Remixing Overwatch: A Case Study in Fan Interactions with Video Game Sound

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Recommended Citation
Shur, Etelle, "Remixing Overwatch: A Case Study in Fan Interactions with Video Game Sound" (2017). Scripps Senior Theses. 1076.
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REMIXING OVERWATCH: A CASE STUDY IN FAN INTERACTIONS WITH VIDEO GAME SOUND

By

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF THE ARTS

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JANUARY 30, 2017
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professors Jaquez and Kang, thank you for your guidance through this process and for your patience and understanding in helping me through it. I cannot put into words how much your support has meant to me.

To my friends—thank you for the late night study sessions, the long-distance skype calls, the encouraging messages and cat pictures. To Katherine, thank you for introducing me to video games, for not minding when I sat and watched you play, and for encouraging me to “just make a character!” And of course, to Blair, for introducing me to the bright world of Overwatch and for identifying all the sounds I could not.

Most of all, thank you to my parents, thank you for giving me the opportunity to pursue my passions, and your unwavering patience, love, and support when the pursuit did not go well. To Yasha, for all the hugs and distractions, and do Grisha and Anya for the cat pictures. Thank you to my grandparents, for all the love and encouragement. And finally, to my grandma Liya, who instilled in me a love of books and learning: it’s a few weeks late, but I promised you I would get it done and I did. I hope, wherever you are, that you can be proud of my work.
ABSTRACT

In the past, video game communities have been studied after they have already been well-established. Studying the *Overwatch* fandom now, less than a year after the game’s release, while its community is still growing, allows me to observe the way gamers bring prior fandom experiences to a new game and the way a new fan community establishes its own practices. Moreover, the *Overwatch* fandom is growing at a time when technology is rapidly changing the way fans share transformative works and the way media companies interact with fans. Studying *Overwatch* fan communities now can give a sense of what is and is not changing and how it might affect fandom.
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CHAPTER 1: SOMETHING

I first picked up a game controller three years ago, to design a character in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* on a roommate’s PlayStation 4. Video games had always been a cultural phenomenon that I had been peripherally aware of but had no particular interest in, but I had been watching my roommate play DA:I for a few weeks, and I was fascinated by the detailed and lifelike graphics, the story, and the overall mechanics of the gameplay. When I asked if I could try creating a character, I was not planning on actually playing the game; I just wanted to play around with the options for a bit. The plan was for me to create the character and then hand it over to my friend to play through the game, but instead, once I had gone through the lengthy process of picking not only my character’s class and whether would be dwarf, human, qunari, or elf but also picking her gender and designing every detail of her face, from the size and curvature of her nose to the width of her jaw, I found that I felt a sense of ownership of this character. I wanted to decide not only how she would look and fight, but to find out what the game’s storyline had in store for her and what kinds of choices she would be able to make, and so I began my first ever playthrough of a videogame.

I cannot say that playing *DA:I* has turned me into an avid gamer, but it has opened to me a section of fandom I had not previously thought to investigate. I have been part of online fandom since middle school, though until recent years I have

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1 In games, class refers to the classification of a character, e.g. whether they are a mage, warrior, healer, etc.
been more of a “lurker” than an active participant. Most of my fandom activity has centered around traditional media such as books and TV series. Even within these boundaries, there is a wide variety of fan-created transformative works, from art to fiction to zines to music videos. Gaming fandom has all of these things, but there is an additional layer to the structure of video game participatory culture: while other media texts are meant to be passively consumed, whether through reading or watching, games are actively consumed through the act of playing. As a result, the identity of “gamer” becomes associated with the action of gaming, and it has become common practice to post gameplay videos online as part of the performance of this identity. An entire subculture has formed around the act of public gameplay, centered around site such as YouTube and Twitch.tv, where gamers stream their games to and interact with live audiences.

Although ludology, or the study of games and gaming, is a young field, quite a bit of attention has been paid to the performative aspects of video game participatory culture. In his 2016 article “Performing as Video Game Players in Let’s Plays”, Josef Nguyen discusses the way the proliferation of Let’s Plays\(^2\) creates a performance of a video game player as well as showcasing various gamer identities. Nguyen specifically focuses on the practice of riffing, or live commentary, during Let’s Plays; he argues that through the practice of riffing, players perform their identities both as individuals who play games and as individuals who share their gameplay. Moreover, as players do Let’s Plays with different games off of which

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\(^2\) As defined on /r/letsplay, a Let’s Play is “one or more people that record themselves playing video games through screenshots or captured video (Mostly the latter).” It has become standard practice for video Let’s Plays to include an insert of the player’s face.
they necessarily riff differently, they showcase new personalities. Thus Let’s Plays allow players to perform different identities and reveal more about themselves through riffing. Ian Bogost analyzes performative play in his essay “Persuasive Games: Performative Play,” focusing on games where the player’s actions affect not only the virtual but the real world, too (2008). Bogost concludes by defining performativity as “a special kind of play” which requires “the player’s conscious understanding of the purpose, effect, and implications of her actions, such that they bear meaning as cultural conditions, not just instrumental contrivances.” To Bogost, exercise games may be a type of performative play, as the actions they require the player to perform directly influence the player and the world around them, but for performativity to truly be in effect, the player must be aware of the reasoning behind their actions.

Ludomusicology in particular places an emphasis on performativity in the way that game music affects the player’s experience and performance of the game. Karen Collins, who has become one of the definitive authorities on video game music, makes a distinction between interactive audio and adaptive audio in her 2003 book *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design*. She argues that when engaging with games, a player can never lose awareness of, or transcend their body and become fully immersed in the experience of the game the way they would be able to immerse themselves in a musical piece or a movie. The player must actively participate in the game, triggering various sound cues (3). Iain Hart aims to take Collins’ work further in his article “Meaningful Play: Performativity, Interactivity and Semiotics in Video Game
“Music,” in which he conceptualizes interactivity as a performative act. He argues that within game worlds all actions are performative, as the game can only move forward when the player acts, and it is through play that the game becomes a text (2014). Because game music is meant to either respond directly with the player’s actions—what Collins calls interactive music—or to adapt to parameters around the player, such as environmental cues, player health, enemy health, etc., a game’s music is never performed the exact same way twice: it is tied to the player’s performance of the game. William Cheng explores how game sound can act as a social device through ethnographic case studies of five games in his book *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (2014). Cheng addresses nostalgia, horror, authenticity, and violence, but his investigation of gender presentation in *Team Fortress 2* (2007) is of particular interest here. Cheng studies the way players react to higher-pitched voices, breaking conventions of anonymity to ask the perceived female player invasive questions and at times harass them. This becomes acceptable practice within the game environment, where such conversations can be passed off as jokes. Cheng concludes that women are left with a dilemma in regard to performing their femininity in-game: either they can remain silent or pass as male, obscuring their identity, or continually “come out” as women and brave the abuse, but be able to fully perform their identities. In her book *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* Kiri Miller dedicates a chapter each *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) and *Rock Band*, analyzing the way these games use music to formulate an identity for the player (2011). Miller take a performance- and player-focused approach in her research, focusing more on player experience than on
theory. Analyzing the role music plays in GTA, Miller concludes that by allowing the player to choose which genre radio stations they listen to, the game gives them a choice to either “play along” listen to the music they believe would be typical for their avatar or to exercise a measure of autonomy and pick something different; this measure of freedom gives the player an added dimension of exploration in their game. In the second part of her book, Miller engages with concepts of embodied performance through her study of Guitar Hero and Rock Band. Miller emphasizes the way these performances are neither fully virtual nor fully embodied, giving a sense of in-betweenness.

While each of these books and articles provides valuable insight into the ways players perform identities and make meaning through game sound, they primarily focus on player interactions with sound specifically in the context of the game. Miller’s ethnography of live Rock Band social performances and competitions does deal with social aspects of gaming, these interactions still take place in the context of playing the game. In Playing With Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games, Collins dedicates a chapter to game sound in performance, covering the range of ways players socialize through performances of game sound. She briefly covers the history of machinima videos, coined from the words “machine” and “cinema,” which began as data file of recorded gameplay shared between users in the early 1990s and have become the gaming community’s analog to songvids, the fandom practice in which pre-existing visuals are set to music in order to present a new interpretation. Collins categorizes music videos in which game footage is edited together and set to music as a type of contemporary
machinima. A common type of game music video consists of player avatars dancing in-game; the footage is later edited and set to music. Through these types of in-game performances, created through real-time rendering of players’ actions, the notion of live-ness becomes fluid. She briefly touches on the functions of game filk, or fan-generated, music; these are fan-written songs, usually set to existing popular music, which narrate the player’s experience and “can extend the players’ identification with characters beyond the game” (2013, 110). Through filk music, Collins argues, players create a character which they embody in the performance of a song. Collins spends the most time on chiptunes, a style of music which has developed out of a community of musicians interested in producing music through obsolete computer chips and game consoles. The chiptune community, however, has its own performative practices and does not often intersect with the wider video game sound communities.

This thesis presents a case study of the community which has sprung up around the sound of Overwatch, which Blizzard Entertainment announced at the end of 2014 and released at the beginning of 2016, and which has, in the roughly two years since its announcement inspired a slew of transformative works of all types. Through an ethnographic study of the remix culture around Overwatch sound, I will attempt to determine the factors that have led to the popularity of Overwatch as a remixable text and explore both the ways in which remix culture has contributed to public performances of fan identity and the ways in which existing fan culture can give new life to and contribute to the spread of a game’s sound.
Why *Overwatch*?

I believe both *Overwatch*’s sound design and fan response to the game make it an excellent candidate for a case study in the way fans interact with and give new life to game sound. *Overwatch* garnered an immediate fan response upon its announcement in November 2014, and it has consistently been one of the most praised and talked about games of 2016. Moreover, *Overwatch* has a sound design which I believe to be particularly conducive to remixing. From its inception, *Overwatch*’s sound design was constructed around a “play by sound” concept: the goal was to allow people to play with their eyes closed, identifying and responding to threats based on sound alone. The result is a soundscape that accounts for the smallest details and provides a wide palette of sounds for remixers to work with. Additionally, Blizzard Entertainment has made a concerted effort to support the fan communities around *Overwatch*, and there is a robust participatory culture both around *Overwatch* in general and around *Overwatch* sound in particular.

In the past, video game communities have been studied after they have already been well-established. Collins references *World of Warcraft* (2004) and *Half-Life* (1998), among other games, while Cheng focuses on *Fallout 3* (2008), *Final Fantasy VI* (1994), *Silent Hill* (1999), *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007), and *Team Fortress 2* (2007). Millar chose the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Guitar Hero* series for her study. All of these games had established player bases and community practices by the time they were studied. Looking at the *Overwatch* fandom now, less than a year after the game’s release, while its community is still growing, allows me to observe the way gamers bring prior fandom experiences to a new game and the way a new
fan community establishes its own practices. Moreover, the *Overwatch* fandom is growing at a time when technology is rapidly changing the way fans share transformative works and the way media companies, known is fandom as The Powers That Be, or TPTB, interact with fans. Fandom and transformative works are rapidly being acknowledged and legitimized by TPTB; Blizzard has been at the forefront of this movement in its promotion of *Overwatch*. Studying *Overwatch* fan communities now can give a sense of what is and is not changing and how it might affect fandom.

**Methods**

I do not personally play *Overwatch*, for a variety of reasons, so I could not conduct participant observation in-game. To compensate for this and to get a sense of the way players interact with the game sound while playing, I collected and watched a variety of YouTube videos players have uploaded, ranging from gameplay video to instructional videos on how to best utilize the play-by-sound concept. Additionally, I conducted observation on the *Overwatch* fandom on Twitch.tv, where I watched streamers and took notes on the way they interacted with their viewers, and participated in fandom on Tumblr, where I tracked the #overwatch tag and created a blog dedicated to collecting and cataloguing *Overwatch* remixes and in-game player-sound interactions. In order to find remixes, I looked primarily to YouTube as a platform, as it seems to be the most popular choice both for creators and listeners. Through YouTube, I tracked creators to other platforms such as SoundCloud and Spotify.
CHAPTER 2: OVERWATCH AND FAN RESPONSE

What is Overwatch?

*Overwatch* is generally considered a first-person shooter\(^3\), but it has been hailed by multiple sources as an evolution of the time-honored game style. One reviewer described it as existing “at an intersection between design and artistry,” and “an incredible achievement in multiplayer shooter design” (Ingenito 2016). Another called it “a Saturday morning cartoon turned into a beautiful, modern 3D game” (Webster 2016).

The game is set in a futuristic world, in which sentient robots known as Omnics declared war on humanity. An organization called Overwatch was formed to protect humanity, consisting of a select group of individuals with various unique powers. They restored peace, and were hailed as heroes for a time, but were later disbanded and labelled criminals. The game’s story begins at a time of escalating hostilities, dubbed “The Second Omnic Crisis” when one of the former Overwatch agents—a genetically modified gorilla scientist named Winston—takes it upon himself to recall his colleagues in an effort to restore peace. A shadowy group of antagonists is introduced in parallel with the Overwatch heroes, though their goals and motivation remain unclear.

In addition to the first cinematic trailer which accompanied the announcement of *Overwatch* in November 2014, establishing the basic concept of

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\(^3\) A first-person shooter, or fps, is a game style in which the action seems to take place directly from the player’s point of view. As the name implies, first-person shooters center around the gameplay mechanic of shooting enemies and other targets. Players generally only see their avatar’s arms and whatever they are holding during gameplay.
the game and teasing the audience with a few of the characters, Blizzard
Entertainment released a teaser in May 2016 in the run-up to the game’s release,
followed by four animated shorts, each of which introduced one or two characters,
briefly demonstrated their abilities, and provided both character backstory and world
information. A fifth animated short centering around a character’s backstory was
released in August 2016. Blizzard’s announcement of a completely new character in
November 2016 was accompanied by an animated short placing the new character
within the current story, an origin story video, and a gameplay trailer. In addition to
the fourteen character-specific trailers and animated shorts, at the time of writing
there were ten comics available for free through the official Overwatch website; each
of them provides further backstory and character development for Overwatch’s
heroes.

Against this story backdrop, Overwatch combines first-person shooter
mechanics with a massive online battle arena (MOBA). Players battle each other in
teams of six across a variety of maps. All twenty-three of Overwatch’s characters
(known in-game as heroes) are available for play in every game; players are not
constrained in their choice by the heroes’ backstories and relationships. Players do
learn more about the Overwatch world as they play the game, as heroes interact with
each other and the environments they are placed in to reveal both plot points and
individual characterization. McCarthy credits Blizzards choice to employ this
method of transmedia storytelling—a term coined by fandom scholar Henry Jenkins,
wherein world-building takes place not in one concentrated story but in snippets
across a variety of platforms—with the way the game “[radiates] positivity” and remains unencumbered with the weight of lore (McCarthy 2016).

**Fan Response**

The community of practice that is the *Overwatch* fandom deserves a case study of its own to do it justice; it sprawls across several online platforms, including Tumblr, Reddit, YouTube, Twitch, and various fanfiction archival site. In this section I will give an overview of the way fans responded to the game and the ways in which they engage with *Overwatch*, its characters, and each other and the types of cross-platform community practices which have developed in relation to the game.

Whether *Overwatch*’s concept and gameplay is truly unique has been vigorously debated throughout the gaming world, but what is notable about *Overwatch* is the way its use of transmedia storytelling has supported a community of fans and spawned an ever-growing number of transformative works. Henry Jenkins notes that “most often, transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories”(2007). Blizzard’s method of periodically dropping story and world-building pieces in various formats has created a world which allows it to host a diverse cast of characters while allowing fans to engage with the world-building at various levels. MOBAs such as *League of Legends* also have their own lore which fans interact with, writing fiction and creating art, but in the roughly two years since the first cinematic trailer was released, *Overwatch* has garnered an unprecedented amount of attention. Within two weeks of its launch, 7 million players had logged over 119 million hours in the game (Seppala 2016), and
in less than five months 20 million people were playing (McWhertor 2016). In contrast, the long-running World of Warcraft had 12 million players at its peak in 2010, five years after its launch (“WoW Subscribers/players” 2016).4

Overwatch immediately garnered a huge fan response upon its announcement at BlizzCon 2014. The #overwatch tag on Tumblr for November 7, 2014, shows that within hours of the first trailer’s release people were already posting gifsets5 and concept art for all twelve of the characters included in the initial release. Gamers started posting reaction videos to the announcement on YouTube the very same day, and by November 8 there were analysis videos already up (Gamers Nexus 2014; WarchiefZ Whitefang 2014) The first (to my knowledge) remix of the Overwatch music was posted to YouTube on November 11, just four days after the initial announcement, by Laura Platt, whose orchestral reinterpretation of the victory theme remains one of the most popular Overwatch remixes (Laura Platt (Pl511) 2014).

The first Overwatch fanfiction was posted to Fanfiction.net (ff.net) the next day (muhtracer 2014). It was a short, sexually explicit piece which the author stated they had written drunk; it did not become influential in the fandom in any way, but, if nothing else, it illustrates how quickly the internet’s pornographic imagination works. The next piece of fanfiction, was sniperct’s “Like a Ghost,” posted to both

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4 In September 2016, Riot Games stated that League of Legends has 100 million monthly players (cite Forbes). However, I do not believe that LoL and Overwatch figures are comparable, as LoL is free to play, while Overwatch costs either $40 or $60, depending on the edition. Additionally, there is a lot of anecdotal evidence of people making multiple accounts on LoL, possible skewing the numbers.
5 Gifsets and photosets are a popular post type on Tumblr. As the name implies, they consist of a set of gifs or photos which have been arranged in a specific order. Common formats include 6 or 8 images in two columns and 9 images in three columns of three with the outside eight images acting as a frame for the center image. The arrangement of gifs and photos often serves to create a narrative or illustrate a point.
ArchiveofOurOwn.org (AO3) and ff.net on November 11, “Like a Ghost” is evidence of how quickly the Overwatch fandom began shipping\textsuperscript{6} characters together. In it, sniperct pairs Widowmaker and Tracer, the two female characters featured in the first cinematic trailers; Widowtracer, as they are known in fandom, was one of the first main pairings in the fandom.

**Diversity in Overwatch**

The game industry’s problem with diverse representation—lack thereof—is long and relatively well-documented. In 1998, spurred on by the then-new “girls’ games” movement, which centered around female-run gaming startups which attempted to bridge the gender divide in video games, the book *From Barbie® to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, presented a compilation of essays which speculated on the ways in which feminist ideology could be applied to technology to create a more welcoming space for girls in gaming (Cassell and Jenkins 1998). The authors foresaw a future where software stores would have a segregated “pink” aisle for girl’s games, the way toy stores tend to have an overwhelmingly pink aisle dedicated to girls’ toys and sought to prevent it. It would seem that if such efforts began in the 1990s, by now the point would be moot, and women would have equal representation in video games. And yet, women continue to be marginalized in video games. As recently as August 2014, under the guise of fighting to restore ethics in game journalism, a movement calling itself Gamergate began a prolonged violent harassment campaign targeting female game developers

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\textsuperscript{6} “Shipping”, derived from *relationship*, is the fandom practice of wishing to see two characters paired in a romantic relationship or supporting an existing romantic relationship between two characters. Popular pairings are often assigned ship names, usually portmanteaus of the characters’ names, to be used as shorthand in fandom discussion.
and critics, men of color who criticized racism in the game industry, and anyone else deemed a “SJW”\(^7\) (Poland 2014). Gamergate began by targeting female game developer Zoe Quinn after her ex-boyfriend wrote a series of posts alleging that she cheated on him with a game reviewer in order to get a favorable review of *Depression Quest*, one of her games and grew into a behemoth which convinced Intel to remove their advertising from a gaming site which Gamergate had deemed unethical (Par kin 2014). In reaction to Gamergate, the mainstream gaming industry disavowed the harassment en masse and pledged to do better by women (Zecher 2014). The next year, at the 2015 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) much was made about how the number of female characters in video games had increased, but at the final count, only 9 percent of the games presented at the featured sole female protagonists, while 32 percent of them featured sole male protagonists (Sarkeesian 2015).

If women are fighting to be presented as something other than bikini-wearing models in video games, in many cases people of color, especially black people, are fighting to be represented at all. By now there is a plethora of essays on the need for positive representation of black characters. In his article “‘When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong’: Resident Evil 5, Racial Representation, and Gamers”, Andre Brock analyzes the way in which *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom 2005) uses the opportunity to fight Black characters (and win) to draw in white gamers, contributing to the idea of

\(^7\) SJW – an abbreviation for social justice warrior, a term commonly used to denigrate activists and people who critically engage with media and pop culture, especially those from marginalized communities. This is not a term activists chose for themselves or identify with. Although “warrior” is commonly used as a positive self-identifier, in this case it was assigned to activists in online spaces in order to imply that they exaggerate the severity of the issues they choose to fight for.
Black as Other. In the essay “Black characters in video games must be more than stereotypes of the inhuman,” Sidney Fussell outlines the ways “the white gaze” shapes Black characters in video games: Black characters tend to be either musclebound fighting machines or voodoo-practicing witch doctor stereotypes (2015). In her article “The Video Game Industry’s Problem with Racial Diversity,” Sandy Ong notes that only 3 percent of game developers are African-American and suggests that concerted efforts to make video game development teams more diverse would also bring diversity to video game characters.

Blizzard’s stated goal in designing the Overwatch characters was to create a more diverse and less sexualized cast than its previous games had (Grayson 2016). Speaking with Kotaku, Chris Metzen, one of Blizzard’s chief developers, related how trying to explain to his young daughter why all the female characters in World of Warcraft wear bikinis opened his eyes to the way Blizzard had been overly sexualizing its women. To that end, of the first twelve characters to be introduced five were women, four were men, two were robots (coded male), and one was a gorilla. On Tumblr, discussion about whether Blizzard had achieved its goal of diversity and good representation began the day of the announcement. Some users were ecstatic about the cast composition. Tumblr user grimpotato wrote,

I am kind of in love with how diverse the original cast is. It’s not just your standard cast of white dudes. We have at least five women out of a cast of twelve, two of whom are women of color and one of which is an offensive character. Out of the remaining 7, two are robots, one is a genius gorilla from the fucking moon and of the remaining 4 males, one is Japanese and one is ‘unknown’.

Good job Blizzard. I hope your expansion characters are just as diverse.

User calne was less coherent but more enthusiastic, writing:
Let’s take a moment to appreciate that Blizzaes [sic] actually made more than one poc for overwatch, and not only that but Pharah is actually in fucking armor, no fanservice, no plate bikini, SHE’S WEARING A GOD DAMN ARMOR JUST LIKE ANYONE ELSE

THANK YOU BLIZZARD FOR THIS

briandanielwolf, on the other hand, summed up many people’s doubts in their critique of the female character design:

Overwatch is actually a really great example of character design in media, because it clearly lays out one of the most common problems in it. The male character designs all have dramatic differences in height, weight, age, and costume design, while the female characters have almost exactly the same body type and are all in the same age range and generally feature ‘sexy’ costume designs. Like… come on guys. We can do better.

The question of diversity in Overwatch’s cast has since become prominent in fandom discussion. When they announced Overwatch, Blizzard made a commitment to increasing representation of diverse characters in their games. Some believe Blizzard has honored this commitment, especially as it has released eleven more characters to join the original twelve; others believe they can “do better”; and a third camp has
accused Blizzard of “kowtow[ing] to this crowd” of “sjws”\textsuperscript{8}, specifically with regard to female representation (mageofbubbles 2014). Overall, however, *Overwatch* seems to be one of the more diverse games on the market. Of the twenty human characters, ten are women; characters hail from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Swedish, and Latin American; and Tracer, the character who has been one of the main faces of *Overwatch* since its announcement, was revealed to be in a same-sex relationship with a woman in the comic released in December 2016. Tracer’s relationship reveal was received with much jubilation in the fandom (Hatmaker 2017). Tumblr posts saying “Cheers love, the cavalry’s queer!”—a word play on Tracer’s tag line of “Cheers love, the cavalry’s here!”—proliferated.

**Performative practices in *Overwatch* fandom**

Though *Overwatch* fandom is prolific in fanart and fanfiction, it is still a gaming fandom, and the majority of fans engage with *Overwatch* through play. The most direct way of performing identity as a gamer is to post gameplay video. In this regard, Twitch.tv is the platform most closely tied to actual performance. The “About” page for Twitch.tv describes the site as “the world’s leading social video platform and community for gamers, video game culture, and the creative arts.” On Twitch, players stream their games live to an online audience, who can then interact with the player. Streams can last as long as the streamer is actively playing a game. Twitch provides an option for viewers to either follow a streamer for free, or

\textsuperscript{8} SJW – an abbreviation for social justice warrior, a term commonly used to denigrate activists. This is not a term activists identify with. Although “warrior” is commonly used as a positive self-identifier, in this case it was assigned to activists in online spaces in order to imply that they exaggerate the severity of the issues they choose to fight for.
subscribe to them for a fee. Twitch subscribers get limited perks in return for their subscription, such as emoticons to use in the chat; it is generally agreed that subscribers do not necessarily expect anything special in return for their subscription, and are doing it to support a streamer whose content they enjoy.

It is common practice for players to have a camera pointed at themselves in addition to the stream of their gameplay; this is both so that viewers can see the player’s reactions to their game and so that players can more organically interact with their viewers. Players respond verbally to the viewers’ chat, often looking away from their screen and into the camera in order to make it seem like they are talking directly to their viewers. Through these practices the act of gameplay becomes a literal performance as streamers perform the role of “gamer” for their viewers. Streamers with large subscriber bases often make Twitch their main source of income, putting their livelihood into their performance.

This kind of performance gameplay carries over into YouTube, where Twitch streamers will sometimes repost their games, but while a Twitch stream may go on for hours, YouTube videos tend to be shorter, usually consisting of parts of games edited together in order to illustrate a point, such as whether a player had a good game, or a close call, or to showcase general skill. YouTube also provides an opportunity for gamers to perform other aspects of their identity as fans. Fanmade content on YouTube includes not only remixes of the *Overwatch* music, but also original songs and instrumental music inspired by favorite characters and common situations gamers experience. The struggle of playing support characters, for example, have inspired popular videos such as “Overwatch: The Woes of Support”
by the Cosmonaut Variety Hour, a humorous video consisting of clips of gameplay footage edited together with a sarcastic voiceover. From YouTube, videos are often shared to other social media sites which house *Overwatch* fan communities, such as Tumblr and Reddit, where they are discussed and further shared. Additionally, it is common practice on Tumblr and Reddit to upload short videos of personal game highlights.

**Conclusion**

Although *Overwatch* is by no means universally loved, it elicited an immediate reaction from the gaming community upon its announcement, and was one of the most popular games released in 2016. Gamers brought existing fandom practices to *Overwatch*, contextualizing it in the larger fandom and gaming communities, and bringing *Overwatch* into existing discourse on topics such as diversity and representation of women in games. Additionally, players brought their gaming practices into the fandom, sharing the way they play through highlight reels and gameplay videos. *Overwatch*’s recent release, widespread popularity, and large online fandom provides a glimpse into contemporary gaming practices and communities.
CHAPTER 3: ELEMENTS OF OVERWATCH SOUND

Playing by Sound

_Overwatch_ has a unique sound design which has been the topic of much discussion. In their presentation at the 2016 Game Developers Conference (GDC), the head sound designers stated that the game’s head developer Jeff Kaplan wanted _Overwatch_ players to be able to “play the game practically with the monitor turned off.” The team’s goal was to encode as much gameplay information as possible into the sound design of the game. This is by no means a unique goal—game sound has a long history of being used to inform the player about their environment, and game sound designers continually strive to make their game music increasingly responsive to in-game events. Video games commonly play musical cues to alert the player that they are in danger; this is a practice so widespread that it has spawned a plethora of memes throughout internet gaming communities. _Overwatch_, however, strives to allow players to identify threats with “pinpoint accuracy,” rather than give them generic warnings. To this end, the developers created their own system for ranking threats to the player, which, combined with each character’s distinctive sound design, has allowed players to rely on the in-game soundscape for information.

_Overwatch_ currently has 23 playable characters (termed “heroes” in the game); in order for the “play by sound” to work, every aspect of a hero’s sound design must be unique. No two heroes can have the same footstep or weapon sounds. In order to make sure each hero had a sonic fingerprint, the developers couched each hero’s sound design in their character traits. For example, Tracer moves fast and is light on her feet, so her footsteps are much quieter and faster than Roadhog’s, who is
not only a physically large character but is also weighed down by the gear he carries.

Roadhog’s physicality can be heard in his footsteps: each step includes various jangly metallic sounds to represent the loose carabiners and gear hanging off his harness and the sound of his breath coming through his mask in addition to the heavy thunk of his boots.

Not only does each character have a sound palette unique to them, but because players on opposing teams can choose to play the same hero, an enemy hero must sound different from a friendly hero. To accommodate this, enemy footsteps are always loudest, in accordance with the threat ranking system, and enemy and friendly heroes sound different when activating their ultimate abilities. Each character utters a specific phrase to notify the players that the character’s ultimate
ability has been activated, but while enemy players hear an aggressive phrase, teammates hear a friendly notification.

This play-by-sound system has created a need for players to pay attention to the sounds around them very carefully. Most players pick up the habit of listening for threats naturally, especially obvious cues like the catch phrases enemy heroes utter before they unleash their ultimate abilities, but there are also some tutorials available on how to best utilize Overwatch’s sound design. Perhaps the definitive video is by Chris Bratt, from the Eurogamer channel on YouTube, as it summarizes the way the player subconsciously learns to react to various audio cues in the game. Bratt relates the moment he realized he had developed a habit of listening for audio cues like footsteps: “I suddenly realized what a difference the heroes’ unique footsteps had already been making in all of the games I’d played. Without really considering it I had already been identifying which hero was about to run around the corner ahead of me based on how heavy their steps were or how quickly it sounded like they were moving” (Eurogamer 2016). The YouTube channel Learn Overwatch has an entire series of videos on using audio cues for map awareness, including two videos which collect audio of characters’ footsteps as they come around a corner and run away from the player (2015a; 2015b). These types of videos both instruct the player in what they should be listening for and allow them to practice identifying various sounds.

The effects of this aspect of the sound design show up in the ways players show off their gaming experience. In one game highlight posted to Tumblr, the player turned around and killed an enemy McCree—a character who dresses like a
cowboy—who had been trying to sneak up on them. The caption read, “Nice try cowboy. I heard his buckle boots.” (wandering-sith-gal 2016). This post speaks to the effectiveness of the way the play-by-sound system give players a sense for the three-dimensional space virtual space in which they play, but the fact that wandering-sith-gal felt the clip was worthy of showing off suggests that players consider being able to identify different sound effects in-game a valuable skill, one worth boasting about.

In an informal AMA\(^9\)-type thread with the sound design team on /r/Overwatch, the official Overwatch subreddit, a few players started exchanging details of the types of sounds they noticed and enjoyed in-game. “There is nothing more satisfying than the noise Junkrat’s grenades do on impact. The sound design in the game overall is phenomenal,” reads one comment. A reply from another user goes into even more detail: “I enjoy the little click Roadhog’s ult fire makes both on headshots and those panels in the base on KotH maps.” (“AMA Request - The Overwatch Sound Design Team • /r/Overwatch” 2017). The comment thread continues as more users chime in to add minutiae of the sound design that have particularly appealed to them. Writing about their experience playing Zarya, a female bodybuilder, one user states that the sound effect of her gun make it feel “like you’re holding a very angry hornet’s nest that will do your bidding… The sound just urges you to be aggressive somehow.” It is impossible to know if the sound of Zarya’s gun was calibrated to elicit this reaction, but it seems appropriate. The point of Zarya’s character is to be out in front taking damage for her team, and the more damage

\(^9\) AMA stands for “Ask Me Anything.” Reddit often hosts open question-and-answer threads with various well-known figures and experts on a variety of topics, during which users can ask the host anything. Reddit users vote on the questions, and the host is more likely to answer more popular questions.
Zarya absorbs, the more damage she does to the enemy team. It would therefore be useful for the person playing Zarya to be encouraged in their aggression.

Throughout the thread, many more players describe minor sounds that evoke an emotional reaction, whether it be satisfaction or an urge to aggressiveness. The way these players pay attention to the details of the sounds they hear is a testament to nuance of the sound design, and it also provides context for a rather unique category of YouTube videos I have noticed. There is a trend of players pulling various categories of in-game sounds and uploading them without modification. Most common are videos cataloguing heroes’ footstep sounds, which is understandable; in order to be successful in the game, players must pay attention to footsteps. But I have also come across videos collecting all heroes’ falling death screams, sounds of heroes’ getting electrocuted in addition to more mundane collections of weapon firing and reload sounds. Unlike the videos cataloguing footsteps and gun sounds, which serve the functional purpose of allowing players to get used to listening for those sounds, catalogues of death screams have no discernible purpose. Instead, these catalogues show that players are willing to engage with the most minor details of the sound design.

**Remixability**

*Overwatch* remixes utilize three main categories of sound from the game: diegetic sound such as weapons fire, specific phrases like the ones that signal the use of an ultimate ability, known as voice lines, and the game music itself. This section will cover the ways these elements can be taken out of context and reused.
Diegetic Sound

By making it necessary for the player to listen for individual noises in what would otherwise be a very chaotic soundscape, the game teaches the player to start paying attention and noticing various aspects of the sound design. As demonstrated by the Reddit thread described above, players naturally start keeping mental lists of sounds they enjoy and look forward to hearing in the game. The videos of various categories of in-game sound, separating footsteps from weapon sounds and different types of vocalizations from one another show that as a whole, the Overwatch player base has learned to take the soundscape apart into its individual components.

This breaking down into parts constitutes its own creation of meaning; falling death screams, for example, when taken out of the context of the game and presented as a collection of human sounds, invite the listener to evaluate each sound individually. Reading through the comments on “Overwatch Fall Death Screams (22 Heroes)” it seems that we as listeners cannot help but try to find new meaning for these sounds without their surrounding context. Some comments compare the Overwatch screams to death screams in other games, weighing in on which is better. A few people find humor in the image of voice actors recording such dramatic noises. Still others find that, on their own, these screams suddenly sound like whale noises or other sounds. But everyone either compares the sounds to something else or imagines a context for them. It might even be argued that these kinds of sound collections are in a sense a type of remix, breaking the sounds out of their intended contexts and recombining them in an aural list. At the very least, these sound
catalogues are evidence that there is potential in the sound design for a remix. The components exist; they just need to be isolated and put back together.

**Voice lines**

Dialogue in *Overwatch* functions differently than it does in most games; characters have spontaneous conversations with each other, but each character also has a number of specific catchphrases the player can unlock as they play the game. Additionally, characters have certain phrases that they automatically say in response to various situations. These unlockable catchphrases and response lines are known as voice lines.

As Scott Lawlor states in Blizzard’s 2016 Game Design Conference (GDC) presentation, the sound design team felt that it was important for players to have consistent cues for when they were in danger. As a result, each hero has only two lines to say when they deploy their ultimate ability: the one the enemy team hears, and the one the hero’s own team hears. For example, when Pharah uses her ultimate ability, she flies up above the battlefield and unleashes a hail of rockets. Right before she does this however, the enemy team gets an aural cue in the form of her line, “Justice rains from above.” Players on Pharah’s team, on the other hand, get the friendly cue “Rocket barrage incoming.” Because each hero has only one line, players learn to recognize and react to the cue on the first few syllables. As a result lines like “Justice rains from above” have become akin to catchphrases in the *Overwatch* fandom, and are often utilized in remixes to add variety to the mix. These lines undergo perhaps the greatest meaning change as they are moved from game to remix. When “Justice rains from above” sounds in the middle of an electronic pop
track, it does not carry the warning note of “get to cover.” Instead, it becomes a callback to the in-game player experience. Often these lines are manipulated in order to fit into the beat of the remix, in which case they become just another instrument for the remixer to utilize.

Melodic Themes

Unlike the diegetic sound, which serves as part of the game play itself, the Overwatch theme music exists to create atmosphere and emotional response. “The world could always use more heroes” has become one of the chief Overwatch taglines, and the theme music works to set a heroic tone for the player. In the cinematic trailer, the first thing audiences saw or heard about Overwatch, begins with the following narration:

Conflict. As the world teetered on the brink of anarchy, a new hope arose. An elite international task force, charged with ending the war, and restoring liberty to all nations. Overwatch: soldiers, scientists, adventurers, oddities. Guardians who secured global peace for a generation. Under its steadfast protection, the world recovered. And today, though its watch is ended, its soaring ideals of freedom and equality will never be forgotten.

The first sentence, through the phrase “a new hope arose” is accompanied by heavy, ominous chord underpinned by chromatic passages on strings, but beginning with “An elite international task force” the music switches to a symphonic brass fanfare in clean, major key chords, and the string passages switch to major instead of chromatic scales. Through the rest of the speech, the fanfare modulates a few times, before coming to a triumphant resolution. The opening motif of this fanfare becomes the main theme of Overwatch; it plays when the player first opens the game, putting them in a heroic mindset. The victory theme, which plays once a team has won a match, is more lyrical. Though it is in a minor key, it is arranged the way like the
main theme, with brass playing the melody, underpinned by fast ascending passages in the strings and a syncopated beat. The instrumentation and the triadic nature of the melody create the same fanfare-like qualities that the main theme has.

These two themes are the mainstays of Overwatch remixes; they are the two most immediately recognizable pieces of music out of the soundtrack as well as the most easily adapted, due to their simple chord structures. Each map also has a theme which plays as an introduction, but unlike the main and victory themes, which are meant to convey a general sense of heroism, the map themes are each meant to convey a specific sense of place. Because Overwatch uses only a few real-world locations for its maps, it relies on the visual design and the musical introduction to
give the player context about the map’s location. For example, the Dorado map is set in a fictional Mexican city in the midst of a celebration for a festival of lights. The Dorado theme music draws on musical markers that have become associated in America with Mexican culture, especially mariachi music. The main melody is played by two trumpets harmonizing over a guitar accompaniment, utilizing rhythms commonly associated with mariachi. Each map’s music has a similar cultural “flavor,” which remixers must contend with in order to incorporate it into their music.

Conclusion

The detailed and nuanced landscape of the Overwatch world provides seemingly infinite aspects for players to interact with. The sound design influences player reactions not only through melodic themes that set the mood but also through the smallest sound effects, all of which are geared toward giving the player a physical sense of their place in the game.
CHAPTER 4: GAME SOUND TRANSFORMATION

While collections of footsteps and character dialogue lines can be considered transformative, there is also a vast ouvre of music inspired by *Overwatch*. Filk, or fan-generated music in *Overwatch* communities tends to break down into four major categories: completely original work, parodies, gun syncs, and remixes.

**Original Works**

Original works tend to be songs, rather than instrumental compositions, and they often serve the function of filling a perceived gap in the official soundtrack. As I mentioned in the last chapter, with the exception of Lucio, a DJ, the characters do not have theme music. Fans have therefore taken it upon themselves to write and perform theme songs for their favorite characters. The lyrics of these songs range from simply descriptive, outlining the way a character fights, to philosophical, exploring a character’s mindset and motivations. Some songwriters even try to match the genre of their music to the character they are writing it for. For example, composing for McCree, a gunslinger from the American Southwest who likes to dress like a cowboy, MandoPony chose to write country rock song, while D.Va, a bubbly professional gamer turned soldier, got a pop/dance track (MandoPony 2017a; MandoPony 2017b). It is also common practice to write songs summarizing all of the characters and the game’s concept, such as Dan Bull’s “OVERWATCH EPIC RAP” (2016). Others write songs describing in-game situations that commonly develop between players, the way The Living Tombstone’s “No Mercy” narrates two players fighting over who will have to play a support role on their team (2017). This practice continues the tradition of players using game filk to “extend their self into the game.
world through sound by extending their character beyond the game world and by role-playing that character in real life” (Collins 2013, 111). Writing and performing songs form the point of view of their favorite characters or about in-game situations allows players to continue to interact with both the game and other players even after they have stopped playing, bringing the act of play out of the virtual and into the real world.

**Parodies**

Parodies straddle a line between completely original work and remixes, as they put original lyrics to existing songs. As with original songs, parodies act as theme songs for individual characters and narrate the player’s experience in-game. Although the word “parody” evokes satirical humor, game songs labelled “parodies” are not necessarily humorous, and in many cases are simply contrafactum. Parodies act as a continuation of filking practices developed in Star Trek fandom, where filkers with no formal musical training or experience reappropriated popular music to “[appeal] to the shared knowledge of the fan community as a precondition for appreciating and deciphering the songs” (Jenkins 1990, 163). Using existing popular music ties a song’s gaming-oriented lyrics to the textual material of the original music video or performer (Collins 2013, 110). This creates a meaning shorthand, wherein the game song writer can reference the original song in order to tell the listener through what lens they should be interpreting the game song.

For example, YouTube user OzzaWorld chose Maroon 5’s “Payphone” (2012) as source material for the parody “Payload,” in which OzzaWorld sings from the point of view of someone playing as a healer:
I'm at the Payload
trying to push so
we don't end up losing soon
where has my team gone
they have it all wrong
chasing kills is just for noobs
yeah I
I know it's hard to restrain but
even though you killed 3
it's even harder to win if
you're not here next to me
I know that I'm just a healer
but it's not too late to push
and in that time that you left me
all of our teammates went down
we've lost all our fights
you're nowhere in sight
it caused my demise
yeah we're low on time
and we need to push
but if I derank now then I will cry

On their own, Ozzaworld’s lyrics can be read as aggressive and angry, but setting them to the pop ballad music of “Payphone” softens their impact. “Payphone” is a song of betrayed love and broken hope, in which the singer laments being cast away by a lover and narrates their disillusionment with the concept of happy endings:

I'm at a payphone trying to call home
All of my change I spent on you
Where have the times gone, baby it's all wrong
Where are the plans we made for two

If Happy Ever Afters did exist
I would still be holding you like this
All those fairy tales are full of shit
One more fucking love song, I'll be sick

Ozzaworld calls back to the feelings “Payphone” evokes by making the lines of “Payload” assonantal to the original. In the second verse, where Maroon 5 would

10 Lyrics taken directly from the description to the “Payload” video. All spelling and punctuation is conserved.
sing “Oh, you turned your back on tomorrow/Cause you forgot yesterday/I gave you my love to borrow/But you just gave it away,” Ozzaworld sings, “You ran off hunting Tracer/but she always gets away/you can't expect me to heal you/when I'm alone fighting Mei,” preserving the second and fourth line rhyme of “yesterday/away” through “away/Mei.” Additionally, Ozzaworld preserves some lines entirely from the original. They convert the original’s “You can't expect me to be fine/I don't expect you to care/I know I've said it before/But all of our bridges burned down” to “You can't expect me to be fine/when you're off making plays/I know I’ve said it before but/all of our teammates went down,” preserving the first and third lines in their entirety. In leaving these numerous callbacks to the original within the parody, Ozzalok invites the listener to project any feelings “Payphone” may have inspired in them onto “Payload” and turns what could have been a diatribe against the inadequacies of inept teammates into a more resigned rebuke. Additionally, setting “Payload” to a song about lost love provides a satirical element, implying that the healer’s relationship with their teammates is akin to that of former lovers.

“Can’t Stop the Healing,” by YouTube channel Instalok, is a more upbeat parody of Justin Timberlake’s “Can’t Stop the Feeling” (2016). Like Ozzaworld’s “Payphone,” “Can’t Stop the Healing” mimics its source material’s verbal qualities in parts, especially the widely recognized chorus. Where Timberlake sings “Nothing I can see but you when you dance, dance, dance/A feeling good, good, creeping up on you/So just dance, dance, dance, come on,” Instalok substitute “Helping out my team when I get the chance chance chance/And if you mess up I’ll rez for a second
chance chance chance come on.” However, unlike Ozzaworld, Instalok use their source material to amplify the message their lyrics convey, not mitigate it. “Can’t Stop the Healing” is a celebration of healers and the necessary role they play on *Overwatch* teams, proclaiming that “It’s hard to win a game without a Lucio, Zenyatta, Mercy/We don’t need six offence heroes to ‘Attack.’” Setting “Can’t Stop the Healing” to an upbeat dance track reinforces the celebratory air of the song, but does not create a satirical or humorous element. The satire in “Can’t Stop the Healing” lies in the lyrics themselves, which subtly poke fun at the plight of support heroes. The song calls out *Overwatch* players’ propensity to choose the high-damage attack heroes, with no regard to balance of team composition, both in the opening and closing verses, and in the middle the singer entreats their teammates “When we group [up] protect me from the foes,” calling out the tendency to leave healers unprotected.

Whether they are humorous or not, parodies, like the original filk game songs, allow players to continue interacting with the game outside of the game world. The comments sections of both Ozzaworld’s and Instalok’s videos are full of people relating their own experiences playing healer class characters. In relation to “Payload,” commenters express the frustration they feel when playing healer, while “Can’t Stop the Healing” inspires a mix of positive comments such as “For all the people who main support, thank you for your service” (Bunny Pilot) and the more sardonic “Oh hey it’s that thing no one ever does when I play Mercy” (Nova Ultimate), in reference to the line about protection from foes. Parodies bring the game world closer to the real by connecting game situations with existing real-world
music and drawing together communities of players who feel that the parodies speak to their experiences.

**Gun Syncs**

Gun syncs involve adding gun sound effects from a game to an existing musical track. Musically, gun syncs are the least original of game-related audio fanworks; gun syncs may sonically alter or augment an existing musical work, but they do not create new material. The pieces used for gun syncs are usually fast-paced electronic tracks which can handle additional percussion; due to the nature of gun sound effects, they are used to add beats and rhythms, rather than melodies. Moreover, gun syncs seem to be intended more to show off a feat of video editing than musical composing or manipulation: they are always presented in video form, so the viewer can see where the sound effects are coming from, and involve cutting between dozens of shots in quick succession in order to keep them on the beat. The musical skills involved in gun syncs lie more in matching various gun sounds to existing beats in a musical piece rather than adding an entirely new component, although in some cases gun syncs are made with less percussive orchestral music and the gun sounds are used to create a new rhythmic component. Generally, though they add sonic and visual elements to original works, gun syncs do not rearrange or significantly change their source material. The original musical piece remains recognizable and fundamentally unchanged.

**Remixes**

Remixes take component sounds from the game, such as sound effects, voice lines, and melodic themes, and manipulate and recombine them into a new work.
Overwatch remixes can be categorized in various ways, but the chief division lies in the way the remixes are constructed: either some element of the remix remains recognizable as Overwatch music, or elements of Overwatch sound are used to create an entire new work.

The first case is a more traditional approach to remix, stemming directly from sampling and remix culture in mainstream music. The remixer takes one or more elements of the Overwatch sound—usually one of the melodic themes—and adds their own material to it to create a musical work. Though it may be manipulated and distorted, the original piece of Overwatch music remains recognizable, connecting the remix to the source material. The new material can come in the form of new beats, harmonies, or entirely new melodies that the remixer has composed. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, remixers often use character voice lines as callbacks to the game. In these more traditional remixes, voice lines are used sparingly, acting as punctuation for particularly important moments in a remix. In “Heroes Never Die,” MOARNial uses various character’s lines during transitions between different sections, as does SharaX in “Break it Down” (2016; 2016). Both MOARNial and SharaX use the voice lines without making any changes to them, incorporating the original rhythm of the spoken words into their works.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the main and victory themes are the mainstays of music-focused Overwatch remixes. It is interesting to note, however,
that remixers turn to the victory theme much more often than the main theme. In fact, the victory theme is often conflated with the main theme, and seems to have become representative of *Overwatch* music, despite the fact that the primary motif of the main theme plays more often during the game. While the victory theme plays only during the Play of the Game replay that plays after every match so that all the players can see the best moment of the game, the main theme is threaded throughout the incidental music of the entire game.

A possible explanation for the preference for the victory theme over the main theme might lie in the musical characteristics of each. *Overwatch*’s main theme manages to simultaneously be specific and generic—specific because the brass fanfare has come to hold a very particular set of connotations in Western musical language (grandiosity, bravery, triumph, etc.), and generic specifically because its heavy reliance on this musical metaphor makes it sound like any other heroic music. The victory theme, in contrast, relies on a melody which does not reference any other text and thus comes to specifically represent *Overwatch* as a whole. Consequently, if remixers want their audience to recognize the sonic imprint of *Overwatch* in their remix, they are more likely to turn to the victory theme than the main theme.

The second major category of remixes, in which components of *Overwatch*’s sound design are recombined into a new piece of music, allows remixers to explore and utilize all aspects of *Overwatch*’s sound design. These remixes are not concerned with making the final product recognizable as *Overwatch* music; instead they use the *Overwatch* sound design as an instrument and allow the sound itself to be their sonic connection to *Overwatch*. 
Although these types of remixes still manipulate the sounds they pull from the game, the emphasis tends to be on keeping the sound as close to how it is heard in-game as possible. YouTuber Minkks, for example, created a minute-long musical piece using only gun reload and shot sounds, six characters’ voice lines, and one character’s ability sound, pitched to an F-Major scale. Without any modification, Minkks edited the gun sounds into a beat, the way they are used in gun sync videos, and combined the voice lines so that they would form something akin to a melody.

“Sounds Like Overwatch” by haveluckgoodfun is perhaps the pinnacle of original work via remix (2016). While the majority of sound effect-only remixes focus on gun sounds and the beats they can create, haveluckgoodfun uses voice lines, sound effects, individual notes cut from the soundtrack, and longer snippets of music to create a dance track. “Sounds Like Overwatch” is somewhat unique in that haveluckgoodfun does not use the voice lines in their entirety, instead cutting them up and putting disparate pieces together; the resulting phrases no longer make sense, and the words become part of the rhythmic whole of the remix. In the description to the video, haveluckgoodfun writes that “Sounds Like Overwatch” may also be known as “Aardvarck from Above,” one of the phrases that resulted from the mix-and-match dialogue pieces. “Aardvack” comes from the beginning of Torbjörn’s line “Hard work pays off,” made to sound like “aardvarck” because of his Swedish accent, while “from above” comes from the tail end of Pharah’s ultimate ability cue “Justice rains from above!” haveluckgoodfun times them so that they fall into the rhythm of the overall piece.
Because “Sounds Like Overwatch” is put together entirely out of pieces of game sound, it is sonically representative of *Overwatch* overall, despite the fact that it uses neither the main theme nor the victory theme. The melody under the dialogue is put together out of notes cut from the main theme; it brings the timbre of the brass omnipresent throughout the *Overwatch* soundtrack to the remix. All the percussion in “Sounds Like Overwatch” comes from weapon sounds, and the bits of dialogue are threaded through with various other character sounds, such as laughter. haveluckgoodfun even works a few snippets from a map theme into the mix to act as a transition between sections. In this way, haveluckgoodfun incorporates all the sonic elements that a player experiences during a game without using any of the musical motifs the player would be used to hearing.

The video for “Sounds Like Overwatch” also works as a visual remix. In parts, it borrows the convention of matching up the visuals to sound effects from gun synchs, showing which gun or character is making the sound the audience hears at a particular moment; each character is shown on a different map, so every time the
sound effect changes, so does the location the viewer sees. During a quiet interlude in the middle, haveluckgoodfun brings in a clip of an introspective moment from one of the cinematic trailers. For the majority of the video, haveluckgoodfun has edited together clips of Lucio dancing on different maps, with the background changing to the beat. By showing a variety of maps, clips from a cinematic trailer, and various characters in action (via the gun sound clips), “Sound Like Overwatch” summarizes the various visual aspects of the game the way the sounds of the remix encompass its sonic qualities.

![Figure 3 Screen capture from music video for "Sounds Like Overwatch" by haveluckgoodfun, showing Lucio dancing.](image)

**Composition, Remix, and Generic Ambiguity**

Fan-generated music does not always fall into neat categories, strictly separated by original and remix, but it rather exists on a spectrum ranging from original to derivative. Original work often contains elements of remix. Dan Bull’s
rap song uses music from the *Overwatch* soundtrack as a backing track, and the chorus is a variation on the victory theme.

Excerpt 5 Chorus to Dan Bull's Overwatch Rap

By some definitions of the term, Dan Bull’s Overwatch Rap could be considered a remix, since it takes an existing piece of music and adds material to it. Similarly, gun syncs could also be classified as remixes. An interesting problem arises here, however. The types of tracks most conducive to gun syncs are dubstep and electronic dance songs, since they have strong beats that the gun sounds can be aligned with, and this type of music is most often found in remixes. Gun syncs, therefore, become remixes of remixes, altering already altered material. The situation becomes further recursive when *Overwatch* gun syncs are set to remixes of *Overwatch* music.

“OVERWATCH Gun Sync (6)” by Exclusively Nerdbox (Overwatch Gunsync Extraordinaire, ExclusivelyNerdBox 2016), is one such gun sync, set to Andromulus’ remix of “We Move Together As One” (Andromulus 2016), one of the songs Blizzard has released for Lucio. Exclusively Nerdbox remixes Andromulus’ remix, speeding it up, using the guns to add new beats, and incorporating character voice lines Andromulus had not used.

Likewise, works which in fandom are labelled remixes can be considered to be original. Collins defines remixes as works “which maintain identifiable features from the original song but significantly change the original, particularly the structure
of the song” (2013, 107). Minkks and haveluckgoodfun created their works out of existing pre-recorded material, but neither of their compositions necessarily references a recognizable “original.” Minkks’s “SoundFX Beat – Overwatch” consists primarily of unaltered game audio, so it is closely tied to the game, but haveluckgoodfun’s “Sounds Like Overwatch” is less obviously connected to its source material. “Sounds Like Overwatch” is more a remix of the sonic atmosphere of the game than of a specific piece of music; Overwatch players listening to “Sounds Like Overwatch” would be able to clearly identify the game elements it uses, but an uninitiated listener would get just as much enjoyment out of “Sounds Like Overwatch” as music.

Parodies inhabit their own space in this world. Where works like “Sounds Like Overwatch” and “SoundFX Beat – Overwatch” are remix-but-original and “Overwatch Epic Rap” is original-but-remix, parodies seem to be neither remix nor original. Musically, parodies create nothing new—in fact, the less a parody has to modify the source music to fit the new lyrics, the better—but lyrically parodies are completely original material. Parodies remix meaning, not sound: they combine the semiotics of popular music with game-specific text, creating layers of meaning which can only be unpacked by those familiar with both the music and the game.

**Conclusion**

All filk music, whether it is completely original or strictly derivative or somewhere in between, allows the composers and remixers to perform public identities of “Overwatch fan” and “gamer” by exhibiting their knowledge of the game world, its characters, and the fan communities. Likewise, interacting with this
music gives listeners a chance to bring the game world and the gaming community into their everyday lives. YouTube comment sections become micro-communities, where players commiserate over the challenges they face playing their favorite hero.
Fan Work and Monetization

Remixers and filkers are first and foremost fans and gamers—people who have dedicated hundreds of hours to playing this and other games, and express their passion for the games they play by applying their own talents to the game. The descriptions of many YouTube videos contain variations of the phrase “I liked this, so I remixed it.” YouTube user Andromulus writes, “To show my love for the wonderful game that is Overwatch and for the sick track made by my favorite support class, I had to give Lúcio’s track "We Move Together As One" my own spin!” Laura Platt (PI511), referenced in chapter two as the composer of the first Overwatch remix to be posted on YouTube, writes in the description of that video that “Overwatch looks absolutely incredible, and this theme especially really grabbed me,” noting that composing the piece was “the most fun I’ve had working on a remix in the last couple of years” (2014). In this sense, remixers are fans who are looking for ways to actively interact with an aspect of the game that appeals to them, to put something of their own personality into the game. Just like the Reddit commenters talking about the way they respond to the sound effects and sound design of Overwatch, remixers invest their time and energy in further interactions with the game’s audio because they connected with it on some way. Remixers post their work on content hosting sites such as YouTube and SoundCloud in order to connect with
others in the gaming community who may have felt a similar pull toward their chosen source material.

But remixers, like fan artists and fan fiction writers, are also people who have spent hundreds of hours perfecting their craft, often in a professional capacity, and working with media texts such as *Overwatch*, which has received seemingly non-stop coverage in the games press, can be an opportunity to reach new listeners. Andromulus’ remix of “We Move Together As One,” an in-game song, had nearly 300,000 views at the time of writing; a dubstep remix of the victory theme by DjEphixa had just over 1.1 million views; and haveluckgoodfun’s “Sounds Like Overwatch”, one of the most popular *Overwatch* remixes, had over 2.6 million views. It is standard practice for remixers to self-promote by including links to their social media, Bandcamp, SoundCloud, and personal sites in the descriptions to their videos. Many offer free downloads of their remixes and redirect listeners to iTunes for purchase of original work. Minkks, for example, has a second YouTube channel, under the username NoZ | Music & Tutorials which primarily hosts *Call of Duty* gameplay videos but is also home to live music production videos and a video of Minkks’ first live Ableton performance(Music & Tutorials, NoZ 2016). Minkks has also said in comments on his own videos that he is “busy making lots of music,” which he is planning to upload to YouTube; other YouTube commenters have taken this as an indication that Minkks is involved in the professional music business. If this is the case, then compositions such as “SoundFX Beat – Overwatch” and generally being visible in gaming fandom serve as advertisement and exposure for Minkks’ professional music career.
As fandom and fan labor has become increasingly commercial, more and more remixers and filk writers are exploring ways to support themselves through their passion for game music. Those who write original songs can monetize their YouTube videos to receive revenue from ads, but remix artists and parody writers run into issues of copyright with regards to monetization. The advent of crowdfunding sites such as Patreon, which allows “patrons” to pledge monthly amounts as low as one dollar to individual creators, has provided a way for an increasing number of fan creators to monetize their work. Patreon’s system provides a workaround to the problem of copyright: the creator does not sell anything specific, and the patron does not technically buy anything, apart from perks the creator may have set up for patrons. The end result, though, is that the creator has income from their content. Instalok, the YouTube channel run by a three-person team which created the “Can’t Stop the Healing” parody, among others, has begun displaying the names of the channel’s top Patreon supporters; they currently receive $2,405 per month from a total of 406 patrons. They currently receive $2,414 per month from a total of 407 patrons and hope to reach $5000 per month, which would make Patreon—and by extension, game filk music—their main source of income.

**Technology Shaping Communities**

The monetization of fan content is a fairly recent development not only in the game sound community but across fandom as a whole. Historically, fandom operated on an asymmetrical gift economy, whereby creators would post their work, symbolically gifting it to the fandom, and consumers would return the gift through
comments, likes, and distribution links (Turk 2013). Of course, not everybody who consumed a fan work would respond to it, leading to the asymmetrical nature of this economy. This gift economy is still active among game sound circles; remixes and filk music are shared more or less freely, with the understanding that all reused work be credited; the promise of increased exposure is currently the only necessary reward. Indeed, remixes and filk music are commonly reposted from YouTube to Tumblr and Reddit, sometimes without credit. There seems to be an understanding right now that these works are created by a fan community for a fan community. For instance, Laura Platt, author of the first Overwatch orchestral remix, which has received almost 1.5 million views, states on the “About” section of her YouTube channel that “If you want to use any of my music in your videos, I'm completely okay with that as long as you credit me and link back in the description of the video.” Despite the fact that Platt’s channel contains original work alongside her video game covers and remixes, she is willing to share her music with other creators simply for credit. The advent YouTube video monetization, Twitch.tv subscribers, and crowdfunding sites such as Patreon, however, seems to be shifting fandom practices in general and gaming practices in particular away from the sharing economy.

Legitimization of Fandom And Further Study

Alongside monetization, there is an increasing communication between fan communities and corporate entities. With Overwatch, Blizzard has been particularly welcoming and supportive of fan work; haveluckgoodfun’s “Sounds Like Overwatch” was featured on Battle.net, the platform through which Blizzard hosts its
games. Additionally, Blizzard released full art reference kits for each of its characters, complete with outfit and weapon details and guides on what colors to use for them in digital art. Whether this welcoming of fandom will turn into opportunities for popular remix and filk artists online time can tell.

The *Overwatch* fan community is developing at a time when fandom practices are rapidly evolving: where before fan work had always been purely a labor of love, it now presents career opportunities; where before fan communities and the creators of the works they celebrated were kept apart, they are now merging. The community established around *Overwatch*’s sound currently looks much like the fan communities Collins covers in *Playing with Sound*, making filk music and machinima videos, remixing and covering the soundtrack, but as this study shows, *Overwatch* fans are also forging their own paths, blurring the definition of remix and establishing new practices around the monetization of fan work. As the internet continues to shape the way fans interact with each other and with game sound, a continuing study of *Overwatch* communities may become a case study in the way technology and fan communities shape each other.
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