the two communities formed have differing levels of national identity ‘activation.’ With the worsening relationship between Russia and the United States, these spaces could prove to be a new method of cross-cultural communication that could allow Russians and Americans to interact in an unprecedented way.

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

People are perhaps the most sociable of all creatures: delighting in and thriving upon the company of others... They are socially constructed. Their views, opinions, values, activities, and means of communication are learnt or acquired from others. Their behavior is largely governed by norms, or agreements between people... Without such agreement, communication, which lies at the core of human existence would be impossible – it depends upon the existence of an agreed-upon set of rules, or a grammar.¹

While serving as a Fulbright English Teaching Fellow in Kolomna, Russia during the 2015-2016 academic year, I discovered that many of my students had experienced American culture in a novel way. Many had informal cross-cultural contact with Americans through social media. They were able to interface, not only with American culture through movies, art and digital content, but also directly with other Americans who were also engaging in that same content. Despite a lack of access to American culture and politics through formal means, they were able to explore another culture through social media. They were able to interface with complete strangers in a previously impossible informal exchange. Many were engaging in informal language exchange programs, through programs designed to simulate pen-pals or chatrooms. Through this they had a greater accessibility to language and culture than through a traditional textbook. The advent of social media allowed my students to interact with American language and culture

¹ Hogg, Michael A., and Dominic Abrams. 1998. *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*. New York: Routledge. 1.

untethered from their syllabus or limitations of the school's rules on what should be taught when.

This is not an isolated phenomenon. In today's era of instant connectivity there are more and more opportunities to interact and communicate with members of differing backgrounds. If a person has greater experience interacting with members of other cultures, they are more likely to have an experiential basis for greater understanding of that culture as a whole.

Prior to my first study abroad trip, I visited my cousins in California. They were both avid gamers and were very interested in an e-sports tournament taking place over the summer. I was surprised to learn that it was an international tournament, with teams from around the globe and that the prize for winning was close to a million dollars. We watched the games through a live stream, and because I was traveling to Russia, we watched the Russian channel in order to let me practice my language skills. As we were watching, the entire group of spectators in the arena started chanting 'Medved, Medved' – a player on the Russian team's chosen avatar for the game was a bear and 'medved' means bear in Russian. Despite not knowing the language, the spectators had picked up on what the Russian audience was calling their player and joined in to support them. Americans in the audience were joining in to support a player whose nationality did not match their own. This was my first experience with video games as a medium for cross-cultural exchange. What made this so unique is that these exchanges occurred in a completely unmoderated context. When I discussed the event with my cousins, neither had any idea of how they

learned the word 'medved' – but both knew the word meant bear. They wanted to root for the Russian player.

Chapter 1: Overview

The purpose of this thesis is to scrape the surface of a new phenomenon: video games as a method of cultural exchange. In order to discuss the impacts of the possible cross-cultural exchange in video games, I first must set up a framework. However, there is limited, if any, scholarship on this topic. This research builds on the idea of community and identity – using Benedict Anderson’s scholarship on nationalism and imagined communities as a theoretical lens to examine community in video games and sports. So, this thesis is broken into two distinct parts - a historical and theoretical discussion, which uses scholarship from the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and international relations, and an empirical study investigating how a video game, Overwatch, is changing the nature of cross-cultural exchange.

The first section examines the history of cultural exchange and how sports are used as a medium of this exchange. The thesis then explains how video games and e-sports differ from traditional sporting competitions, and how this may affect their role in cross-cultural communication. The following section lays out the concept of imagined communities by Benedict Anderson, which informs the subsequent study of the various communities of Overwatch players. The second half of this thesis focuses on the game of Overwatch and how this game serves as a medium for cross-cultural exchange.

Due to the scope of this research project and the lack of scholarship to build off of, there are limits to what can and cannot be proven. But my findings show that there are two ‘levels’ of exchange in games such as Overwatch. The first occurs at the professionalized level – the level of international sporting competition. Fascinatingly, despite the different rule structure and medium used for engagement, the Overwatch tournaments mirror traditional international sporting events. They fail to ‘surpass’ national identities. This,

however, is not true at the amateur level. While players do not seem to overcome their national identities, they seem to ignore them entirely. What my research suggests is that there is a new identity being formed in these video games. Technically, this is not an exchange of culture, but, perhaps, the creation of new shared identity between people only connected through a video game as medium of exchange. The impacts of this identity are not yet known, but with over a million of players for just one of these video games, these connections are happening at an unprecedented rate.

The amateur community for Overwatch is creating an a-national space for dialogue between people from across the globe - whether discussing Overwatch or pop-culture, these people are creating connections with complete strangers. It is not just while they are in the game, these players build relationships with players they enjoy, they chat outside of the game or even meet. In a post on the blizzard forum for Overwatch, one player stated, “from the game itself, I had made 3 notable friends, all ladies from Hong Kong, Russia and Malaysia. Women, in game, are really the nicest people around, for sure.”² The poster, Silenthill, goes on to say that while they have not met their friends in person, they still meet virtually.

These connections revolutionize how cross-cultural communication happens because, instead of an intentional exchange, these occur in an a-national space. It questions if these interactions are cross-cultural or are they an intra-cultural exchange happening by members of the same community?

² Silenthill. 2019. "Do You Make Friends From Overwatch." Blizzard Forum. January 1. Accessed March 4, 2019. <https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/overwatch/t/did-you-make-friends-from-ow/289760>.

SECTION 2: EMERGENCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Chapter 2: A Tale of Two Countries – Russia and the United States

There is a long and significant history of cultural exchange between the United States and Russia. Prior to the fall of the Soviet Union (USSR), much of the historic cultural exchange between Russia and the West was through cultural and educational media. During the Soviet Period, it was not until the U.S.-Soviet cultural agreement in 1958 that people were able to really travel between the two countries. Most of these people were coming in order to deliberately exchange culture or academic knowledge.³ The most prominent of these exchanges were in the arts: Russian ballet companies toured the United States and American symphonies and jazz bands toured parts of the Soviet Union.

After the fall of the USSR, new modes of formal exchange flourished. The two modes of exchange fell under active exchanges and passive exchanges. One example of active exchange was educational exchange. This formalized process allowed for a student from either country to trade places with a student from another. Many international educators stress the importance of such cultural exchange programs to promote greater cross-cultural competency and understanding. “You have young Americans who are going to Russia, who are meeting Russians personally, who are being exposed on an academic basis to Russian culture, Russian history. [...] And culture plays a big role in this society,

³ Yale, Richmond. 2005. "Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: How the Arts Influenced Policy." *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 35 (3): 239-245.

language, culture and history.”⁴ One of the key drivers of study abroad programs is the opportunity to get out of their cultural comfort-zone and “to recognize — and then dismiss — stereotypes they may have held about people they had never met.”⁵

According to one Russian student, these exchanges allowed for unique insight into the propaganda fed them by the state-controlled media. “How could the decadent West produce such great orchestras, we asked ourselves. Cultural exchanges were another opening to the West, and more proof that our media were not telling us the truth.”⁶

The second type of exchange relied on the dissemination of culture through arts and media. This mode of exchange was more passive, but still just as potent, using cultural exchange through media - such as movies, art, or music. America has a long history of using cultural exchange tools to convey messages about its culture and political climate. But both active and passive cultural exchanges began to decline as the political relationship between the US and Russia began to sour.

RELATIONSHIP IN DECLINE

Despite the increase of exchange after the fall of the USSR, the relationship between Russia and the United States has deteriorated significantly in the past five years.

⁴ Sherwin, Emily. 2017. "US-Russian Exchange Provides Optimism in 'Cold War' Freeze." *DW*. January 10. Accessed January 10, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/us-russian-exchange-provides-optimism-in-cold-war-freeze/a-40727933>.

⁵ Berdan, Allan Goodman and Stacie Nevadomski. 2014. "Every Student Should Study Abroad." *The New York Times*. May 12. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/10/17/should-more-americans-study-abroad/every-student-should-study-abroad>.

⁶ Yampolsky, Miron, interview by Richmond Yale. 1999. *Personal Interview* (August 4).

During the Cold War “relations between the US and the Soviet Union were more clear-cut. Now, falling back on the ‘understandable black and white’ paradigms of the Cold War is simply easier for many Americans, including US politicians.”⁷ This worsening relationship has directly impacted exchange programs which are critical for cross-cultural understanding.

As the high-level relationship between the United States and Russian Government declined, so did the relationship between lower levels of society. This was a glaring reversal of the previous trend. As global connectivity increased after the dissolution of the USSR, so did indicators of good will, such as tourism. As the political barriers between Eastern Europe and the West became less potent, so did the barriers in the outbound tourist market in Russia, largely due to income growth and softening of travel restrictions. There were still some bureaucratic challenges such as getting visas and formal paperwork to travel out of the country, but there was an “annual growth of 7.5%” in Russian tourist market.⁸ This showed a greater ability to travel and to explore other cultures. However, the growth of tourism to and from Russia faced a sharp decline shortly after the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and subsequent Ukrainian invasion. “Since 2014, Russian tourism has entered a crisis state. This is due to political problems, negative changes in the economy and social sphere.”⁹ The loss of tourism hit Russia the hardest financially. “America does not lose relatively much money by restricting trade with Russia. Europe is losing more than

⁷ Sherwin, Emily. 2017. "US-Russian Exchange Provides Optimism in 'Cold War' Freeze."

⁸ Kozlov, D.A. (Козлов Д.А.). 2016. «Forecasting of Russian Outbound Tourism (Прогнозирование Выездного Туризма Российской Федерации).» International Journal of Applied and Fundamental Research.

⁹ Kozlov, D.A. (Козлов Д.А.). 2016. «Forecasting of Russian Outbound Tourism (Прогнозирование Выездного Туризма Российской Федерации).»

America and of course, Russia is losing more than anything because of the current situation.”¹⁰ Tourism is seen as important from an economic perspective because it brings new industry and outside currency into a country.

Economic boons are not the only benefit to tourism. It is also an important factor in socio-cultural development. It is not just part of the social sector, but also creates a new “type of social reality.”¹¹ Tourism used to be limited to social elites, but as travel became more accessible, so did foreign countries. “Tourism allows people to find sustainable forms of communication, to create grounds for increasing interpersonal trust.”¹² Tourism is just one indicator of society-to-society contacts between Russians and Americans. Other opportunities are declining, such as the closing of cultural centers abroad.¹³ In an attempt to counter this decline, Russia has lowered the cost of procuring a Russian visa in an effort to entice more travelers from the US.¹⁴ Russians looking to travel to the United States will have to wait for almost eight months to procure a travel visa to the United States due to the closure of the US consulate in Saint Petersburg.¹⁵ Due to recent travel warnings by the US State Department, many study abroad scholarships are no longer supporting Russian

¹⁰ Astvatsaturov, Aram (Арам Аствацатуров). 2019. *U.S and Russian: What is the Difference Between the Two Powers (США и Россия: В чем отличия между двумя державами? Что общее и где расходятся интересы?)*. February 23. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://7x7-journal.ru/post/118858>

¹¹ Dusenko, Svetlana (В.Дусенко, Светлана Викторовна). 2014. *The Structure and Function of Social Space Tourism (Структура И Функция Социального Пространства Туризма (Социологический Анализ)*. Dissertation, Moscow: Russian State University of Tourism and Service.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Dolgov, Anna. 2015. "Russian Authorities Close Down American Center In Moscow." *The Moscow Times*. September 17. Accessed February 13, 2019. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/09/17/russian-authorities-close-down-american-center-in-moscow-a49623>.

¹⁴ Allen, Jordan. 2019. Why Did Russia Just Lower Its Visa Fee for US Tourists. February 5. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://thepointsguy.com/news/why-did-russia-just-lower-its-visa-fee-for-us-tourists/>.

¹⁵ *Moscow Times*. 2018. Fewer Russian Tourists Traveling to U.K, U.S., Tour Operators Say. April 23. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/tourism-61244>.

programs or require additional waivers for study.¹⁶ Several programs are suggesting that students enroll in immersion courses outside of Russia, but in the vicinity, such as countries like Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine.

Many international educators stress the importance of cultural exchange programs in order to promote greater cross-cultural competency and understanding. "You have young Americans who are going to Russia, who are meeting Russians personally, who are being exposed on an academic basis to Russian culture, Russian history. [...] And culture plays a big role in this society, language, culture and history."¹⁷ One of the key drivers of study abroad programs is the opportunity to get out of their cultural comfort-zone and "to recognize — and then dismiss — stereotypes they may have held about people they had never met."¹⁸ Studies have found that even short-term exchange programs can positively impact cross-cultural understanding for students.¹⁹ Many highlight the personal benefits for study abroad. In a study by the Institute of International Education, they found that out of 3,400 respondents found that "when asked about personal growth, 97 percent said studying abroad served as a catalyst for increased maturity, 96 percent reported increased self-confidence, 89 percent said that it enabled them to tolerate ambiguity, and 95 percent stated that it has had a lasting impact on their world view."²⁰ However, while study abroad

¹⁶ SRAS. 2018. "The State of Study Abroad in Russia - 2018." SRAS. August 19. Accessed February 23, 2019. https://sras.org/state_of_study_abroad_russia_2018/.

¹⁷ Sherwin, Emily. 2017. "US-Russian Exchange Provides Optimism in 'Cold War' Freeze."

¹⁸ Berdan, Allan Goodman and Stacie Nevadomski. 2014. "Every Student Should Study Abroad."

¹⁹ Anderson, Philip H., Leigh Lawton, Richard J Rexeisen, and Ann C Hubbard. 2006. "Short-Term Study Abroad and Intercultural Sensitivity: A Pilot Study." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 457-469

²⁰ Dwyer, Mary M, and Courtney K Peters. 2004. "The Benefits of Study Abroad." *Transitions Abroad*. Accessed March 15, 2019.

https://www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/magazine/0403/benefits_study_abroad.shtml.

is seen to be greatly beneficial it also has high barriers to access. There are three general barriers to study abroad - cost, curriculum and culture.

Most students have the opportunity to study abroad in college – however over half of Americans do not attend university. Study abroad requires funding that can be prohibitive to students where funding is limited. It also has costs associated with procuring flights, visas, and foreign lodging. For curriculum, some students find it difficult to find the time to fit living abroad within their planned program of work. Finally, the cultural component can be daunting for many students. “In 2009, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development placed the U.S. in 15th place based on the number of students studying abroad. When compared to other countries less than 4% of U.S. college students study abroad”²¹ Despite increases in the amount of US students studying abroad, there are large differences in the amount of women who study abroad (65.1%) to that of men (34.9%).²²

Cultural exchange can also happen through traditionally one-way channels such as popular or mass media. This was seen since the advent of print technologies. Many people’s first interaction with a foreign cultural is through books or film. However, there are issues with one culture dominating the media space. Herb Schiller identified the theory of cultural imperialism “where culture is transmitted and promoted in a one-way top down system of transmission by dominant countries and in extension their cultures. This process.... resulted into audiences that became passive and a media that became all

²¹ OECD. 2009. "Education at a Glance." OECD. Accessed February 10, 2019. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/41/25/43636332.pdf>.

²² Open Doors. 2008. Information and Data Tables. Accessed February 10, 2009. <http://www.opendoors.iienetword.org/>.

powerful” However, through the advent of social medias, the exchanges are less one-sided and western focused. “A recent survey of the social media gives credence to the new media as an agglomeration of acculturation of philosophies and values. The famous Arab spring... and even the occupy Nigeria protest of 2012 shows how the new media has mushroomed into a global cultural player through its ability to mobilize, influence and monitor cultural inclinations and societal activism often shrouded in the imperialism of philosophy”²³ However, many of these social media technologies are still rooted in American or western cultural ideas and languages.

The increasingly confrontational nature of the US and Russian relationship is further exaggerated by media. Inherent biases impact how world events are talked about for both countries. American journalist, Michael Vastura stated in an interview that, “if you turn on a Russian talk show, you regularly hear accusations that if something happens in the world, it could only be because it was organized by the US.”²⁴ This is not necessarily new sentiment, according to an article written in Foreign Affairs in 1946, Russian media attempted to “to deflate the prestige of western culture and civilization” and that this “has been accompanied by a more somber propaganda line in which "American imperialism" has been substituted for German Fascism as the chief symbol of evil and danger.”²⁵

Despite the period of peace, Russia is still the token bad guy for American culture in the 21st century. This can be seen most vividly in Hollywood film. In action blockbusters,

²³ Muhammad, Abubakar. 2016. From Traditional to New Media: A Paradigm of Cultural Imperialism. Paper, Pan-Atlantic University Lagos: School of Media and Communication.

²⁴ Astvatsaturov, Aram (Арам Аствацатуров). 2019. U.S and Russian: What is the Difference Between the Two Powers (США и Россия: В чем отличия между двумя державами? Что общее и где расходятся интересы?).

²⁵ Barghoorn, Fredrick C. 1948. "What Russians Think of Americans." Foreign Affairs.

such as Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit, the Avengers, Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, etc., the idea of the Russian boogeyman is still an evocative villain.²⁶ While some of these are historical tales, the accessibility of the Russian villain is an ongoing trend. This can also be seen in television, with popular shows such as “Killing Eve” or “the Americans.” The United States is not the only country to fall back on old stereotypes in new media, in movies such as Brother 2, Americans are portrayed as stupid and villainous.

For all these reasons, it is very possible that in the next decade, less formal modes of cross-cultural communication will serve as many Americans’ first introduction to Russian culture (and many Russians’ introduction to American culture). When formal cross-cultural programs are drying up, media portrayals revert to caricature, and bilateral travel is in decline, other means of interaction become more important. New technologies are of great significance here. The internet creates a unique opportunity for people to reach out beyond their immediate physical community and to learn about other countries and cultures. In some cases, the freedom of the internet can promote disinformation or distrust, while in others it can be a tool for great understanding of others at the person-to-person level. Nowhere is this truer than in the world of e-sports and video games. This is a phenomenon that did not exist even a few decades ago and deserves particular attention.

²⁶ Kurutz, Steven. 2014. "Russians: Still the Go-To Bad Guys." New York Times. January 17. Accessed March 1, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/opinion/sunday/why-are-russians-still-the-go-to-bad-guys.html?hp&rref=opinion&_r=0.

Chapter 3: Sport as Cultural Exchange

One type of cross-cultural exchange that has not suffered, despite the ups and downs in the US-Russia relationship, was exchange through professional sport. While athletes would interact on and off the playing field, spectators would see other countries and cultures through the lens of competitors.

The Soviet Union and the Russian Federation have a long record using sport as a way to legitimize nationalist programs during and after the Cold War. The reason for this use of sport was the October revolution, building on the ideas of the next level of human evolution.²⁷ The idea was that through the soviet system a new kind of soviet person would emerge.²⁸ They believed that if the spectators saw the success of their athletes, it reflected that their culture and ideology was superior. In the USSR, each person was valued for his or her contribution to society and sportsmen embodied the ideals of fitness and health. Also, competition through sport could be propagandized to galvanize the new nationalism sought by the Communist leadership. The “soft power of culture” turned into the new weapon of the Cold War. For the Soviets, ideological supremacy had to be proven by a society’s cultural wealth, and, on occasion, the ability of one’s athletes.²⁹ Even now, sportsmen are seen as “real treasure(s) of the nation.”³⁰

A more benign role of sport has been to promote cross-cultural understanding. “Sport is probably the most universal aspect of popular culture. It crosses languages and countries to captivate spectators and participants”³¹ The optimistic hope was that “sport

²⁷ Polivoi, Boris Nikolievich (Полевой Борис Николаевич). 1974. *We - Soviet People (Мы - советские люди)*. Moscow.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Wagg, S., and D.L. Andrews. 2017. "Introduction: War minus the Shooting." In *East Plays West: Sports and the Cold War*, by D. L. Wagg, 1-10. New York: Routledge.

³⁰ RIA Sport. 2015. "Pride of Our Nation: the Most Titled Olympic Champions of the USSR and Russia (Гордость нашей нации: самые титулованные олимпийские чемпионы СССР и России)." RIA Sport. June 23. Accessed April 1, 2019. <https://rsport.ria.ru/20150623/837153415.html>.

³¹ Miller, Toby, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay, and David Rowe. 2001. *Globalization and Sport: Playing*

exchanges between the United States... (And Russia) would break down stereotypes, increase understanding and confine battles to the playing field rather than the battlefield.”³² While seen as a tool for states, these exchanges impacted how people interacted with and understood other cultures. However, international sporting events fell short of the ideals for exchange and mutual understanding. These games became a way to prove dominance, even though the outside of the competition the sportsmen had little relevance to how cultures interacted.³³ To many of the spectators it rarely mattered who scored the final goal, but which country the athlete represented during the competition. “It is easier than ever before for sports fans to watch, to support and to wear the colors of nations other than their own. Yet most choose not to do so.”³⁴ In essence, sports can amplify identity instead of breaking down barriers.³⁵ The sportsman and international competition became a token for the strength and superiority of one’s identity.³⁶

While social media has allowed for greater conversation and interactions between cultures, it has also broadcasted the negative side of exchange. Sometimes exchanges through sport or popular media can enhance stereotypes and biases instead of breaking them down. This was evidenced during the 2014 Sochi Olympics, where the presence of social media led to a mass-influx of posts critical of Russia on media such as twitter or Facebook, heightening negative emotions. The strong connection to sport still intrinsic to Russian identity made many Russians have a positive view of the events, whereas the

the World. London: SAGE Publications

³² Rubin, M. 2014. "Rings of Fire: Why the Olympics Actually Don't Bring the World Together." Foreign Policy. February 6. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/06/rings-of-fire/>.

³³ Bairner, Alan. 2008. "Sport, Nationalism and Globalization: Relevance, Impact, Consequences." Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts and Sciences 43-53.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Boyle, Raymond. 2009. *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 7

³⁶ Grix, Jonathan. 2014. *Leveraging Legacies from Sports Mega-Events: Concepts and Cases*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham

international spectators were largely critical of how the games were hosted at every level, from the location to the food to the local politics. The trending hashtag, #sochiproblems, has baffled and upset Russians.³⁷ The Russians called this trend “zloradstvo,” or “malicious glee.”³⁸

SPORT AND E-SPORT

The traditional “definition of modern sport involve that it is a physical, competitive and institutionalized activity.”³⁹ However with the advent of greater technological innovation, there has been a lessening of link between physical identity and sport. Sport was seen as a “attached to the physical domain.”⁴⁰ Instead, it has to be expected that the values we accept as sport disciplines will change as our value systems change, for example due to technological progress.”⁴¹ With greater globalization, the imagined barriers around sport have only been amplified. “Media, television and the press in particular are playing a central role in producing, reproducing and amplifying many of the discourses associated with sport in modern world.”⁴² The amplification can be seen in the popularity of the

³⁷ Kaufman, S. 2014. "#SochiProblems is More of an Embarrassment for American Than it is For Russia." Word.Mic. Febraury 9. Accessed April 29, 2015. <http://mic.com/articles/81663/sochiproblems-is-more-of-an-embarrassment-for-american-than-it-is-for-russia>.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Thiborg, Jesper. 2009. "eSport and Governing Bodies - An Outline for a Research Project and Preliminary Results." Conference Paper. Retrieved from <https://muep.mau.se/bitstream/handle/2043/10746/esport.pdf>

⁴⁰ Carter, Marcus, and Martin Gibbs. 2013. eSports in EVE Online: Skulduggery, Fair Play and Acceptability in an Unbounded Competition. Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games, Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games.

⁴¹ Wagner, M. 2006. "On the Scientific Relevance of eSport." 2006 International Conference on Internet Computing and Conference on Computer Game Development. Las Vegas: CRSEA Press. 437-440.

⁴² Boyle, Raymond. 2009. Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture. 7

Olympic games, such as the US defeat of the USSR hockey team in 1980.

Social media was not the only technological development that changed the nature of sport competition. New modes of competition, through the sportification of video games, created e-sports. Similar to traditional sporting competitions, e-sports are video games played competitively through a tournament structure. There are national and international e-sports leagues, as well as collegiate teams. The main difference between sport and e-sport is that one is played online, and the other is tied to physical spaces. Due to its reliance on physical realities, sport is often seen as “a vehicle for the expression of nationalist sentiment.”⁴³ Whereas, e-sports are inherently tied to globalization through economic means as opposed to nation states and international competition.

The medium of e-sports impacts how people interact with it and how. The origin of sport was war-like competition. While e-sports are largely based in the same origin of competition, they have an underlying requirement of community engagement joined by capitalism. It is impossible to actively engage with an e-sport without first purchasing a platform and the games themselves. Whereas a fan of soccer could easily play the game without purchasing official gear through FIFA, fans of games such as Overwatch must purchase the game in order to play.

As e-sports rise in popularity, there has significant debate around whether or not video games, even played competitively, can count as a type of sport and their players a type of athlete. While not a ‘physical’ sport, they do require intense training and skill in

⁴³ Bairner, Alan. 2001. *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

order to play the game. The medium through which video games are played disrupts the traditional ideals of what an athlete is - strength and agility matter less in the digital world, whereas reaction times and teamwork are drawn on more intensively. In 2013, the US Government officially recognized e-sports as a type of sport and granted professional athlete visas to players.⁴⁴ According to the Washington Post, the prize pools for e-sports are comparable to other niche sporting events, with tournament prizes reaching over 25 million for the Defense of the Ancients 2 international tournament in 2018.



Figure 1: Prize Money Comparison

While e-sports are still not considered ‘mainstream’, there is a viewer base in for e-sports and growing. While e-sports are still a long way off from revenues of ‘leagued’ sports such as the NFL, NBA or NHL, they are growing in an important segment of the population, youths. According to a University of Massachusetts Lowell poll, almost 60%

⁴⁴ Tassi, Paul. 2013. "The U.S. Now Recognizes eSports Players As Profession Athletes." Forbes. July 14. Accessed February 15, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2013/07/14/the-u-s-now-recognizes-esports-players-as-professional-athletes/>.

of 14-21-year-olds said that they watched people play in e-sports competitions using video games that they themselves played.⁴⁵

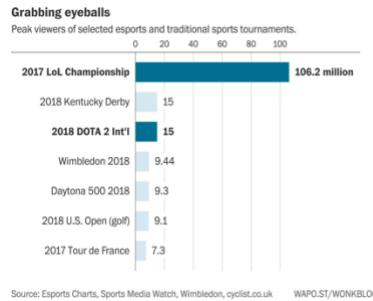


Figure 2: Viewership Comparison

Video games are games that players engage with through a digital medium and are characterized by imagery that ranges from fanciful castles to outer space to the playing fields of traditional sports. Since their advent in the 1980s, they have permeated almost every type of digital media. Smart phones, specialized platforms and social media sites such as Facebook all include video games as way to entice users to use their site. E-sports are the ‘sportification’ of competitive video games. Despite similarities in structure they involve a different level of involvement and rule frameworks. This is very similar to the difference between playing a casual pick-up game of basketball at the park or playing for the NBA. However, the main difference is that through video games, one could play a pick-

⁴⁵ Ingraham, Christopher. 2018. "The Massive Popularity of Esports." The Washington Post. August 27. Accessed February 27, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/08/27/massive-popularity-esports-charts/?utm_term=.d95e72856ca2.

up game with people from across the world – a benefit traditionally limited to professional players.

Chapter 4: MMOs and Overwatch

Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) are games “where thousands of players simultaneously interact, collaborate and compete.”⁴⁶ These MMOs are very popular across the globe. The revenues for MMO gaming were 30.7 billion dollars in 2017.⁴⁷ These revenues come from the initial purchase of the game as well as players buying aesthetic enhancements for their characters. Approximately 25% of the digital gaming market income comes from these MMO games.⁴⁸ MMOs have drastically risen in popularity over the past ten years. Anyone with a stable internet connection can join a community of players. Some see playing video games as an introverted activity; however, some are seen as a new type of social media because, when playing online, it is an interactive and real time conversation between two or more people.

MMOs offer a new type of interaction where people are knowingly and unknowingly interacting with people of different cultures. The earliest recorded multilingual cross-cultural exchange occurred in the MMO World of Warcraft. “A speaker of English living in the US and a speaker of Russian living in the Ukraine. The two were playing near to one another (within the virtual game space) when the Ukrainian communicated the following text message: "ti russkij slychajno?" (are you Russian by any chance?). The American replied with a question mark and asked, "what language was

⁴⁶ Thorne, Steven L, and Ingrid Fischer. 2012. "Online Gaming as Sociable Media." *Social Media and Language Learning*.

⁴⁷ Statista. 2018. MMO gaming - Statistics & Facts. Accessed April 2, 2019. <https://www.statista.com/topics/2290/mmo-gaming/>.

⁴⁸ Statista. 2019. MMO and MOBA games market revenue worldwide 2017-2021. Accessed April 2, 2019. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/830090/mmo-moba-market-revenue/>.

that?'.⁴⁹ This interaction happened just because the two players were in a similar virtual space, despite being in two very different physical locations. When the two identified where they were from respectively, the interaction continued and the American player even pursued learning Russian and Ukrainian phrases in order to interact more with the Ukrainian player.⁵⁰ Sometimes the language learning is intentional: in a study by Sylven and Sunqvist, they found in an interview with one of their subjects that he wanted to play a game and understand what the story was – so “he listened and watched, listened and watched, listened and watched, put one piece of information to the other, and eventually dared to start playing on his own, when he was only 13 and had cracked the code for English.”⁵¹

OVERWATCH

All MMOs create a virtual world in which players can interact, collaborate and compete. One of the most popular MMOs is Overwatch, which was initially released on May 24, 2016.⁵² Overwatch was named the “New e-sports Game of the Year” that same year.⁵³ It is one of the most popular games available, with over 40 million ‘monthly’

⁴⁹ Thorne, Steven L, and Ingrid Fischer. 2012. "Online Gaming as Sociable Media."

⁵⁰ Thorne, S. L. 2008. "Transcultural Communication in Open Internet Environments and Massively Multiplayer Online Games." In *Mediating Discourse Online*, by S Magnan. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

⁵¹ Ross, Andrew. 2014. "The Science of Language, Community, and MMORPGs." Engadget. October 13. Accessed April 18, 2019. <https://www.engadget.com/2014/10/13/the-science-of-language-community-and-mmorpgs/>.

⁵² Esports Charts. 2019. Overwatch Tournaments Statistics. Accessed February 15, 2019. <https://escharts.com/tournaments/ow>.

⁵³ Ibid

players.⁵⁴ While country specific numbers are unknown, it is possible to extrapolate the popularity of the game through fan forums. There are over 300,000 followers of Overwatch on both the Russian social media site, VKontakte, and the English-speaking forum dedicated to Overwatch on reddit.com.⁵⁵

In the game of Overwatch, one can be randomly added to a group of other players. The selection criteria are based on server region and level in the game. As such, there is little or no controlling the types of people one will be matched with beyond selecting a team via a group search function or playing exclusively with friends. As of 2019, it has more than 30,000,000 total players.⁵⁶ This dedicated player base makes the likelihood of repeated contact between members of different cultures more likely.

Overwatch is a MOBA-type game, a massive online battle arena game. It splits players into three regions **Americas** for players in North America, Latin America, South America, Australia, and New Zealand, **Europe** for players in the European Union, Eastern Europe, Russia, Africa, and the Middle East, **Asia** for players in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. However, it is easy to change the region you are placed in, creating opportunities for players to interact globally. In fact, many players from other regions choose to play in the NA region because the competitive landscape is better and the path from amateur to professional is clearer.⁵⁷ Several Russian language players mention in

⁵⁴ Rodriguez, Veronika. 2018. How Many People Play Overwatch? December 19. Accessed February 12, 2019. <https://www.dbltap.com/posts/6251690-how-many-people-play-overwatch>.

⁵⁵ VKontakte. 2019. "Overwatch." <https://vk.com/overwatchru>. vk.com. <https://vk.com/overwatchru>.

⁵⁶ Esports Charts. 2019. Overwatch Tournaments Statistics.

⁵⁷ TheMightyMat. 2017. "Why EU players should try playing on NA." Reddit.com/r/Overwatch. July 1. Accessed April 21, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Overwatch/comments/6knc5p/why_eu_players_should_try_playing_on_na/.

forums that they play either on the Americas server or the Asian server due to it being more fun.⁵⁸ Some players switch between servers that have higher traffic during times of the day in order to have more players and shorter wait times.⁵⁹ There are several types of game modes in Overwatch. The most popular is competitive, where players receive ranking based on performance and try to advance to new rungs of competition.

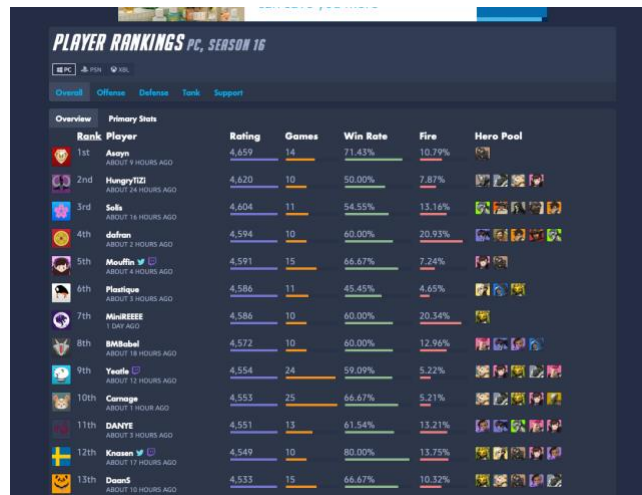


Figure 3: Overwatch Player Rankings

In gameplay, “you control one of several heroes in competitive 6-person team shooting matches. Battle over objectives, take down the other team, and achieve victory.”⁶⁰ Each player chooses a hero in one of three categories: tank, damage and support. Tanks are charged with taking on damage and breaking through team fortifications. Support heroes

⁵⁸ Anonymous. 2018. "On Which Server is the Best to Play On? (Подскажите на каком сервере лучше играть?)." Blizzard. March 11. Accessed February 16, 2019. <https://eu.battle.net/forums/ru/overwatch/topic/17618054039>.

⁵⁹ TheMightyMat. 2017.

⁶⁰ Blizzard Entertainment "Welcome to Overwatch." Play Overwatch. Accessed February 25, 2019. <https://playoverwatch.com/en-us/game/overview>.

“empower their allies” in the form of healing or shielding from damage. Finally, damage-type heroes are responsible for “seeking out, engaging, and defeating the enemy using their varied tools, abilities and play styles.”⁶¹ Within each of these categories there are several hero options, each with their own abilities and play styles. Many of the playable heroes represent a wide variety of nationalities - including a Russian tank hero, an American cowboy and a German healer - as well as various human races.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERACTION

Through MMOs, a huge amount of player interaction is taking place. In fact, while the stereotype of video games is that they are antisocial, the opposite is true. A good comparison is ‘traditional’ social media, like Facebook, which in 2011 had 845 million monthly users, with each user having 130 or so friends.⁶² Generally people accept friend requests from people who they either know or know people that they know. This generally limits the actual social interaction to close connections. In contrast, through MMOs people are interacting through avatars and connect via location in the virtual space or similar interests - while one can connect and play with friends and family, one is also largely interacting with strangers. This is especially true of Overwatch. In fact, an average competitive game lasts anywhere from 12 to 15 minutes, given some time for loading time and for the computer to place a player on a team. Each match from loading, to play, to

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Muriel, Daniel, and Garry Crawford. 2018. Video Games as Culture. Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society. London: Routledge.

finish lasts 20 minutes. In one hour of play, a player, assuming they have a completely new team each time, has interacted with 15 other players and had opportunities to chat through voice chat and on-screen commands, create connections and strategize to win a goal. Those that play via a PC have the ability to chat with the opposing team, as well – meaning that in an hour of gameplay they have the opportunity to interact with 30 other players from across the globe.

Overwatch is facilitating virtual methods of cross-cultural exchange at two different levels. The first level is that of the player - an informal interaction that happens as one is actively participating in the video game and interacting with strangers through the team search process. The second level occurs at the spectator level – a more traditional method of exchange due to its similarity to that of spectators of other sports and sporting events such as the Olympics or FIFA World Cup. Here, fans are interacting with each other and are watching exchanges happen as they view the competition.

Overwatch is also unique in its availability across different platforms. While many players use PC (over 75% of players), there is still a considerable amount of those that use consoles such as the PS4 or Xbox One to play. This allows more players to access the game and play. The active playing of a team-sport has long been regarded as a tool for unifying people from culturally different backgrounds. In fact, the United Nations see sports as “an effective tool and a strong unifying factor in the process of conflict transformation and peace building.”⁶³

⁶³ Ross, Craig M, and Lynn M Jamieson. 2008. "Cross-Cultural Understanding Through Youth Sports: Bridging the Tolerance Gap Through Youth Development." *Journal of Youth Development*.

The second level of exchange is at the competitive level. Instead of forging a new mode of dialogue, this one mimics existing structures for international sporting events. “Matches between players and teams are televised, complete with commentators, to an audience who watches through streaming websites.”⁶⁴ Essentially, these competitions mimic professional sporting events, they have commentators, and fans can watch live-streams of matches and comment on them in real time. Overwatch is not the most popular e-sports game, but it is well established in the field of e-sports despite its newness. While other e-sport competitions have naturally separated teams into regionality or language, Overwatch has actively attempted to create a local fanbase for their games. Each formal team for their World Cup is assigned a home city; however, this is unique because while each team may have been tied to a region through its name, the players on that team do not necessarily come from that city or even country. For example, the London Spitfire team in the most recent Overwatch World Cup was completely composed of South Koreans from South Korea. The simulation of traditional sports tropes makes Overwatch analogous to traditional modes of sport. However, the narrative around the competition shows a new approach largely due to the difference of medium and the focus on the celebration of their product.

MMOs such as Overwatch create a meaningful and unmoderated space for Russian and American youths to interact. As such, this kind of unregulated interaction creates an unrecognized conduit for a cross-cultural connection and could work to enhance cross-

⁶⁴ Hutchins, Brett. 2008. "Signs of Meta-Change in Second Modernity: The Growth of E-sport and the World Cyber Games." *New Media and Society* 851-869.

cultural understanding in an age of increasingly divisive rhetoric. This communication provides a critical opportunity for understanding in the face of rising tensions and declining opportunities for exchange. With the rise in MMOs in both popularity and accessibility, there are new ways to be a cultural ambassador that combine the accessibility of e-sport as well as the humanizing elements for cultural exchange.

SECTION 3: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Much of the study around video games and cross-cultural communication focuses on the platform's possible use as a recruitment tool for terrorist organizations. However, the interactions between players have the opportunity to spawn greater cultural understanding for good or for ill. What is at the root of this study is the idea that online communications and forums, whether through social media or video games create opportunities that did not exist prior to the internet age. The "abl(ility) to play online from (any) possible location with any other possible location (in) the world without delay – [means] the borders of time and distance are falling down."⁶⁵ In essence, the internet is circumventing previous barriers to long-distance communication and interaction. Video games democratize access to cultural exchange.

⁶⁵ Sáfrán, József. 2017. "Terrorist activity in online games (Terrorista aktivitás az online videójátékokban)." *Military Science Review (Hadtudományi Szemle)* 10 (1): 337-353.

Chapter 5: Benedict Anderson: Imagined Communities

The theoretical framework for this paper builds on Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities." While his work focuses on the idea of a national identity created in the post-industrial age, it serves as useful model to understand the mechanisms of identity and the kinds of forces that help shape it. These communities formed and are moderated by the members of those communities instead of outside rules being imposed on the group. As such, no one is quite sure where or when the creation of a national identity takes place and how identity shifts due to external or internal influences. However, it is generally agreed that national identity is created from a shared consciousness. "... National identity (is) not only an ideological and geopolitical issue, but one that is infused with (an) emotional, unconscious, and frequently irrational dimension."⁶⁶

For Anderson, the advent of print media allowed for the creation of national communities, as it created a new medium for the imagining of relationships between nations and peoples. This shift was largely due to a change in the perception of time. Prior to print 'capitalism' as Anderson refers to it, religious time, seen in the Middle Ages, was built on ideas of stationarity. He argues that "the mediaeval Christian mind had no conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present."⁶⁷ Print media altered the way people interrogated their understanding of history, time and place. For Anderson, "the idea of a sociological

⁶⁶ Caputi, Mary. "National Identity in Contemporary Theory." *Political Psychology* 17, no. 4 (1996): 684

⁶⁷ Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of a nation, which is conceived of as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.”⁶⁸ The national identity proves to be a comfort of sorts for people who understand the vastness of time and the sheer insignificance of their role as an individual.

Traditionally, society was broken up due to differences in belief or social status, but after the industrial revolution the idea of the nation state served as the core tenet of people’s identity. At the core of Anderson’s theory is the idea that despite the fact that members of even small nations will never meet most of the other members, there still exists a connection between them, an “image of their communion.”⁶⁹ Despite vast socio-economic differences between members of a nation “the nation is always convened as deep, horizontal comradeship.”⁷⁰ This collective imagination of their shared identity is what makes up a nation..

Benedict Anderson argues that all communities are imagined, and nationalistic ideals are created through the proliferation of literature and through other means. The internet has also created a virtual “public space” through which people can engage with different levels of communications, whether private correspondence or through engaging in blogging or posting on forums such as Reddit. The reason that this public space is so different from what has come before is that each user in this space is a consumer, but also has the chance to be a producer at a low cost of engagement. “The fact that every such effort is available to anyone connected to the network, from anywhere, has led to the

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid

emergence of coordinate effects, where the aggregate effect of individual action, even when it is not self-consciously cooperative, produces the coordinate effect of a new and rich information environment.”⁷¹

Social media create opportunities for imagined communities to form around interests and issues rather than relying on geographic proximity. Gusfield in 1975 split communities into two buckets - the first is territory which relies on geographic locations, similar to Anderson’s idea of nation states. The second is all relational - which is rooted in the “quality of character of human relationship, without reference to location.”⁷²

The immediacy of the response and the diversity of the media means that reliance on time is no longer an issue. In a sense these communities exist asynchronously from the physical world. “For example, Facebook and Google Plus groups allow people to join and take part in conversations over time, and in the Reddit community, users can read about and post responses to issues that form pages on a topic.”⁷³ This freedom of exchange means that there is “greater freedom to participate in tugging and pulling at the cultural creations of others, “glomming on” to them, as Balkin puts it, and making the culture they occupy more their own than was possible with mass-media culture.”⁷⁴

Out of the advent of computer-mediation, two distinct types of communities emerged, which are still seen today. The first is not unlike traditional communities, where

⁷¹ Benkler, Yochai. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁷² Gusfield, J. R., 1975. *The Community: A Critical Response*. New York: Harper Colophon.

⁷³ Koh, Adeline. 2016. "Imagined Communities, Social Media and the Faculty." *The Faculty in the Digital Sphere*

⁷⁴ Benkler, Yochai. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*.

people meet face-to-face, but have other modes of communication and interaction in the digital sphere. Social media today fit in that role - most people interact with people they know, or who are part of physical communities such as schools or organizations. The second type of community relies on anonymity. These communities, called [tokumeisei no komyuniti], share anonymized virtual spaces for “self-expression.”⁷⁵

Online communities can mirror traditional physical communities in their structure. However, a main difference is that online communities are often communities of affinity rather than a community borne of physical proximity or cultural identity. According to Rheingold, “Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”⁷⁶ Perhaps the most famous online medium for online communities is Reddit.com, where there are forums for almost every human interest including cooking, health questions, video games or scholarly pursuits.

Online communities, at their heart, rely on participation. Each user adds to the communal narrative. These forums are moderated by volunteers and the communities tend to create their own rules of engagement. Why do people agree to participate in these new mediums? Jenkins, Ford and Green suggest that co-creation is a driver for participatory

⁷⁵ Morioka, Masahiro. 1993. *Conscious Communication: the Birth of Dream Navigators* (Ishiki Tsushin: Doriimu Navigeita no Tanjou). Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo.

⁷⁶ Rheingold, Howard. 1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. New York: Addison Wesley.

space.⁷⁷ According to them, the factors can be broken down into informativeness, socializing and community building, status seeking and entertainment.⁷⁸

As virtual communities are created, each group creates behavioral norms. Some communities, such as subreddits on reddit.com have written standards for how and what users can post. Users can post in any subreddit of their choosing and these posts are either upvoted or downvoted based on how other users interact with and feel about that post. “Subreddits give users the ability to create and nurture communities that each reflect their own unique needs.”⁷⁹As such, users help determine what is seen on the forums and create a space that reflects the identity they choose to express. Social identities are created through practice. In essence, social identities comprise “the performative elements of identity: as members come to identify with the group, their behavior changes to act along these new lines.”⁸⁰

Karma on reddit is a way for users to engage with the site in a positive or negative way. Downvoted comments create negative karma whereas posts that are voted highly give positive karma. “This system ties together content moderation with user reputation, making somebody’s karma a reflection of reddit’s evaluation of their taste.”⁸¹ These karmic points are financially worthless, but serve as a way to motivate users to engage positively with

⁷⁷ Moore, Carrie. 2017. "Redditors Revealed: Motivational Factors of the Reddit Community." Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences. Hilton Waikoloa Village: Association for Information Systems.

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ ClockworkLion. 2013. "An Examination of reddit as an Online Community Platform." AClockWorkLion.Wordpress. December 20. Accessed March 3, 2019. <https://aclockworklion.wordpress.com/2013/12/20/an-examination-of-reddit-as-an-online-community-platform/>.

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

the site and not to break the rules of the forum. They also signal the type of community member one is to others – someone with low karma may be locked out of certain communities for not meeting their threshold of engagement. Many online forums have modeled themselves in a similar way - they allow users to anonymize themselves, but still to engage with an identity of their choosing.

Overwatch players create an imagined community because many of the players will never know many of their fellow-members, yet, to echo Anderson, “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” This is evidenced in how members of the community refer to themselves, they see themselves as members of ‘limited’ group. Within Overwatch, they share similar values through the creation of norms, evidenced by the reporting features, and common ‘language’ seen through specialized terms for in-group play.⁸² Overwatch, as well as other massive multiplayer online games, provides the space for new types of imagined communities.

These communities can be split into two different buckets, those of players and that of spectators. While there is significant overlap between these communities, the identities that are tapped into are unique. There is a critical distinction between community of players for e-sports and community of players for video games. Lots of people play tennis. Only professional tennis players benefit from the cultural exchange involved in international tournaments. Lots of people play Overwatch, and they all are benefiting from

⁸² Arondlop. 2018. "Lingo 101, A Guide on the Language of Overwatch." [Reddit.com/r/OverwatchUniversity](https://www.reddit.com/r/OverwatchUniversity). November 29. Accessed February 12, 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/OverwatchUniversity/comments/a1nlht/lingo_101_a_guide_on_the_language_of_overwatch/.

cross-cultural exchange involved in each game. For the community of Overwatch players, in addition to the ‘traditional’ building blocks of virtual community creation, Overwatch adds another factor that strengthens that community bond - that of a communal goal. The nature of Overwatch creates largely random teams of six players that are required to work together to achieve a common goal. Players who work well with their team can be rewarded by teammates endorsing them in three categories of play, shot-caller, good sport and good teammate. These rankings are easily seen on a player’s profile as well as shown below the player ID, easily seen by any player of the game on the same team. Like Reddit’s karma, these ratings can’t be exchanged for a digital or physical good but serve to identify players acting in good-faith. “People are attracted to others whose skills or competence can benefit them in some way. People seem to gravitate toward people and groups that offer the most rewards.”⁸³ People also have the option to stay on with a team in order to continue to play.

The community of Overwatch tournament spectators, while imagined, is more traditional in how identities are impacted and activated. E-sports are now popular enough to be featured on sports streaming services and can have spectators who do not play the game but enjoy watching the competition. However, most spectators are familiar with Overwatch and most likely players of the game. Despite this, they still interact with the game through institutionalized means - through mediated streaming services or professional sports sources such as ESPN. As they have a passive voice in the community, their standing in the community is less impacted by their ability to be a good community

⁸³ McMillan, David W, and David M Chavis. 1986. "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory." *Journal of Community Psychology* 6-23

member.

The community of professional players is similar to that of other pro players in other sport leagues. They do meet in person and are part of the larger player community, but their drive and interaction are different than that of amateur players. For professional players, their goal is to win overall. The spectators fall into a similar communities as other professional sports fans, they follow the games and discuss among themselves. The community that is truly new is that of casual players, this community is completely facilitated by the game, but is not limited by regionality or skill.

Interestingly, some Overwatch amateur players found the spectator community to be a hindrance. They did not want their community to be overrun with the community of spectators and found that e-sports events such as the Overwatch World Cup were a distraction from their enjoyment of the game. One player in a post on the Overwatch subreddit, stated that they felt disconnected from the game due to the focus on the Overwatch league.⁸⁴ They wanted the company to focus on the development of features for them, instead of expanding Overwatch to the “main stage.” Some were members of both communities. A commenter on an official Overwatch forum, mentioned that they enjoy the competition because it allows them to see the game played at the highest level and learn from it. “I play basketball and love watching the NBA, I can fully appreciate the great amount of skill, focus and dexterity the OWL (Overwatch League) players possess to play at that level. And I am learning what I can from watching their play. Although I

⁸⁴ Temporal_Enigma. 2019. "I Do Not Care About eSports and Blizzard Doesn't Care About Me." Reddit.com/r/Overwatch. Jan 24. Accessed March 10, 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/Overwatch/comments/ajhga2/i_do_not_care_about_esports_and_blizzard_doesn/.

would never reach even 1/10th of their level, just like I would never reach 1/10th of any NBA player's level; learning and trying is part of the fun in and of itself." Players found value in the spectator community because it allowed them to advance their play within their own community. These differing viewpoints on the benefits of the spectator community shows how the cultural values *within* the community of amateur Overwatch players differs slightly in how open they are to outside influences.

Video games are a type of mass media - they are "cultural products that reflect cultural values." As such, mass media shapes the perceptions of the cultures reflected within it. For games like Overwatch, many cultures are represented through the diversity of the hero. As of January 2018, the 26 heroes represented a wide variety of nationalities, ethnicities, ages and sexualities. In Russia, an official Overwatch comic showing a relationship between a same sex couple was banned.⁸⁵ Many Russian players who had ordered the comic responded negatively to the lack of the 'complete' story.⁸⁶ While this has led to some controversy surrounding appropriation of cultures and some accusing Overwatch of "pushing" certain values, it has led to many lauding the games approach to creating better representation. One Russian site celebrates access to LGBT representation in the game, when usually such things are banned or made increasingly hard to access due

⁸⁵ Kolbus, Michael. 2016. "Christmas comic by Overwatch in Russian (Рождественский комикс по Overwatch на русском языке)." *Gameguru*. December 21. Accessed March 15, 2019. https://gameguru.ru/esports/v_rossii_zapretili_komiks_po_overwatch_s_kaming-autom_trejser/articles.html.

⁸⁶ Rodin, Pavel (Родин, Павел). 2017. "The players have accused Blizzard of deception in print comic Overwatch does not have a Chapter with a kiss all of Them! (Игроки обвинили Blizzard в обмане — в печатном комиксе Overwatch нет главы с поцелуем Трейсер!)." *Kanobu*. December 21. Accessed March 15, 2019. <https://kanobu.ru/news/igroki-obvinili-blizzard-v-obmane-v-pechatnom-komikse-overwatch-net-glavyi-s-potseluem-trejser-400437/>.

to propaganda laws.⁸⁷ This makes Overwatch unique within its category of game, MMO and FPS (first person shooter). Overwatch is also lauded for its representation of characters with disabilities, such as the autistic character Symmetra, without making the character ABOUT the disability represented. Much of the information about the characters comes through comics released by Blizzard. While this representation is not an active part of playing the game, it does change the way some people view the game and its characters. These characters are symbolic of how the players view themselves in the game – they symbolize the community of players.

That is not to say that the community of players pick heroes that they most identify with. Players pick which hero works best for their playstyle. On a Russian language forum, a player mentions that they played the Russian hero, Zarya for over 50 hours, but found her playstyle difficult and decided to play someone else.⁸⁸ Nowhere in the entire post on the forum did they mention her nationality or their own in connection. In fact, in an informal poll taken on the Russian social media site, VKontakte, the top two heroes were Lucio and Soldier 76, a black character who is a healer and a white American soldier. Zarya was the third choice.⁸⁹ The national identity of the player didn't need to sync up with the national representation of the hero in the game.

⁸⁷ Parfenenkov, Igor Парфененков, Егор. 2019. "Best LGBT and queer games — from Mass Effect to Overwatch (Лучшие игры с ЛГБТ и квирами — от Mass Effect до Overwatch)." Kanobu. January 9. Accessed March 14, 2019. <https://kanobu.ru/articles/luchshie-igryi-slgbt-ikvirami-372977/>.

⁸⁸ XQC. 2010. "Zarya My Favorite (Заря любимая)." Blizzard. Forums. June 12. Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://eu.battle.net/forums/ru/overwatch/topic/17615685082>.

⁸⁹ Anonymous. 2015. "What Character do you Like Most of All (Какой персонаж вам понравился больше всего?)." VKontakte. August 9. Accessed March 15, 2019. https://vk.com/topic-57249947_33058105.

The importance of national identity is most seen at the higher levels of play. National identity is at the heart of cooperative (or non-cooperative) discourse surrounding international sporting events. Traditionally, such sporting events are a competitive activity between communities associated with nations. This connection with national identity comes back to the veneration of the human body; however, instead of celebrating the achievement of the sportsman, it is the veneration of the idea that one nation, through strength and skill of a representative member can surpass another through professional sportsmanship.

In contrast, virtual competitions, such as the Overwatch World Cup, are built on the same foundations as the amateur games. All of the heroes are the same, as are the way matches are held. The only real difference is the location and goal of the event. There each team is incentivized to win for financial rewards, as opposed to an increase in ranking. These e-sports tournaments see much more cooperative dialogue among the spectators than other competitions even though they are all mediated through virtual means, either on computers or through television.

By analyzing what creates national identity and how sport or other identity-building events can strengthen national identity, one can see how the chance of conflict between people of differing nationalities can be increased during such times. When international sporting events, like the Olympic games, come into play there are tensions between the intranational intentions of the events, to build national unity, and the international ideals, to open dialogue and build peace.

One of the most famous international sporting events is the FIFA World Cup, an international soccer tournament, which had over 3.5 billion viewers over the course of last year's competition. Despite language differences and time-zone difficulties, over 1.12 billion watched the final match between France and Croatia. The total population of both these countries combined is fewer than 72 million, meaning that other nations were invested beyond watching their 'own' team play.

SECTION 4: IMAGINED COMMUNITIES OF OVERWATCH

The relationship between the United States and Russia has degraded to Cold War levels and impacted traditional modes of cultural diplomacy through exchange.⁹⁰ However, the internet and unmoderated, community driven spaces offer a unique opportunity to continue cross-cultural exchange even in the face of the reduction of educational programs and student exchanges. The primary question of this thesis is does Overwatch in itself create opportunities for cross-cultural exchange? If there are exchanges happening, then what impacts, if any, do they have? As there are two ‘buckets’ of communities, first one must see if the overarching Overwatch community has this identity activation and cross-cultural dialogue.

The research design for this paper is split between the two identified levels of interaction seen through Overwatch in order to address these questions. The first part compares two sets of data in order to see how dialogue is developed at the amateur player level. First, a control group is established using PEW and Chicago council research data on American opinions of Russia. This is compared to views of those players of Overwatch who frequent the online forum [reddit.com/r/overwatch](https://www.reddit.com/r/overwatch) and were willing to answer a 20-minute survey. The goal of this survey was, first, to see if this population differed from the general control population and, second, if there was a difference, to posit a hypothesis of

⁹⁰ Sherwin, Emily. 2017. "US-Russian Exchange Provides Optimism in 'Cold War' Freeze."

why this population differs. The latter half of the research design examines the dialogue surrounding the Overwatch World Cup in comparison to that of the FIFA World Cup that occurred within the same six-month timespan. The comparison of the high-level dialogue between and about nations through press-releases and country/company dialogue during the event, as well as general trends in social media focusing on each event respectively, will assist in establishing if these events evoke different identities in their spectators.

Chapter 6: A Tale of Two Cups: FIFA v. Overwatch

This section of the paper examines the dialogue surrounding the Overwatch World Cup in comparison to that of the 2018 FIFA Soccer World Cup that occurred within the same six-month timespan. In order to ascertain if the Overwatch World Cup engaged different identities, one must compare the high-level dialogue surrounding the event. These dialogues at the sponsor, press and spectator level showed how these games may have activated nationalist sentiment during the matches.

The Overwatch World Cup was designed to mimic the existing structures created for other international sporting events. This can be seen in almost every aspect of how the parent company and sponsor, Blizzard, set up the event. They advertised the event, set up the competitive structure, created uniforms for teams in order to evoke traditional competitive sports competitions.⁹¹ This evocation of traditional sporting competition can also be seen in how the media and fans interacted with World Cup. One reporter stated at the beginning of the tournament, “Here’s the thing: It has all come down to this. Three hundred players across 50 countries playing not only for your entertainment, not only for a celebration of competitive Overwatch, but also for national pride.”⁹² The interactions and identities activated all happen in a traditional way.

Despite the traditionalized structure of the event, the media framing around the event suggests that Blizzard was trying to activate this identity in a passive way. They did

⁹¹ Turtianen, Riikka, Usva Friman, and Maria Ruotsalainen. 2018. "Not Only for a Celebration of Competitive Overwatch but Also for National Pride." *Games and Culture* 1-21.

⁹² Ibid

not engage in media campaigns to activate national identities, instead they framed the competition as a “a global celebration of competition and community, will pit teams from around the world against each other”⁹³ They highlight the community aspects of their competition, but also hint at the nationality of the event – the teams from around the world.

Basis of Comparison

The FIFA and Overwatch World Cups are largely comparable for three major reason, the timeframe, the singularity of sport during the competition, and the qualifier process. Both world cups occurred over the summer of 2018. For FIFA, the decision to have Russia host the tournament was made in 2010 in order to give the country time to prepare for the event.⁹⁴ The official start date of qualifiers was in late 2017, where country teams jockeyed for the limited spots in the official FIFA tournament.⁹⁵ The matches officially started in early June of 2018.⁹⁶ The Overwatch World Cup had a shortened lead in-time with the games announced in March of 2018.⁹⁷ The “qualifiers” occurred in the same time frame. Overwatch took the cumulative skill scores of the 150 top players per country and from that score selected to 20 top countries overall.⁹⁸ From those 20 countries, players were

⁹³ Blizzard Entertainment. 2018. "Announcing the 2018 Overwatch World Cup." *Play Overwatch*. March 27. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://playoverwatch.com/en-us/news/21665270>

⁹⁴ Tharoor, Ishaan, and Tony Karon. 2010. "What the World Cup Choices Tell Us About the World." *Time Magazine* . December 03. Accessed March 10, 2019. What the World Cup Choices Tell Us About the World

⁹⁵ FIFA. 2018. FIFA.com. Accessed March 10, 2019. <https://www.fifa.com/about-fifa/index.html>.

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Blizzard Entertainment. 2018. "Announcing the 2018 Overwatch World Cup

⁹⁸ Ibid

invited to compete for a spot on the country team that represented their citizenship.⁹⁹ The official tournament ran from August until November. The timeliness of each tournament means that the political realities surrounding the events are largely the same - so any impact on the conversations around the games should be constant between the two.

While the viewership of the two 'World Cups' were vastly different, they are both comparable in several ways. The first is that 2018's FIFA tournament is the first with a large Chinese interest.¹⁰⁰ While FIFA's support from Western companies may have declined, there was a high rate of new investors from Asian markets. This allows for a more balanced comparison because, while other international sporting events such as the Olympics are seen as tools of the West, FIFA has managed to disentangle itself from that image. Overwatch, while created by an American company, is very popular in Asian countries. In fact, e-sports has more national fan support from countries such as China, South Korea and Japan, than the United States. While both sports are popular in the United States, these are not sporting areas where the American team usually dominates the tournaments, such as the Olympic Games.

Another area of similarity is in advertising. For the 2018 FIFA World Cup, the advertisers focused on younger viewers. Due to this, advertisers focused more on online streaming media. For the Overwatch World Cup, online streaming is the only way to watch the tournament, which skews towards younger viewers. "GlobalWebIndex's survey found

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Roxborough, Scott. 2018. "Soccer World Cup 2018: Global Audience to Hit 3.4 Billion, FIFA Revenue to Reach \$6 Billion." Hollywood Reporter. June 14. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/soccer-world-cup-2018-global-audience-hit-34-billion-fifa-revenue-reach-6-billion-1120071>.

47 percent of the online population plans to watch the World Cup, with 55 percent of male internet users and just over a third (37 percent) of female users planning to catch at least some matches.”¹⁰¹ This allows for a greater diversification of viewership and younger viewers are more likely to engage in social media. Younger viewers are also the right demographic for cross-cultural education exchange.

COMPETITIVE NARRATIVE

At an institutional level, both World Cups were set up similarly to traditional competitive matches. Each had an overarching mission statement for the games, rallied sponsors and used media to drum up support for the tournament. Both of the events were set-up by the sponsors to purposely evoke a sense of competition for the spectators. The professional narrative around the events also impacts how people view themselves and the dialogue of the events. Finally, I will examine how the fans discussed the events of the world and other teams.

Sponsor Messaging

In order to draw a comparison between the World Cup and the Overwatch Tournament, one must look how the hosts of the events approached the messaging surrounding the events and if that messaging is in conflict with the stated goals of the event.

¹⁰¹ Ibid

At the mission level, both sponsors had stated goals for their respective World Cups. For FIFA, their overarching desire is to be constantly improving football.¹⁰² For the World Cup, FIFA wanted a professionalized competition of athletes from each country in order to draw huge crowds and ‘home-town hero’ support from fans.¹⁰³ According to Blizzard, “the World Cup’s worth isn’t a tool for revenue like the Overwatch League is, but rather one for growing fan support for players who either aspire to or participate in the League and for Blizzard to show off the future of its e-sports property.”¹⁰⁴ Many companies have built upon that to create mega-sporting events driven towards capitalistic cooperation. Blizzard, the company that created Overwatch, stated that their 2016 “World Cup” tournament would be “a community driven exhibition of Overwatch players from around the globe.”¹⁰⁵ As addressed by Turtiainen et al., the goal of the tournament differed from traditional mega-sporting events. “As such, the aim of the tournament was not to compete for the honor of being the most skillful Overwatch players or national team in the world but instead to promote the game and showcase both skillful players and important community figures.”¹⁰⁶ That is not to say that Blizzard did not use messaging to evoke a competitive spirit. “Whether you’re flying the flag of your homeland, your favorite player, or wanting to

¹⁰² FIFA. 2018. FIFA.com.

¹⁰³ Ward, Alex. 2018. "9 Questions About the 2018 World Cup You Were Too Embarrassed to Ask." Vox. July 11. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/12/17356780/world-cup-2018-russia-teams-schedule-tickets>.

¹⁰⁴ Parrish, Ashley. 2018. "The Overwatch World Cup is About Prestige and Exposure, Not Revenue." The eSports Observer. November 01. Accessed February 15, 2019. <https://esportsobserver.com/overwatch-world-cup-prestige-exposure/>.

¹⁰⁵ Blizzard Entertainment, 2016. "Get Ready for the Overwatch World Cup." Play Overwatch. August 4. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://playoverwatch.com/en-us/news/20228352>.

¹⁰⁶ Turtiainen, Riikka, Usva Friman, and Maria Ruotsalainen. 2018. "Not Only for a Celebration of Competitive Overwatch but Also for National Pride.

witness some of the best competitive Overwatch on offer—will you answer the call?”¹⁰⁷ In essence, for both sponsors, the stated higher vision for their events was a celebration of sport. Neither sponsor stated an intent to have nation v nation, they wanted the events to evoke an overarching sense of joy for the sport. However, the messaging surrounding the events showed attempts to build a competitive dialogue, whether nationally based or for support of specific players.

Both Overwatch and FIFA innovated in their tournaments to create more opportunities for fan engagement. While FIFA opened new methods of live streaming, the company behind Overwatch, Blizzard, created a PC platform update called “The Overwatch World Cup Viewer” which allowed fans to choose between a first person camera, a third person camera or an ability to ‘fly’ around the arena to watch the battle from any angle.¹⁰⁸ While FIFA is reaching towards younger audiences, Blizzard is reaching for more conventional sports fans. Part of this reach relies on traditional media partners in hopes of growing the fanbase. According to Pete Vlastelica the president and CEO of Activision Blizzard e-sports leagues, “media partners are another very important partner in [the Overwatch League] ecosystem. ESPN is invested in the growth of the NBA and now we hope they are invested in the growth of our league.”¹⁰⁹ While ESPN has screened e-

¹⁰⁷ Hitt, Kevin. 2018. "Overwatch World Cup Hype! Sites Announced, Tickets Are on Sale." VPEsports. June 27. Accessed February 15, 2019. <https://www.vpesports.com/overwatch/overwatch-world-cup-hype-sites-announced-tickets-are-on-sale>.

¹⁰⁸ Marchello, Matteo. 2018. Overwatch World Cup Viewer Could Change the Way eSports are Watched. November 1. Accessed February 1, 2019. [Technology.ihs.com](http://technology.ihs.com).

¹⁰⁹ ESPN.com. 2018. "Overwatch League Comes to ESPN, Disney and ABC." ESPN. July 11. Accessed January 18, 2019. http://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/24062274/overwatch-league-comes-espn-disney-abc.

sports competitions in the past, this is the first time the network has entered into talks around multi-year agreements.¹¹⁰

Prior to both tournaments, both FIFA and Blizzard supported more nationalized press of their upcoming events. While FIFA relies on country knowledge and support of national teams and inborn rivalries between countries' teams, Blizzard took steps to tap into more nationalized support. Despite teams being named for cities, it was very clear in the playoffs that it was a national team competing for a place in their World Cup competition. Overwatch Commissioner Nate Nanzer said, "there's a lot of people who play games and know about e-sports but haven't really engaged with it yet. When you see Italy v the Netherlands, it immediately makes sense and you also get to play on the national pride."¹¹¹ Evoking national pride was not only for the audience of the games, "this year has been the most competitive, and the players take it very seriously -- there's something about putting your national flag on that makes players take it seriously."¹¹²

For Overwatch and FIFA World Cup, the imaging surrounding the event was very similar. The hosts of the tournament, game company Blizzard, worked hard to evoke images of traditional sporting events through pre and post- game interviews as well as game

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Castello, Jay. 2018. "Playing on National Pride!: eSports is coming home at the Overwatch World Cup." *The Guardian*. October 12. Accessed February 3, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/oct/12/playing-on-national-pride-on-the-road-at-the-overwatch-esports-world-cup>.

¹¹² Coby, Alex Sassoon. 2018. It's Going To Be A Hoot Overwatch League Boss Nate Nanzer On Bringing More Teams to Europe and Why Season 2 is Going to Be Even Bigger. October 19. Accessed February 1, 2019. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tech/7517880/overwatch-league-boss-nate-nanzer-on-bringing-more-teams-to-europe-and-why-season-2-is-going-to-be-even-bigger/>.

commentary offered by a panel of ‘analysts.’ This move is to give credibility to the idea of e-sports as sport, as well as help explain the game to those unfamiliar with the gameplay.

In the messaging from Blizzard the goal of the event was not to prove which team was superior, but instead to “showcase ... Overwatch talent from around the world, as well as its host’s technological advances in e-sports.”¹¹³ This is in line with Blizzards approach to the event, in the game play, but also in how they recruit players. In the first iteration of the World Cup, “players filling the teams from each nation were chosen by community vote.”¹¹⁴ Now, players are chosen through an overall ranking of skill gained through playing the game in the amateur competitive seasons.

Press Messaging

In order to create a clear comparison between the conversations around the World Cup and the Overwatch Tournament, one would have to look at the external conversations around the event. In order to build an accurate picture of press coverage of the lead-in and coverage during the events, keyword searches were used through google news. In an effort to reduce bias, regional media was used and not subject focused media such as Overwatch websites or other e-sports focused web media.

¹¹³ Parrish, Ashley. 2018. "The Overwatch World Cup is About Prestige and Exposure, Not Revenue." The eSports Observer. November 01. Accessed February 15, 2019. <https://esportsobserver.com/overwatch-world-cup-prestige-exposure/>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid

Interestingly, the low-level press coverage of the Overwatch World Cup was more likely to stress nationalism than the competitors themselves. In an article written about the semifinals in the daily Californian, the writer was quick to draw on old national feuds in their coverage of the competition. In the France vs. Canada match, he wrote, “it is fairly fitting to see the French fight against their former, far frontier, giving the Canadians a crack at conquering their colonial precursor.”¹¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, despite each team being named for a city, national titles were the press reference point. In an article covering the final World Cup matches, the author detailed the surprise that the United States team and the French Team did not advance further into the game. “Going into the weekend's matches, all eyes were on Team USA and Team France to dethrone the reigning champions at some point in the tournament. Neither squad got anywhere close; both teams were eliminated in the quarterfinals, with the USA falling to the United Kingdom and France losing to Canada.”¹¹⁶

The press surrounding the FIFA World Cup followed a similar nationalized pattern. Similar articles stressed the long-standing rivalries between countries and teams. The coverage was more specific in how it talked about the game, such as penalty shots, who had possession of the ball as well as the rate of scoring. The other main difference was that the coverage referred to individual players rather than the team dynamic. An example of this taken from coverage of the Croatia v France final is “Croatia's Mandzukic then

¹¹⁵ Jeong, Michael. 2018. "Overwatch World Cup 2018 Preview - Nations Collide on International Stage." Bear Bytes. November 1. Accessed January 30, 2019. <http://www.dailycal.org/2018/11/01/overwatch-world-cup-2018-preview-nations-collide-on-international-stage/>.

¹¹⁶ Garst, Aron. 2018. "ESPN." South Korea's JJoNak: 'Without Cheating, No One Can Beat Us!'. November 5. Accessed February 1, 2019. http://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/page/blizzcon16/overwatch-world-cup-was-upset-central-south-korea-get-memo.

scored, bringing the score to 4-2, thanks to an error from France.”¹¹⁷ Interestingly, the coverage referred to players as belonging to the country team in many of the articles covering the play of the games.

Headline Comparison

Each of the events were heavily covered by ESPN, who had rights to each competition and streamed the games live. This ESPN coverage serves as a good medium through which to compare the dialogue around the competition. ESPN covered both FIFA and the Overwatch World Cup.

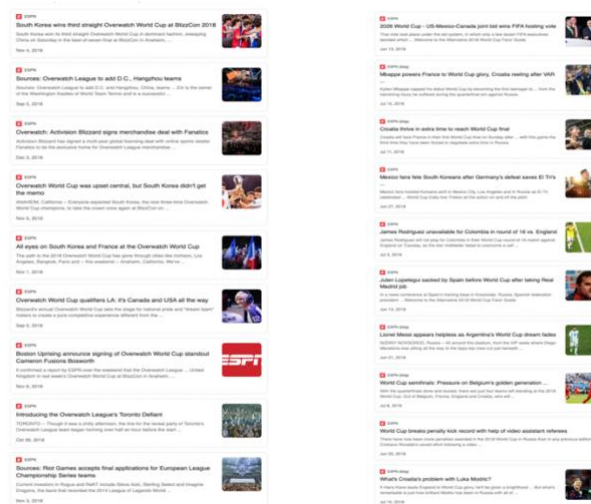


Figure 4: Headline Comparison

¹¹⁷ Kennedy, Merrit. 2018. "On Top Of The World': France Wins World Cup." NPR. July 15. Accessed February 1, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/15/629245670/france-wins-world-cup>.

In a high-level comparison of headlines during a three-month range of gameplay, May 1st until August 3rd for FIFA and Sept 1st through Dec 31st for the Overwatch World Cup, one can see only one main difference in the headlines for each event. While much of the sentiment stays the same - FIFA uses names of players, whereas Overwatch relies on a team's country to refer to specific matches or teams.

Spectator Messaging

While these other factors impact how fans interact with one another, they do not show the outcome of how these sporting events either increases nationalist identity or taps into the community creation envisioned by sporting events such as the Olympics. Here will be the meat of the comparison, a cursory comparison of different reddit forums dedicated to each sport, which can show how fans interact with one another, as well as the narrative around each of these events.

Interestingly, reddit.com forums for both the FIFA World Cup and the Overwatch World Cup shared similar sentiment in how they talked about the games for popular posts, those that were voted for by the community. Both were largely positive and did not use nationalist terms. For the purpose of this study, only the top scoring posts were analyzed as this best showcased the accepted values of the community.

FIFA World Cup Fan Forum

For the FIFA World Cup, the subreddits r/soccer and r/worldcup were both searched using the keyword phrases “Russia”, “USA”, “Russia World Cup”, “US World Cup” and “World Cup Finals”. A cursory look at using the sort by top comment feature showed that the top scoring posts and comment threads discussing the matches were largely about which team they supported, but did not use many, if any nationalist terms. The highest scoring post about Russia was a travel guide to fans going to Russia with many positive comments about the travel experience. However, the posts suggest that this positivity is not always the case.

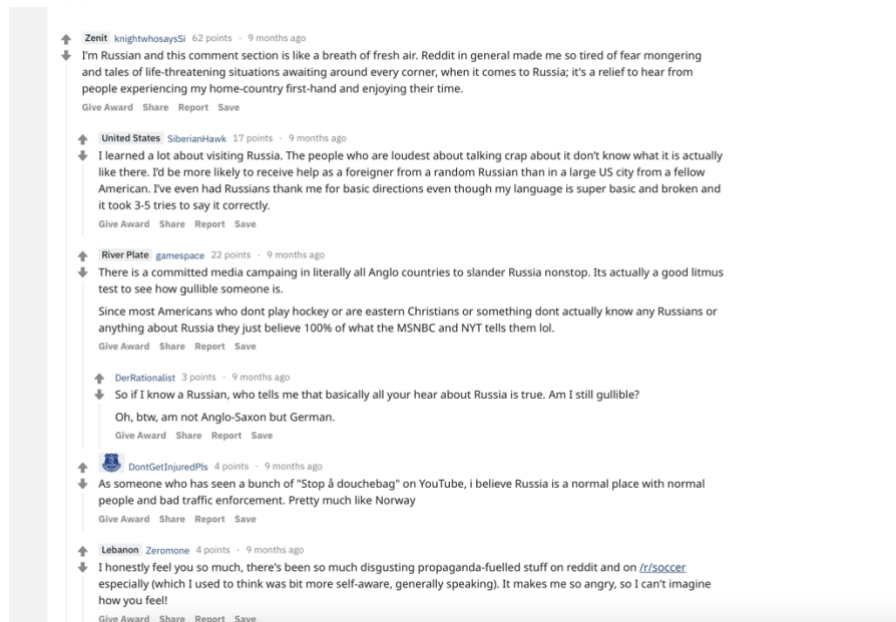


Figure 5: Russian Reddit Comments for “Russia”

However, using the same search term “Russia World Cup” and sorting by relevance yielded different results

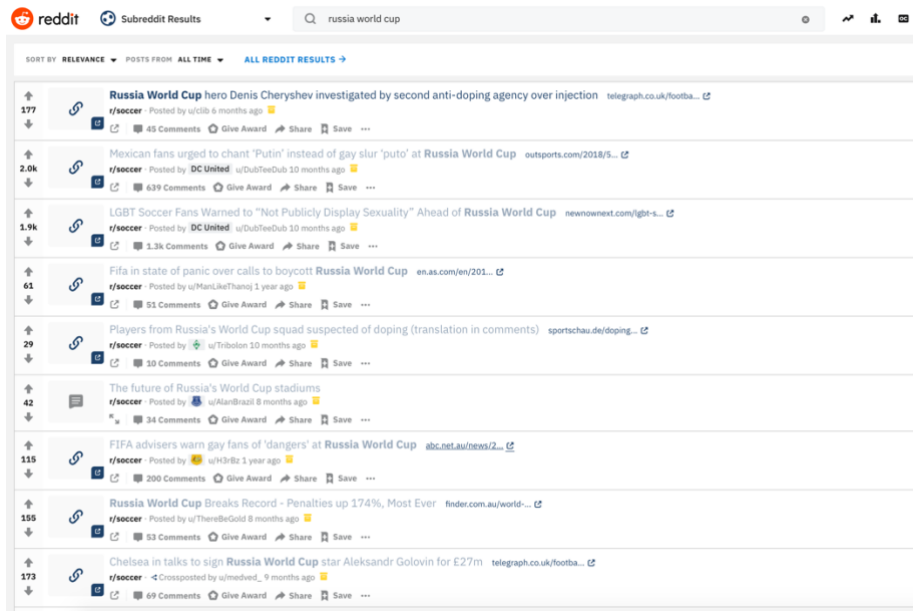


Figure 6: FIFA World Cup Reddit

Here we see that of the nine most relevant posts, eight occurred within the FIFA World Cup time frame. Of those six posts have negative connotations - lack of safety, doping and the possibility of a boycott. The other search terms yielded similar results, with high scoring posts focusing on analyzing matches after the fact, and then the most relevant delving into more nationalist or political topics such as corruption probes into FIFA and Russian fans backing England in the match against Croatia.

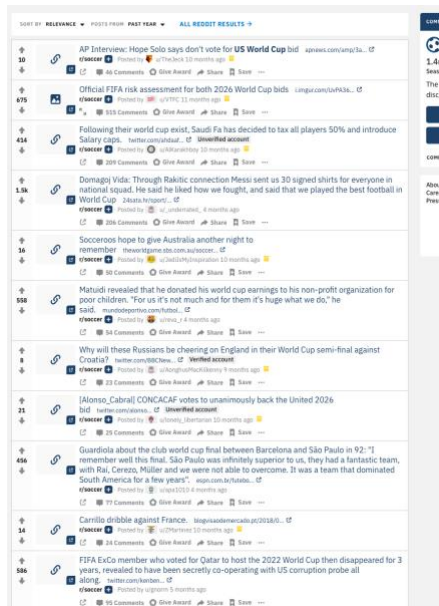


Figure 7: FIFA World Cup Reddit "US World Cup"

Overwatch World Cup Fan Forum

The Overwatch fan forum was largely dedicated to amateur play and had fewer overall searches returned. For the Overwatch World Cup, the subreddits r/overwatch and r/competitiveoverwatch were searched using the keywords “Russia and World Cup”, “US World Cup” and “World Cup Finals”. Similar to posts on r/soccer and r/worldcup for FIFA World Cup, many of the top posts were largely positive or neutral in tone.

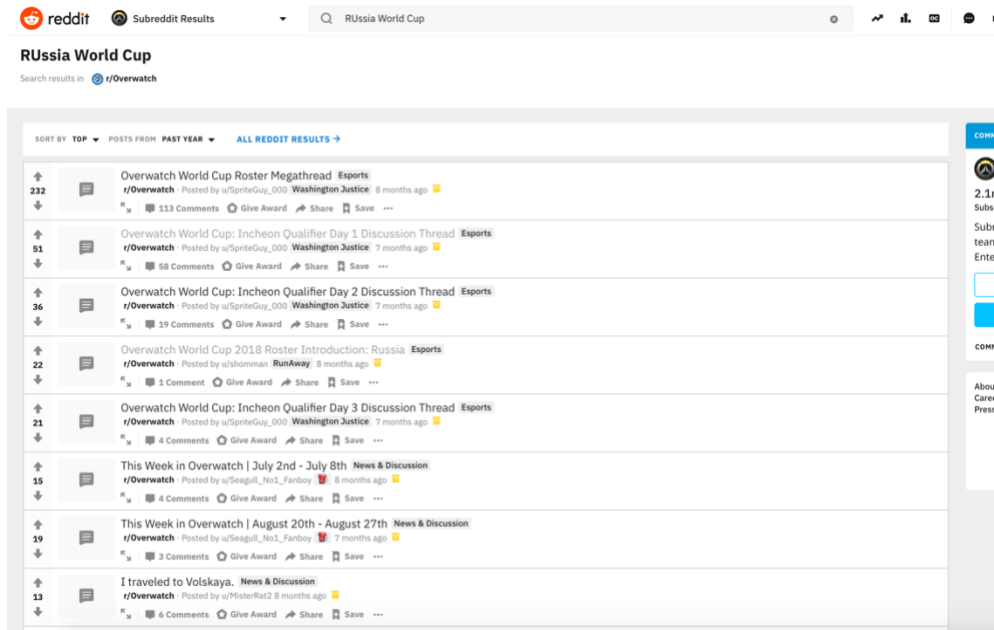


Figure 8: Overwatch World Cup Reddit Top

In fact, many of the posts were updates from the competition qualifiers where Russia was playing and Russia, as a term, was rarely brought up to describe a person, team or play style. This held true for posts when sorting posts by relevance and not by points.

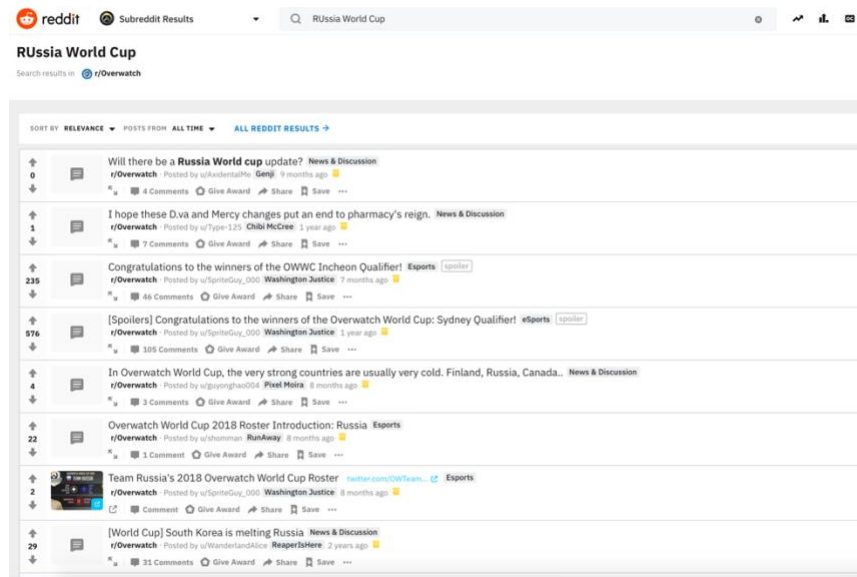


Figure 9: Overwatch World Cup Reddit Relevance

Analysis

For the spectator community of both competitions, there was a general comradery. For the FIFA World Cup, the top comments and posts are generally positive in how they discussed Russia, both as the location for the event and the players. For Overwatch, while the games did tap into national identities, there was still greater support for the way the game was played than just supporting the team whose identity matched that of the viewer. In coverage of the France match, a reporter commented that, “(al)though the French home team was very clearly the favorite, what the fans really loved was seeing great plays. Whenever something dramatic happened – a fight won, a flashy demonstration of skill, an objective scored – they erupted, regardless of the team.”¹¹⁸ This is shown in the forum

¹¹⁸ Castello, Jay. 2018. "Playing on National Pride': eSports is coming home at the Overwatch World Cup."

postings about how well the Russian team played and how unfortunate it was that they did not make the finals of the Overwatch World Cup.

Of the first 15 posts sorted by either most relevant or top for all of the search terms, many included a mention of nationality, either in describing a team or a country. For the keyword phrase “US World Cup” only four of the first 15 posts related directly to gameplay during the event for the FIFA forum, for the Overwatch subreddit the results were much the same. Most of the posts were directed towards the institutions themselves, such as FIFA, soccer, Blizzard and Overwatch. However, for the post on soccer reddit forum, every post that had to do with the tournament talked about the game in national terms. The Overwatch World Cup did not have as many mentions of national teams, but still focused on post-match discussion threads.

The first 15 posts in each of the keyword searches were assigned a theme. In a very simple and subjective process, a topic was either rated to be nationalist in nature, focusing on the sport as a whole or the sponsor of the competition, political or on the tournament itself. Some ratings were more intuitive than others, if the post talked about a specific match, a play or a round of the tournament it was rated as a tournament focused post. If it mentioned the governing structures of the event, such as FIFA or Blizzard, talked about the tournament in a general way or talked about the game in a general way it was put in the sport category. The other two ‘buckets’ were more subjective. If a post talked about a nation, usually about spectators or governments in a general way, it was rated as nationalistic. For political, if a post mentioned a specific initiative outside of the game or tournament structure, such as players charities, corruption charges, etc. it was rated

political.

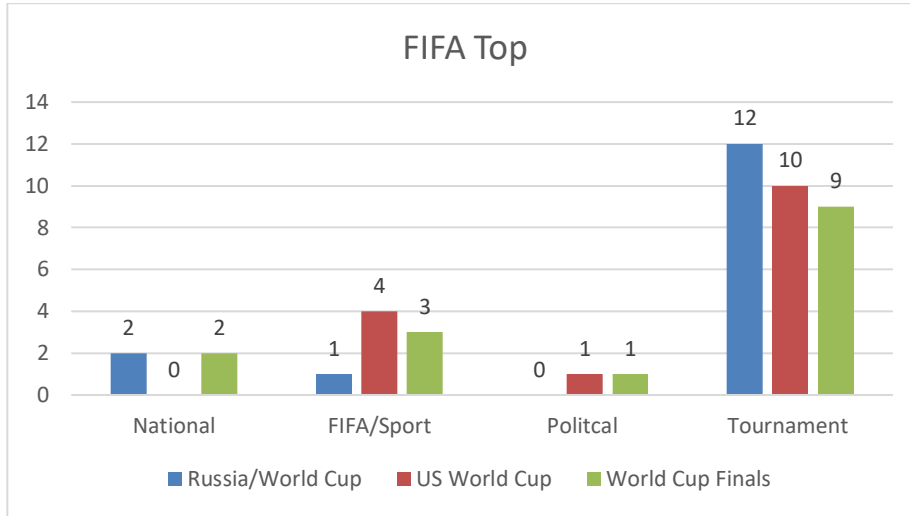


Figure 10: FIFA Top Topics

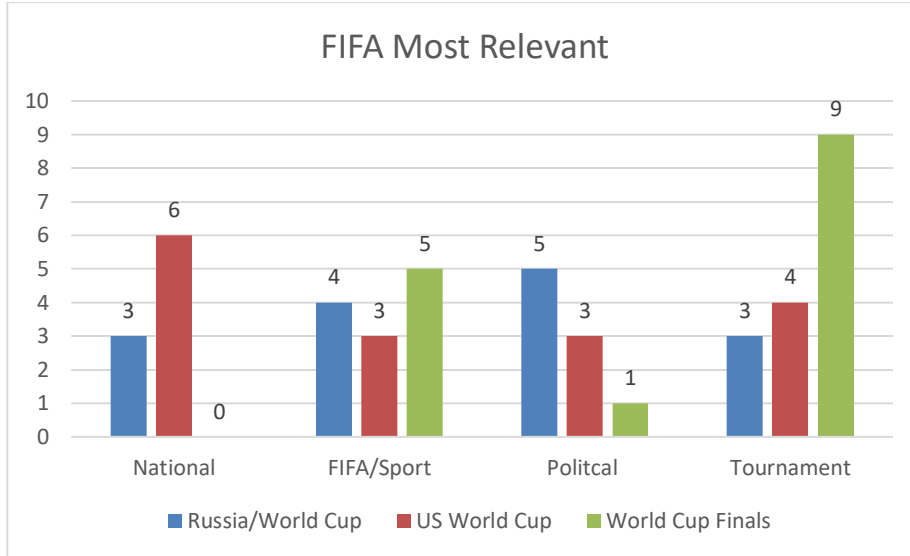


Figure 11: FIFA Most Relevant Topics

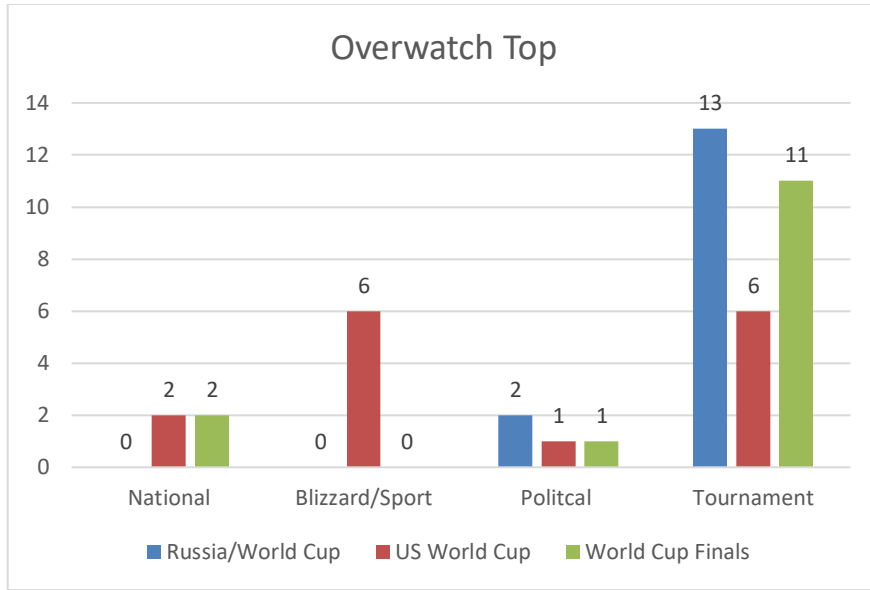


Figure 12: Overwatch Top Topics

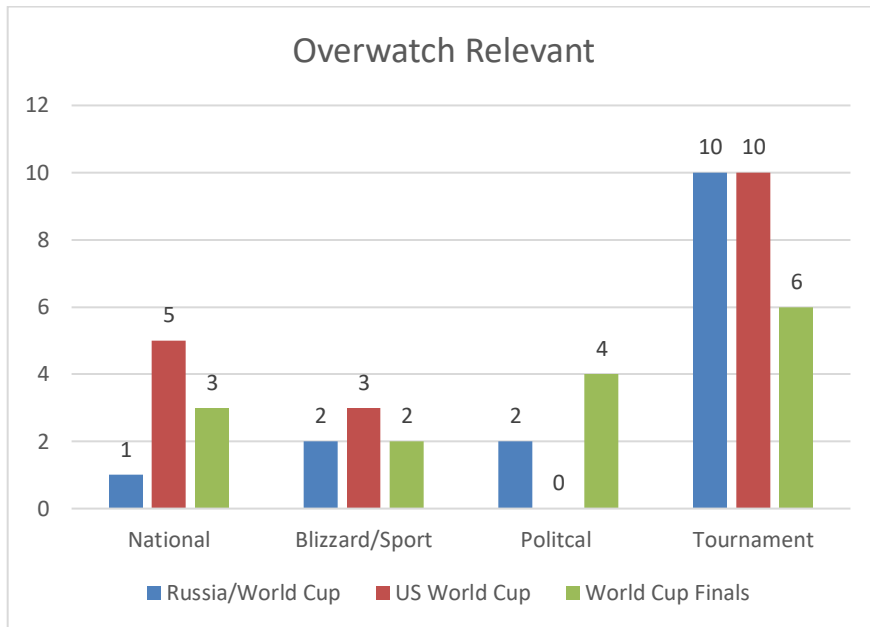


Figure 13: Overwatch Most Relevant Topics

Unsurprisingly, most of the highest ranked posts focused on the tournaments themselves either specific matches or teams. They also had the most comments. However, when sorting by relevance for both FIFA and Overwatch, the posts tended to delve into political or national conversations. That is not to say that the discussions were negative or positive towards one country, but the focus of the post evoked national identities. An example of this is a post from July 4, 2018 “In Overwatch World Cup, the very strong countries are usually very cold. Finland, Russia, Canada... South Korea is not warm as well. Is there a reason? Or is this just a coincidence?”¹¹⁹ This nationalist sentiment is also where FIFA and Overwatch differed the most. While the top comments for each of the subreddits were similar, for the FIFA World Cup the most relevant skewed towards more negative nationalist topics. For FIFA, these were not focused on how the players performed during the game, but instead on the political realities of competition. In essence, people were more likely to fall back on nationalist stereotypes. The most relevant posts using the keywords “Russia World Cup” retrieved several posts about doping and corruption charges. Interestingly, the country most likely to be described negatively by commenters in general, along with Russia, was the United States.

¹¹⁹ Guyonghao004. 2018. "In Overwarchj World Cup. the very strong countries are usually very cold. Finland, Russia, Canada.." *Reddit.com/r/Overwatch*. July 4. Accessed March 1, 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/Overwatch/comments/8w7qe4/in_overwatch_world_cup_the_very_strong_countries/

IMPLICATIONS

Despite the focus of the fan discussions being on the tournament itself, at the highest level of dialogue national identities still form an important part of the tournament experience. However, Blizzard seems to be turning into more nationalistic, traditional competition structures. In their most recent press release leading up the upcoming 2019 world cup, Blizzard announced “players hailing from the Overwatch League, Overwatch Contenders, and even Ranked Play, will put aside their professional rivalries to compete for the glory of their home countries.”¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Blizzard Entertainment. 2019. *Announcing The 2019 Overwatch World Cup*. April 25. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://news.blizzard.com/en-us/overwatch/22944574/announcing-the-2019-overwatch-world-cup>

Chapter 7: Amateur Overwatch

Does cross-cultural communication in the cooperative space of MMOs, such as Overwatch, create greater cross-cultural understanding between Americans and Russians? As seen in the previous chapter, at the more formalized professional level, it does not. E-sports, while striving for greater cohesion in their community, still tap into the basic national identities that traditional sports do. However, the amateur community, the community of players may be able to surpass the national identity activation through the activation of something else. At the roots of cross-cultural understanding is the idea of empathy. “Empathy is itself an affective state, which necessarily requires “interpersonal similarity”: some relevant similarity between the affective state of the subject and the target of empathy”¹²¹ In essence, through having some shared traits, a person is more likely to empathize with another person.

Overwatch players build group identity through a shared dedication to a goal and a common language of understanding of how the game works. An ability to signal membership in the “player” identity allows for better ability to play; “Those signals of group identity allow fast identification of common culture, facilitating fast collective cognition and action.”¹²² While people may be aware of playing with players from other countries, does that affect their playing of the game? If not, how does this common goal

¹²¹ de Vignemont, Frédérique, and Pierre Jacob. 2012. "What Is It like to Feel Another's Pain?" *Philosophy of Science* 79 (2).

¹²² Mason, Winter. 2012. "Group Identity, Culture, and Collective Intelligence." *Collective Intelligence Workshop*. Cambridge: M.I.T.

create greater empathy between players of different nationalities and what are the impacts of this greater understanding, if any?

There are two approaches to answering these questions. First is an analysis of how the game works in comparison to traditional modes of cross-cultural exchange in order to determine how, if at all, these exchanges are taking place for players of Overwatch. The second approach looks at how the players themselves interact with one another through the use of survey data. The idea is to measure the baseline of who the players are and how aware they are of who they are playing with, as well as to compare answers to foreign policy opinion surveys from a player sample to that of larger general population sample to see if there is any deviation in answers between the two groups.

Traditional modes of cross-cultural communication and exchange rely on the intentionality of the person or people participating. When one travels to a foreign country, one does so deliberately. In much of the literature around travel, going to another country and learning about other cultures is mark of “worldliness.” An example of this is study abroad for students. Study abroad is important because it is advantageous to the students through “Broadening world views and ways of thinking by experiencing different cultures firsthand. Benefiting **students** with future career opportunities by providing more life experiences and personal connections”¹²³ Games like Overwatch require that players interact with one another through a shared interface, but do not focus on intentionality of understanding other cultures. This suggests that the intercultural exchanges that happen

¹²³ Center for Global Education and Exchange. 2019. Importance of International Education. Accessed March 15, 2019. <https://hilo.hawaii.edu/studyabroad/importanceofinternationaleducation.php>.

through Overwatch are a passive byproduct of the game's overarching goal - to work effectively as a team in order to achieve mission objectives.

USE OF SURVEY DATA

The guiding question of the survey was, do players in these informal interactions talk about non-game topics and, if so, does it impact them in a similar way to traditional modes of exchange. In order to answer these questions, the survey was split into two parts. The first focused on baseline player questions in an effort to answer the questions "are these exchanges happening?" The latter half of the survey used questions taken from PEW and Chicago Council surveys in order to measure potential impact of these interactions by comparing the results from the Overwatch players to those of the general public.

The survey data gathered from Overwatch players can help paint a picture of what, if any, types of exchanges are taking place in the game as well as how those exchanges actually impact things like foreign policy assessments of other countries. The baseline will inform who plays Overwatch and if these groups of people differ from traditional participants of cross-cultural exchange programs, as well as what values they look for in teammates. These will help build a picture of community values and what, if any, identities people are creating through these games.

The first part of the survey qualitatively examined what motivates fans and if they have experienced one-on-one interactions with players of different nationalities to see how those experiences impacted their view of other countries. In order to measure views of other nationalities, I used several surveys that measured American's views on Russia and

compared them to the gamer community. I used random survey data from the 2018 Gallup poll, Americans' Views on Russia -- Ally, Friendly, Unfriendly or Enemy, data from a PEW research study. I posted the same survey questions online on the Overwatch forums in order to gain data on how users interact with the game and other players. The goal of this is to determine if, through cross-cultural exchanges, their view of Russia differs from the larger population. The reason for this multi-faceted approach is because while the professional tournament is organized by country, the amateur competitive play is by server, which can be changed through a VPN.

In order to gain more data on who the players were, general 'baseline' questions were drafted in order to better understand the survey population. These questions were intended to measure the parameters of the groups of players on the forum such as age, level of awareness of playing with foreign players and how they chose to engage with the game.

The second part of the survey used questions from PEW and Chicago Council in order to contrast the views between the general American public and the Overwatch players. In order to test if these spaces encourage cross-cultural understanding, I used questions from two surveys delivered to the American public through PEW and the Chicago Council focusing on American views on Russia. These questions were saved until the end in order to keep the foreign policy aspect from changing the answers in the former half of the survey which focused on player interactions.

The PEW study was chosen for its breadth of study as well as its methodology. Often, according to their US survey page, they will try and engage with the youngest

member of a household in order to sustain a diverse range of respondents. The players of Overwatch skew towards the ages of 12-24, making a younger sample more comparable.

In order to reach as much of the target population as possible, a self-completed survey through Google forms was released on forums dedicated to players of Overwatch. Traditionally, self-completed surveys eliminate members of the population who do not have access to computers or internet. Due to the nature of the target population, an online survey seemed like the most appropriate method to connect as those without computers were not likely consumers of Overwatch or e-sports in general. However, players that use platforms such as Xbox or PS4 would still be likely to frequent these forums for information online.

The survey was posted multiple times on the website reddit.com in an effort to collect a diverse range of responses. Reddit is the 4th most visited site in the US and the 16th most visited site worldwide. Reddit is unique in that it is almost completely controlled and moderated by users of the site. Users create subreddits on topics ranging from recipes, to sports, to favorite television program. As such, “Reddit claims to be the front page of the internet, achieving its stated purpose by allowing users to post news, questions, and other information in the form of text, images and links to external websites.”¹²⁴

While the PEW and Chicago Council survey methods rely on random number dialing in order to randomize their sample, the Overwatch player survey has some selection

¹²⁴ Horne, Benjamin D, Sibel Adali, and Sujoy Sikdar. 2017. *Identifying the Social Signals that Drive Online Discussions: A Case Study of Reddit Communities*. Conference Paper, IEEE International Conference of Commuter Communications and Networks.

bias due to the nature of its dissemination, through the Overwatch subreddit and survey subreddit on reddit.com. Only players who are on those forums at the time of posting, while see the survey due to the high volume of new posts. In order to cast a wide net, the survey was published at different times of day and on different days of the week to diversify responses.

There were three major areas of limitation in the survey approach, selection bias, total number of respondents and interpretation of the questions. One of the main limitations of an online survey is that it is difficult to measure the non-response rate. Many on the Overwatch forum on Reddit.com are likely to scroll past many of the posts. Generally, selection bias is also an issue, as only people who have the time at that moment or are very passionate about the subject will spend time responding to the survey.

The second limitation is that small number of respondents. It is estimated that over 30 million people play the game world-wide on a monthly basis. The respondents to this survey represent a small fraction of that population, with 70 total respondents.

The final limitation is the interpretation of the questions themselves. The open answer options had a wide array of responses. However, the PEW and Chicago Council questions were structured in such a way that the results should still be comparable.

Baseline Results

The first part of the survey focused on building a baseline of understanding of who plays Overwatch. While other surveys have attempted to measure who plays the game,

many of the questions are focused on the individuals understanding and impressions of gameplay. This survey focused more on the group dynamics and awareness that player had about the others that they were playing with.

The first part of the survey was focus on player demographics. Of the 73 survey respondents, a majority were male (76.7%) and between the ages of 18-25 (47.9%). 42 of 67 respondents said that their nationality was American. The second most common nationality was Canadian with 6 respondents. Many of the respondents (49.3%) played between 10 and 20 hours of Overwatch per week and 46.6% visited the [Reddit.com/r/overwatch](https://www.reddit.com/r/overwatch) thread between 10 and 20 times per week. The preferred platform of play was the PC with 71.2% of respondents. Over half of respondents play using the 'solo-queue' feature which means that they are placed with a completely random group during competitive play. When asked if they follow politics and/or current events over 60% of respondents said that they did.

When asked about values they look for in teammates, many (65.8%) said that English speaking was an initial quality they wanted for gameplay. Many respondents mentioned that qualities like hardworking, good communicator and personality were also initial traits they looked for. Given the option of staying as a team, 50% of respondents looked for teamwork when making the decision to stay as a team. When asked what kinds of people they do not like to play with a majority of respondents listed some toxicity as factor as well as an unwillingness to communicate and work as a team.

As far as communication while waiting to be placed in a match, most respondents either actively talked with their randomized team with queuing or would talk if others on

the team-initiated conversation. Talk between teammates was largely diverse with many respondents highlighting gameplay and analysis and the game of Overwatch in general as the most common topics (53.3% and 53.8% respectively). The second two most popular topics were popular culture (49.2%) and general strategy (46.2%). Finally, other video games (43.1%), Current events (26.2%) and personal life (35.4%) were the least common topics of discussion in the voice chat.

About 54% of respondents said that they have made friends through Overwatch and that they are aware they are interacting with people outside their own country through playing the game. Most of the players were on the European or American regional servers. One player mentioned that they would switch to the EU server if more of their European friends wanted to play. When asked about foreign interaction through the [reddit.com/r/overwatch](https://www.reddit.com/r/overwatch) forum over half of respondents acknowledged that they actively interacted with people outside their country. Interestingly, over 50% of respondents said that they were somewhat aware of playing with people from another country versus very aware (only 25%). Over 76% of respondents said that they enjoyed playing with people from foreign countries just as much as playing with people from their own country. However, when asked what subjects that they talked about with foreign teammates while queuing for matches, the top subjects did not change. Both game play and Overwatch in general were the top choices with 55.9 and 66.1 respectively. Strategy was the next most popular with 49.2% respondents selecting it. Interestingly, popular culture was only selected by 28.8% of respondents, showing a difference between conversation topics with a general team where 49% of respondents talking about popular culture. Other games

(20.3%), current events (13.6%) and personal life (18.6%) were all less popular topics of discussion with foreign teammates.

Analysis

The survey yielded interesting results. The typical respondent was an American male between the age of 18 and 25 who follows politics to some degree. The values looked for in a teammate and teams in general were most centered around the ability of the team to communicate effectively. Most interesting, was that while winning was seen as important, most respondents said they rank team compatibility higher than the ability to win. As for the qualities players look for in the decision to stay with a team, winning was only selected by 12.3% of respondents. Toxicity, people who intentionally try to lose (throwers) and people who are smurfs (high-level players playing at lower levels) were the most disliked teammates. The only demographic of people that was listed in that response were children (defined by most as people under the age of 12).

This shows a clear difference in the goals of the World Cup Tournament players and spectators – where the goal is to win. This highlights the distinction between video games and e-sports. The amateur players that make up the Overwatch community would rather have fun than necessarily win.

When interacting with people from other countries or nationalities, many players were somewhat aware of foreign players during gameplay, but it wasn't seen as something that they were very cognizant of. However, when playing with foreign teammates, respondents were more likely to focus on Overwatch specific topics of conversation than

when queueing with teammates in general. This suggests that players stuck to topics that they had in common (Overwatch). Perhaps this indicates that players showed an inclination to focus on shared values in conversation with teammates instead of topics where they were different. This shows that Overwatch can create shared values and sense of community among people who do not have other things in common. Overwatch is the common ground and the players are able to use that commonality.

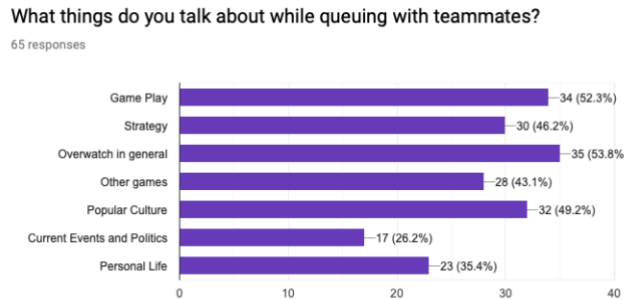


Figure 14: Baseline Survey Queuing

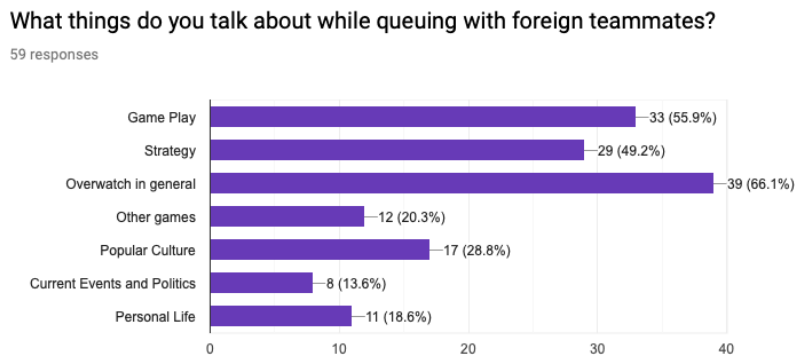


Figure 15 Baseline Survey Queuing with Foreign Teammates

However, when discussing topics with foreign players outside of the game, most respondents mentioned that they did discuss politics and popular culture. Several respondents stated that they often asked country specific questions like what life was like in other players' countries as well as current events. One respondent wrote, "With random people, foreigners or not because I don't care about that, nothing. With people who I keep playing with over time, it's the usual 'getting to know each other' thing so it can touch... pretty much anything. Things that we like, other games, could be politics, personal stuff, whatever. Depends on the people, the mood, the time, the context, ... They're just people."

Comparison with PEW and Chicago Council

The latter half of the survey used a mix of questions from PEW and Chicago Council attitudes on foreign affairs surveys. These surveys were designed to measure Americans' attitudes of foreign powers in general, as well some questions tasked with measuring the attitudes around Russian interference in the 2016 US Elections. Questions were selected based on their applicability to the measurement of American views on Russia.

Overall the data between the original PEW and Chicago Council surveys and the Overwatch Player Survey were largely consistent. However, between the two groups control, from PEW and Chicago Council Surveys, and OPS, from the Overwatch Player Survey, Overwatch players were more likely to answer, "I don't know." The other deviation was from the most extreme answers. Overwatch players were less likely to pick

answers that were the most severe, using words like major or very.

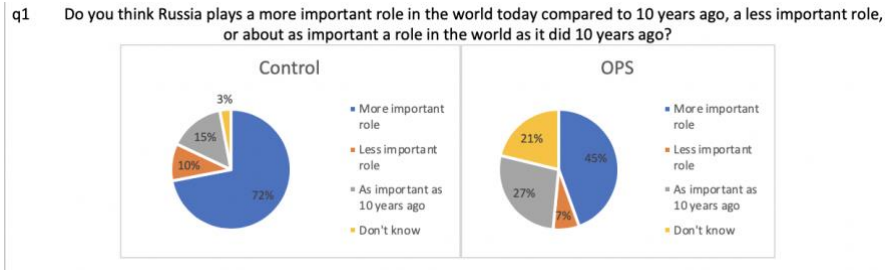


Figure 16 Comparative Survey Q1

Of the questions asked, Overwatch players were more likely to say that they had unfavorable views of Vladimir Putin (78% OPS versus 68% Control). Surprisingly, no player answered that they had a favorable view or had never heard of the Russian President, in contrast with the 3% and 6% of PEW survey respondents respectively.

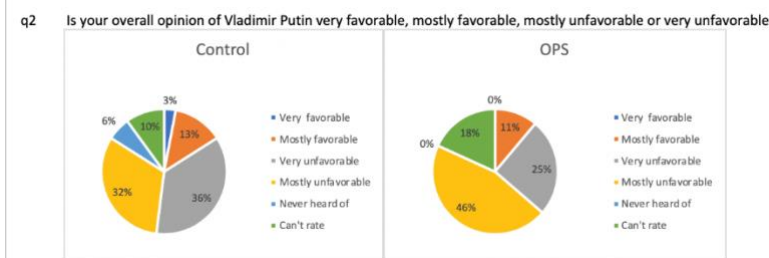


Figure 17 Comparative Survey Q2

Overwatch players were, however, less likely to view Russian power and influence as a major threat to the United States, whereas 89% of the respondents to the original PEW center survey viewed Russian power and influence a major threat.

q3 Do you think that Russia's power and influence is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to the well being of the United States

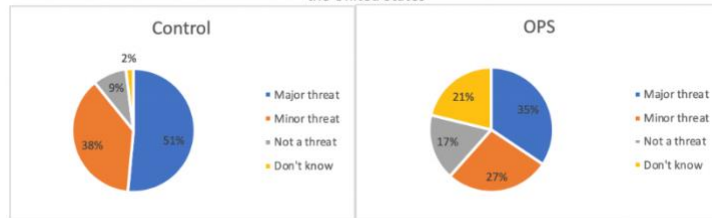


Figure 18 Comparative Survey Q3

Interestingly, the answers were most consistent between the two groups for the questions taken from the 2017 Chicago Council survey. However, the Overwatch group were more likely to choose “I don’t know” as an answer.

q4 To what extent do you think the Russian government tried to influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S presidential election

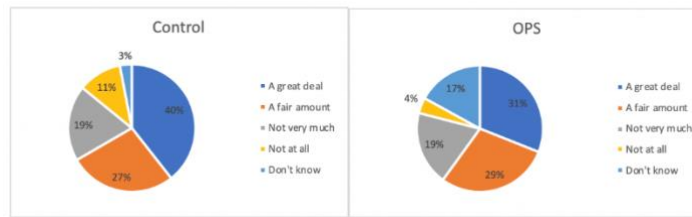


Figure 19 Comparative Survey Q4

q5 To what extent do you think Russia tries to influence the domestic affairs of the United States - a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or not at all?

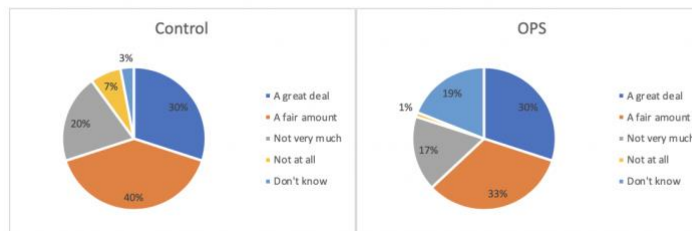


Figure 20 Comparative Survey Q5

Analysis

Overall the two groups were largely consistent in the distribution of answers. However, the major difference between the two groups were that Overwatch players were more likely to choose to respond “I don’t know” to any given questions. Approximately 20% of the Overwatch players who responded to the survey chose this option on each question, whereas only approximately 3% of respondents to the PEW and Chicago Council surveys chose that answer. There are several possible reasons for the increase in “I don’t know” answers for the Overwatch player group.

The first is that players of Overwatch may not be as engaged with public affairs. This could be due to the age of players - younger people may be less likely to follow current events or have strong opinions. Close to 70% of respondents were under the age of 25. However, over 90% of respondents to the survey said that they follow politics and current events either consistently or sometimes. Only 7% said that they do not follow current events in any way. Studies have shown that technical competence or lack thereof has little bearing on one answering “I don’t know” to a technical question. Instead, “this disengagement from political discourse cannot be attributed to differences in education or cognitive abilities. Instead, it indicates a lesser sense of social, as well as technical, political competence.”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Laurison, D. 2015. "The Willingness to State an Opinion: Inequality, Don't Know Responses, and Political Participation." *Sociol Forum* 925-948.

Another possibility is that respondents were trying to move through the survey quickly. However, Dr Laurensen found that willingness to respond “I don’t know” is not necessarily tied to boredom or trying to finish a survey quickly. “Responding “don’t know,” especially on unfiltered questions where it would be just as fast and easy to choose a neutral response or guess an answer at random, indicates unwillingness to participate in that question topic, likely based on the respondent's sense... that she or he is not a legitimate producer of opinions on those issues.”¹²⁶ The survey given to Overwatch players had no required questions. Players were under no obligation to finish the entire survey and of the 74 respondents over 4 did not answer the political questions in the latter half of the survey.

IMPLICATIONS

The survey suggests that while cross-cultural communication is taking place, it does not seem to make a large difference in opinion of foreign affairs. The findings indicate, that despite Overwatch, and other games like Overwatch, creating a space for people from a range of nations to communicate cross-culturally it is not impacting their overall opinions about another country’s politics.

From the baseline responses, players are aware that they are playing with people from other countries, but it is not a factor in how they choose to rate those players. For them, they are indifferent to cross-cultural differences as long as those differences do not

¹²⁶ Ibid

impact their goals for the game – teamwork and having fun.

The PEW and Chicago council comparison showed no real difference in foreign affairs opinions between those that play Overwatch and those that they sample in their survey. One of the measurable outcomes of cross-cultural interaction, is a greater ability to empathize with the other. Those that study abroad or had repeated exposure to other cultures experienced improvements in “openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability.”¹²⁷ Despite this constant exposure to people from foreign countries, where over a third of players were somewhat aware of playing with people from different nations, there was no great change in their responses to these formal survey questions around foreign opinions.

This suggests one’s national identity does not matter during gameplay - but that does not mean that these identities are shifting to encompass their identity in the Overwatch community. Instead the identities as member of the Overwatch player community may be completely disconnected from their national identities. The only time that other group identities are activated was when they were seen as a poor member of the community. According to a study on how social identity theory impacts goal attainment found that “instead individual motivation is projected on, informed by, and adapted to the needs, goals, expectations, or reward of the team or organization in which individuals work.”¹²⁸ This could be a result of the passive cross-cultural communication that happens through

¹²⁷ Wood, Janice. 2013. "Studying Abroad Boost Students' Emotional Development." PsychCentral. July 5. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://psychcentral.com/news/2013/07/05/studying-abroad-boost-students-emotional-development/56846.html>.

¹²⁸ Ellemers, N, D De Gilder, and S. A. Haslam. 2004. "Motivating Individuals and Groups at Work: A Social Identity Perspective on Leadership and Group Performance." *Academy of Management Review* 459

Overwatch. People are aware that they are playing with a wide array of people, but it is not their goal while playing the game - it is instead a byproduct. Cross-cultural exchange is usually a very intentional process instead of an unintended result of a game.

Massive Multiplayer Online games create a space that allows for people of different cultures to interact, without any intention to communicate cross-culturally. This is a new phenomenon, a byproduct of information age, and the real long-term impacts of this passive interaction are unknown.

SECTION 3: CONCLUSION

The main question of this paper focused on how virtual and unmoderated spaces, such as the chatroom in Overwatch, create opportunities for cross cultural exchange. The randomization aspect of gameplay in Overwatch, as well as the extreme difficulty to track who is saying what, gives players an unprecedented freedom to discuss any topic with any person. When looking at countries with very strict laws around internet access and what one can say in public, these games provide a space to exchange ideas unhindered by the political realities of the nation they reside in. As the internet becomes more and more accessible, it allows communities to form and interact—some of which can provide illegal substances or fund terrorist activity.¹²⁹ But it can also create unmoderated spaces for cross-cultural exchange. This thesis looked at what these cross-cultural exchanges look like.

The findings suggest that MMOs can create shared spaces where a shared ‘culture’ creates a bridge through which cross-cultural communication can occur. These communities build on the anonymity as well as the immediacy of the internet to build shared identities. While there was an overarching community of Overwatch, it broke neatly into two underlying communities, the first the community of spectators, those that enjoy the sport when it is played at a highly competitive level, and the second of the players, those that enjoy playing the game recreationally. What I found, is that it is not the medium, the game of Overwatch, itself that facilitates greater cross-cultural interaction.

The formalized competitive tournaments do not overcome the trappings of international sport. In fact, Blizzard, has used messaging to invoke a more nationalist identity in tournaments through mimicking formal tournament structures seen in events

¹²⁹ Sáfrán, József. 2017. "Terrorist activity in online games (Terrorista aktivitás az online videójátékokban)."

such as the FIFA World Cup. While there are echoes of the “Olympian ideal” in e-sports competitions, the idea of sport for sport’s sake, it still falls short. “Looking at the love which the crowd has for the League, the players and the game; it makes this old fogey smile at how much video games have been accepted into the mainstream and that e-sports is on its nascent rise. Overall this would have positive repercussions, not just on Overwatch as a game but to video games as a whole.”¹³⁰ High-level competitive sports, it seems, easily fall back on nationalism to motivate spectators to root for “their” team—whether they are rooting for a football team or an e-sports team of Overwatch players.

Through survey data of casual players, however, I saw that there was cross-cultural communication happening. But this was a byproduct of the in-game interactions, not the goal. Through participation in the MMO, players had created a new identity completely unrelated to their national identity. The player community of Overwatch, while seeing themselves as members of a ‘global’ community, did experience cross-cultural exchange. However, this exchange did not seem to change larger ideas around identity and foreign affairs despite interacting with members of foreign nations. This is because, while the players were interacting with, and usually aware of, foreign players, that exchange was not intentional. Players played with teams that worked well to achieve their goals in the sport. The only time when foreign identity is mentioned online, is when groups of people violate the agreed upon community standards for the game – such as toxicity or ‘throwing’. They created their own set of shared norms, language and values. In essence, through Overwatch, these players created their own culture.

This is interesting because there is no real precedent for this type of incidental exchange, and this suggests interesting avenues for those interested in promoting cross-

¹³⁰ Silenthill. 2018. "Is OWL Really Ruining the Game for Everyone." Forums Blizzard. July. Accessed March 1, 2019. <https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/overwatch/t/is-owl-really-ruining-the-game-for-everyone/175240/15>.

cultural communication. Companies such as Blizzard could work with organizations that specialize in international exchanges to build on this medium. If the cross-cultural exchange aspect of MMOs were slightly more intentional, it could benefit players.

Some players are already using video games, such as Overwatch, as a deliberate, intentional channel for cross-cultural exchange. In a posting to the Russian language subreddit, titled “Looking for a comrade to play DOTA 2/Overwatch who want to improve his Russian”, a player from Saint-Petersburg reached out to find an English-speaking community member in order to do a language exchange.¹³¹ Russians

At the same time, formalizing this goal of cross-cultural communication could also destroy the organic creation of these online MMO communities. The most interesting part of the imagined community of Overwatch players is the irrelevance of national culture to most in-game interactions. What this suggests is that online communities (at least in MMOs) may be forming that are entirely independent of their members’ national identities. These communities create several opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, but their power is in the informal and a-national connections they create between players. The player base for these games are traditionally under the age of 25, meaning that these communities will impact younger generations.

For Russians and Americans, these communities offer a unique opportunity to connect despite a decline in opportunities to formally exchange cultures. However, several Russian laws threaten the freedom to connect with and exchange, whether formally or informally, through the internet. A bill is currently being considered by the Russian State Duma which would allow Russia to segment the internet and create infrastructure to

¹³¹ Kraivd. 2018. "Looking for a Comrade to Play DOTA 2/Overwatch Who Want to Improve His Russian." Reddit.com/r/russian. September 5. Accessed March 1, 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/russian/comments/9d5h3u/looking_for_a_comrade_to_play_dota_2overwatch_w_ho/.

insulate their own Runet.¹³² While the bill's stated purpose is to protect the Russian people from cyber-attacks, many suggest that the bill will drive Russia into total internet isolation.¹³³ While the true impact of these types of communities is yet unknown, it is imperative that these channels remain open in order to reap the benefits of a more connected, more inclusive, multinational or a-national, community.

¹³² Gerasukova, Margarita, (Герасюкова, Маргерита). 2019. "The Enemy Will Not Pass: The State Duma Will Protect the Runet (Враг не пройдет: как Госдума защитит Рунет)." *Gazeta*. February 12. Accessed April 29, 2019. https://www.gazeta.ru/tech/2019/02/12/12178717/runet_defense.shtml.

¹³³ Zamachina, Tatiana, (Замахина, Татьяна). 2019. "Network Variant (Сетевой вариант)." *RG.RU*. April 11. Accessed April 12, 2019. <https://rg.ru/2019/04/11/zakon-o-zashchite-runeta-ot-vneshnih-ugroz-proshel-vtoroe-chtenie.html>.

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