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# "But You're Female!": Discourses of Queer Gender and Sexuality Across BioWare's Mass Effect Trilogy

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"But You're Female!": Discourses of Queer Gender and Sexuality Across BioWare's

*Mass Effect* Trilogy

by

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## Abstract

BioWare's highly successful *Mass Effect* trilogy is one of the most lauded examples of mainstream video games that have incorporated prominent queer representation. In a media landscape that is still navigating marginalized representation in a meaningful way, BioWare has made strides in terms of their depth and quality of queer inclusion since its release. The ways that this inclusion is constructed in all levels of design – from formal game qualities to its storytelling choices – can tell researchers much about how discourses of queerness function, using the game space as a site of discursive operations.

Utilizing theory from Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, in tandem with concepts from film studies and queer studies, my research investigates the discursive operations at work throughout the *Mass Effect* games, with focus on what discourses of queer gender and sexuality are produced, circulated, and subverted though a critical discourse analysis of the games' text and content. I examine the role of the player at the crux of it all, the specificities that arise from player choice and interactivity, and how they work to create something that demonstrates a nuanced and complex showcase of queer representation.

## Acknowledgements

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**Table of Contents**

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

**1.1 Introduction**

In 2007, Edmonton-based game studio BioWare released *Mass Effect*, the first

title in what would become a popular franchise. The games would go on to achieve high

critical acclaim and financial success, with over 10 million units sold worldwide

(D'Angelo 2012). The protagonist, Commander Shepard, would go on to become one of

gaming's most beloved icons – and an intensely personal hero to many, for Shepard's

player-shaped personality and customizable gender and appearance would set the

character apart from many of her cohort. A science fiction space opera, the *Mass Effect*

trilogy successfully combined elements of different game genres, all under BioWare's

company imperative to tell strong stories. A focus on deep narratives has always been a

notable part of BioWare as a brand, which has given the developer distinction from most

of their peers. The notion of narrative in games has been widely discussed and studied,

both in the industry and by academics, as they can tell us much about what games

represent about the social world: "[t]hus, the options given to players within the dynamics

of the game reveal what fantasies and experiences are endorsed therein" (Hart, 2015, p.

153).

Games provide a unique terrain for the study of media. As a quickly-evolving and

growing industry, contemporary games research has seen a much-needed shift from

studies on aggression and psychology which had dominated the field in its early years

(Bartholow & Anderson 2002; Anderson & Bushman 2001; Funk et al 2004; Gentile &

Anderson 2003; Griffiths 1999; Dietz 1998). More and more, the field has seen a rise in

research focusing on thematic readings and social representation (Shaw 2014; Ryan

1

2007; Krzywinska 2015; Folkerts 2010; Kirkland 2009). Studies of race, gender and sexuality in games are now on the rise as games become more entrenched in mainstream culture as well as in the academic sphere. Studying these representations grants researchers an equally unique opportunity to consider the ways their processes reflect structures and formations of power.

New innovations keep video games ever-changing, and the way that play occurs changes with them. In "Beyond *Ludus*: Narrative, Videogames and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality" (2007), Marie-Laure Ryan speaks to the unique nature of digital games relative to other forms of gaming, such as the imagination-driven children's make-believe or competitive rule-based games of sports and board games:

> If there is one significant contribution of digital technology to gaming, it is to have reconciled competition and make-believe, in short, to have introduced a narrative dimension that speaks to the imagination in games of physical skills and strategic thinking. (p. 13)

Evolving technologies have allowed for pleasure in gaming to not only be derived from task completion but also by engaging with a narrative in an interactive story world. These narratives can take many forms – from loose integration with gameplay, where designated cutscenes are the main means for story to progress, interspersed between long segments of gameplay – to games that play like digital "choose your own adventure" books or interactive films. The latter are usually comprised almost entirely of dialogue-based scenes where the primary gaming mechanism is to select dialogue options that will branch the scenes off into different directions depending on player choice. These games are built on allowing a player to shape a story as it goes along; this feature constitutes the

main appeal for players, while allowing such choices to affect outcomes or relationships between characters. *Mass Effect* has a style that lies between these two forms, balancing combat-based, tactical gameplay with substantial dialogue-based segments that urge players to spend time speaking to companion characters and building relationships.

Games are rule-based systems, both in terms of code and in terms of narrative. In analyzing any form of media, a researcher must interrogate the social formations she finds within – what these "rules" really are. Games have different rules than other media, and questions of representation become complicated when the interactive element can bend structures – such as customizing main characters. For instance, we can ask: who is generally allowed to be the hero of the story? What if Captain Kirk was a queer man, or Luke Skywalker a woman? Games can give players the option to make these hypotheticals a reality. Because it is conceived in advance, a film cannot change what a protagonist looks like according to every viewer's wishes, but a video game can. Thus games can provide the opportunity to explore new kinds of questions – with new ways to consider notions of "heroes" and "stories" and ultimately, where the rules are. What are the boundaries of play and representation? What discourses are being reproduced, or being countered, by these rules? By the existence of player choice? I explore these questions as they relate to queerness, through my analysis of *Mass Effect*.

The aim of this thesis is to illuminate the ways in which hetero-centric narrative practices work to define the possibilities of queer representation in *Mass Effect*, and how they are indicative of the working of larger socio-cultural practices, with some notion of finding ways for subversion and transgression. To this end, I engage this work with the usual kind of emancipatory goals of most feminist politics, while endeavoring to present

3

a thorough and critical discussion that does not presuppose that politics must overrule empiricism. The be more precise, I aim not to let the political nature of this thesis obscure the need for a structured framework.

My framework is based on critical discourse analysis, operationalizing the theories of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Laura Mulvey. I examine the ways in which narrative choices – both in terms of broad directions as well as specificities in syntax as located in dialogue – speak to discourses of queerness. My approach to this thesis is a dual one, as a scholar and gamer: I utilize my expertise with the medium as a foundation for my analysis, and as a scholar I translate and filter the experience through theory and critical discourse analysis to observe the critical valences of the text and what it can tell us, ultimately examining how visuals, narrative, and gameplay in video games are operations that produce and circulate discourses of queerness.

## 1.2 Overview

In this chapter, I examine the contentious issue of how a scholar approaches an analysis of video games, outlining and detailing two major models of games research: ludology and narratology. Ludology foregrounds formal, game-specific elements and game design as the locus of analysis, emphasizing the medium's unique features as the avenue for the most compelling research. Conversely, narratology has characterized games as cultural texts, and has modeled the reading of their narrative content in a manner not dissimilar to established disciplines such as film or literature studies. Researchers have debated over these two forms of analysis for decades, and here I review

both, as well as conclusively situating this thesis *between* the two models – borrowing principles from each, while respecting the aims of the other.

A definitive conception of "narrative" as it applies to games is complicated, which I highlight in this discussion. This is due to the structure of video games being variable by nature. To lead us into the discussion, I will outline how narrative is often implemented into games on a structural level – most games convey their story via cutscenes[1]. This is especially true for heavily story-oriented games: cutscenes establish information about the game world, the character the player will be controlling, and the goals to be accomplished. Players are introduced to necessary exposition that will guide them along the beginning stages of a game, asking – 'who are you, why are you here, what must be done'? It is common for games to provide some kind of background to sustain player interest and also justify the actions she is made to take. It is a familiar way to impart visual information, as "cutscenes enable the game to draw on the visual vocabularies used within cinema" (Krzywinska, 2015, p. 109). Cutscenes can take many forms, from long, expository sequences with performances, editing, and music to short moments that show only minimal information.

In this chapter I feature an array of case studies by different scholars, utilizing different approaches, to 1) demonstrate what analyses based in ludology and narratology can look like and to see the benefits of each position, 2) showcase the inherent flexibility of this concept of "narrative" as it manifests in games, and 3) provide examples of specific elements of game design that are particularly rich in analytical possibilities, and

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[1] A portion of a game (usually a story segment) where the player has no interactive control and watches events unfold, akin to a scene in a film. Sometimes cutscenes are referred to as a "cinematic". Adrienne Shaw refers to them as the "filmic portions" of a video game (Shaw, 2014, p. 37).

the political implications they have for my own analysis of *Mass Effect*. In essence, the case studies discussed here serve as models for my own analysis later in this thesis.

Lastly, this section will also cover fundamental material relevant to the political reach of this project, providing a discussion of Laura Mulvey's conception the male gaze, as well as bell hooks' work, which nuances and redirects the concepts found in Mulvey's work in a relation to race. While the case studies covered in this literature review might briefly recall other theorists to bolster specific points of analysis (including Mulvey), I emphasize that the political foundations of this project be made apparent, and therefore call attention to it specifically. I connect the relevance of these works to this study of games, demonstrating how we can view elements of game design and gaming through this political lens, and also specify where this thesis is positioned with regard to the use of certain terms and concepts.

## 1.3 Approaches and Problems of Game Analysis

### 1.3.1 Ludology and Narratology

Researchers have debated over the most beneficial way to conduct a study on games, and examining this debate foregrounds two popular models of analyses: ludology and narratology. Ewan Kirkland summarizes the distinction between the ludological and narratological models as follows: "ludologists foreground formal gaming qualities, characterizing video games as abstract rule-based systems or interactive simulations; while narratologists emphasize more static storytelling aspects, regarding games as texts to be read, often in relation to other media forms" (Kirkland, 2005, p. 167). There is some

contestation over where the term "ludology" was first created, but in the context of game studies it was largely popularized in 1999 by Gonzalo Frasca a prominent games researcher, borrowing from concepts purposed by Roger Caillois, wherein he pointed to the absence of a formal discipline for game studies (Jensen, 2013) [2]. He argued that this absence was one of the primary reasons that researchers and scholars were looking toward other disciplines for the "theoretical tools" with which to discuss games (2003, p. 222). Games are distinctive objects, yet research trends in game studies borrow from other disciplines and therefore, much of that dimension is lost (Frasca 2003; Paul 2012; Simons 2007).  The term has since been used to describe the kinds of scholars that disavow the notion of games being viewed as "extensions of narrative" (p. 222) and should therefore be viewed on their own structurally unique terms. Thus this approach emphasizes the distinctive qualities of games. Ludology has also been described as "a formalist discipline – it should focus on the understanding of its structure and elements – particularly its rules – as well as creating typologies and models for explaining the mechanics of games" (Frasca, 2003, p. 222). This is not to claim that narrative is to be done away with entirely, but rather, that narrative is not to be prioritized over games' formal elements.

Conversely, narratology reads games as texts much in the way that film or literature are read as texts: rich in themes, mores, or social commentary. Evaluating the kinds of stories games tell, scholars can infer what games are saying about social reality. Just as with other media, games investigate a multitude of topics, from war to romance.

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[2] "The study of games": derived from the Latin prefix *ludus*, meaning "game" or "play", and the suffix o*logy*, meaning "study of" (Frasca, 2001, July 8).

There is however, ongoing criticism over the prevalence of the narratologist approach and now much of it appears to dominate the field (Frasca, 2003, p. 221). A conflict arises there because understanding that video games are cultural texts is key to their consideration as a site of scholarly study. Additionally, with most games utilizing some degree of story elements alongside gameplay, narrative is an integral facet of games as a medium. On the other hand, the unique technical elements of games deserve recognition and particular focus, especially to keep from making games studies into a derivative of other established disciplines (Simons 2007). Regardless of approach, game scholars have generally expressed a concern that in the temptation to borrow from other disciplines (such as film and literary studies[3]) researchers fail to address the specificities of video games that could yield enriching and new trajectories of thought (Jenkins 2004). There is a recurring sentiment in many of these works that refocusing to avoid these traps would promote richer and more substantial analysis (Frasca 2003; Juul 2005; Murray 2005).

The works covered in this section cover the spectrum of strictly narratological or ludological, and some combining elements of both models. All, however, understand games as offering fundamentally different experiences from other media and are therefore beneficial to study. My own aims for this thesis involve foregrounding the qualities of games that are distinct and demonstrate the medium's unique position as sources of intellectually beneficial knowledge. I position myself as a researcher borrowing from both positions in order to produce a thorough analysis; I engage with the

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[3] This becomes exacerbated when working with cases that naturally lend themselves to an intertextual analysis, such as the *Silent Hill* series – a title focused on by one of the authors covered in this section, Ewan Kirkland – because the series contains many intentional homages and thematic ties to classic horror films and books.

text not only on the level of written narrative but also examine formal elements to uncover how they speak to discourses about queerness.

### 1.3.2    The Problem of "Narrative" in Games

Much of the body of work in games studies focuses on interactivity, and often, there is a concern with how interactivity can impact a narrative. Traditional narrative analysis is difficult when the core game mechanics, such as player choice, can disrupt it. Indeed, genre differences in video games can account for a vast dissimilarity in terms of aesthetic and mechanics between titles, but interactivity is the foundation of all games (Apperley, 2006, p. 7). Researchers have to account for branching paths in a story, what kind of options are made available (and by extension, what kinds are disallowed), choice options existing in such one scenario but not another, and so on. Kirkland points to the precise issue in his case study of Konami's *Silent Hill* franchise, stating that; "the vagaries of player input undermine the coherent linear unified story-text necessary for close textual analysis" (2005, p.169). He suggests that clarity can be complicated because of player input. To appreciate this point, we might consider the complications introduced into literary analysis if readers were able to discard plot threads or select characters to live or die. Interpretations of a story's themes or social commentary are made difficult when there are multiple endings, or when character relationships are different according to individual actions. How does one conduct a close textual analysis when these complications are a natural part of the game design?

This context requires that we rethink what constitutes as narrative, or "text." To complicate matters, there is not yet a consensus about what that model looks like, or *should* look like. The difficulty of studying narrative in games is an often-acknowledged obstacle of the field, with researchers tackling the issue from standpoints that prioritize different perspectives – those being ludology and narratology, as noted above. I propose that it is the tenuous nature of narrative that at the heart of the ludological vs narratological debate – and therefore, it is more beneficial to move away from asking, "should we be focusing so much on traditional conceptions of narrative in games?" to instead ask: "what does 'narrative' *mean* in the context of games and gaming?"

The work of Henry Jenkins, and in particular, his essay, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" (2004) has shaped contemporary analyses of games. Jenkins addresses this debate in the literature by claiming that the ludic standpoint has been overly concerned with pulling game studies out of a supposed "cinema envy" (p. 3). Jenkins also invites us to reconsider what we know of the "game space" itself. He emphasizes the word "spatiality" and argues for "an understanding of game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects" (p. 3). The physical spaces in games constitute a site of design choices, including narrative ones. By approaching study in this way, we then consider the structural elements in games as sites of narrative processes – in addition to conventional, textual narratives in games. Game space provides new ways of thinking about narratives and their unique operations in games. His conceptual basis follows the ludological tenet of putting game design at the center of theorizing, while at the same time incorporating elements of the narratological approach by uncovering the ways that games employ narratives.

The relationship between narrative and player, and how the two come together to form a new way of understanding narrative and meaning-making, is significant to this thesis. This interaction poses a significant question: how do we negotiate the tension between player agency/authority (a core component of video games) and the idea of a coherent narrative takes place as intended by writers and developers? Game design scholar Jef Folkerts insists video games are equal to film and literature in terms of their artistic integrity. That this notion is contested in the first place can be traced back how video games handled narrative in the medium's early days: little emphasis was placed on narrative, and therefore games became conceptualized only in terms of "entertainment" and not serious art (2010, p. 100). This argument for appreciating games as art echoes the discussion of evaluating games as a worthy object of study. Folkerts argues that video games are a site where meaning-making does take place, and in these processes demonstrate their power as an art form, because art should possess some degree of interpretive quality or depth. He writes, "in its openness and layered or multidimensional constitution a work of art preferably encourages multiple interpretations" (2010, p.110).

Video games takes this notion of "multiple interpretations" and reconstitutes it as a physical part of the process. Games offer different, and *variable* experiences (multiple endings, for example): this is a fundamental part of their narrative functioning. Therefore, when researchers study games and narrative, this game-specific variability needs to be emphasized. The case studies I refer to all examine different ways in which interactivity can, and often does, function as another way in which to convey narrative ideas, differing from the ways conventional literary structures do.

*1.3.3 Latorre: Narrative via Ludology*

Observing game form can lead to narrative discovery, despite the presumption that focusing on form is antithetical to studying narrative. One example of using ludic principles to study narrative is in Óliver Pérez Latorre's "The Social Discourse of Video Games Analysis Model and Case Study: GTA IV" (2015): This case study evaluates how social reality is conveyed, constructed, and transmitted via formal elements of game design. Latorre adheres to a more strictly ludological approach to his analysis – but echoes Jenkins in emphasizing how gameplay and design can *also* engage narrative concepts without an over-reliance on conventional, textual narrative features such as story and characters. He considers: how the player/character is represented, the game world, and the actions that can be carried out in the game world. Latorre also emphasizes the importance of understanding games as cultural and social texts, and the discursive potential in their study. He focuses exclusively on the particular ways that *Grand Theft Auto IV* conveys social commentary through its formal features, showing how such a reading is particular to its medium.

According to Latorre, elements of game design can be structured to "induce" the player to behave in certain ways even if she is not necessarily aware of it (2015, p. 424). For instance, *Grand Theft Auto IV* is a game that largely places criminal action at the center of enjoyment (the freedom to cause chaos without tangible consequences) – criminal or immoral behaviour is therefore emphasized in the game as the answer to most problems the player encounters. Even in the segments where the player is able to choose a course of action, he emphasizes that certain choices are always more "ideal" than others and often lead to more satisfying outcomes (p. 424). Latorre insists that the salient

12

narrative elements belong to the game design, and that a critical thematic reading from this is not only plausible, but also *effective*. More simply, he suggests that game design itself constitutes a form of narrative writing and therefore can be read as text. Latorre's analysis of the game centers on how a lower-class, eastern European immigrant (Niko Bellic) navigates through contemporary North America via crime and immoral behavior; this criminality is supported and incentivized by the gameplay, and therefore extends to demonstrating the farce of the American Dream (p. 427 - 428). In this way, Latorre is also touching on how discourses of the "American Dream" permeate the game and are also generated by it. This is one way in which game design can craft narrative – criminal behaviour always yields better results in *Grand Theft Auto IV*, even when there are options otherwise.

Latorre illustrates the many small ways in which game design sustains this reading. For example, he notes the ways that player choices in earning money are constrained, and subtly guided in a certain way: crime yields bigger (and quicker) benefits than honest work, and most of the story-based missions are based in crime[4]. Therefore, to make progress in the game, criminal behavior is the required (or at the very least, the most expedient) course of action. For Latorre, considering the nuances of gameplay and design is absolutely crucial to the analysis of video games as social texts. He writes:

> GTA IV projects a critical discourse on structural limits and social inequality, in
>
> line with social-democratic perspectives; but on the other hand, it promotes game

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[4] Money is a vital resource in many games, it is often needed to advance in the world and progress through the plot.

mechanics with certain traits in tune with neoliberalism and the pleasures of

consumerism. (p. 431)

Latorre emphasizes that narrative operates in game design in markedly different ways.

Giving *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s player character high competence in stealing cars and

using firearms, for example, predisposes the player toward criminal action over peaceful

action and therefore inherently shapes the thematic reading of the game a certain way

from the outset (p. 428). I present Latorre's case study as a good example of how to

conduct critical readings of formal mechanics and how to infer critical points from them,

and also to see how an example of a ludologically-based project can be conducted. My

analysis observes some of *Mass Effect*'s ludic elements, and Latorre's approach serves as

a model for how I approach my study.


*1.3.4 Reading and Unpacking Narrative Themes*

The idea that narrative-focused readings diminish the unique features of games

and gameplay becomes complicated when we consider BioWare games. BioWare titles

are known for featuring dense storytelling, and gameplay mechanics are structured

around delivering a story-centered experience. Conducting a strictly ludic-based study of

a BioWare game would ignore much of the game's core components. Conversely,

focusing on the game's narrative (plot, characters) without considering how they are

affected by gameplay would grant only very surface level readings. Without the dense

storytelling BioWare is known for, the games would have a diminished foundation and

much of the appeal to players would be lost – and so, it follows that as researchers,

studies of BioWare games must follow suit. What makes games distinct from other visually-based media is that they are interactive, allowing players to impact the story as they see fit. The intellectual richness of games – on both a consumer and researcher perspective – spans across its ludic structures, narrative elements and for some researchers, audience engagement (Dutton et al 2011; Zakowski 2014; Zekany 2016).

Another case study of gameplay informing thematic ideas, and even providing potential for uncovering subversive (especially feminist) readings, is in Ewan Kirkland's analysis of *Silent Hill 4: The Room* (2004), which operationalizes Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze. Voyeurism is a recurring theme, and it becomes apparent in specific gameplay moments wherein the game's camera employs a forceful switch from third person perspective[5] (for most of the game) to first person perspective (for very select segments). The player then occupies the main character's body space in the moments that he peeps in on others, watching them without their knowledge. These moments harken back to related kinds of imagery and themes explored in cinema – such as in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), where a "stuck" protagonist passes time by watching other people without their consent. Kirkland sums this process as: "Here the gaze of the player, the avatar, and the virtual camera become one" (2009, p. 176). The major formal element of the game here is the interactive aspect – the peeping is completely *optional*, and the player must actively elect to do it (and therefore this agency makes the player complicit in the character's actions). Significantly, in these particular

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[5] Third person view in games entails being able to see – and therefore control – the player character's body, and results in being able to visually situate the character relative to his or her environment. First person view is constructed so that the "camera" essentially functions as the character's eyes – the player sees from the character's optical perspective, and therefore the body is absent (excepting, perhaps, hands and feet).

segments the gaze does not give power - but rather takes it away. The player is trapped in his apartment; all the skills given the character with regard to combat and movement are taken away, and the player can only watch and the world goes on around him (p.176). I raise this example to emphasize the kind of theoretically rich readings that are possible from observing game form and mechanics.

*1.3.5 Games, Knowledge, and Social Reality*

The intertextuality of video games is pertinent to this thesis, especially in the way that games often recall films. The ways that games reconstitute the kinds of narratives and images seen from film will be discussed in the analysis, but I call attention to it here because it situates games as cultural objects that speak to others. Cultural objects impart some meaning about their contexts – whether social, artistic, or otherwise. Games are not an exception. As Folkerts suggests, "art refers in some way to something outside itself, to something in reality, and the meaning of that reference is created mainly in the experience, in the artistic interpretation" (2010, p.103). He goes on to say:

> Actually the artfulness of games seems closely related to the various modes in which the game story *refers to reality*, and prompts meta-reflection. We define the artistic nature by its content and by what it refers to, which we determine partly ourselves. (p. 113). [emphasis added]

In this thesis, I will consider the way such features are discursive. The value of video games for this study, and the aspects that transcends pure "entertainment", concerns games' ability to produce and reproduce discourse.

Much of Folkerts' rhetorical position is interested in what games – and by extension, their authors/developers – say about reality through specific representations (p. 104). This question is relevant to this thesis as well: what is queer identity/narrative/experience, and what do representations in video games tell us about these issues? Feminist cultural studies have an inherent stake in unpacking presumed "knowledge" about the social world, in unraveling status quos and presenting opportunities to reconfigure our own notions about the way the world functions – or ought to function. Video games as a cultural text are rife with representations that produce opportunities for scholars to uncover what is being said when developers choose to incorporate certain elements and exclude others.

In *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design, and Play* (2012), Christopher Paul writes: "a discussion of games as process develops the background needed to address the special status of games as objects comprised of both meaning and doing" (p. 6). Analyzing the aesthetic of queerness in narratives can tell us something crucial about the social world: it works to clarify the ways that queer identities are constructed by media creators, and the assumptions that such narratives forge about their audiences. Stories – even science fiction or fantasy (or perhaps, especially these genres) – do not exist in a vacuum. Stories come from minds that are located in our social world, and they are conveyed to other minds also formed by socio-cultural mores. In this interaction, I am interested in processes of meaning-making, on both sides. As for the "doing" that Paul refers to, in which gaming is a process and an interaction of discourses, "doing" is also impacted by meaning. What meanings are imparted by the game, and in what ways can these meanings reinforce status quos – or alternatively, where and how

17

can players renegotiate the meanings they encounter and create a possibility of subversion?

Much of this is tied to questions of knowledge. Cultural and social knowledge can be uncovered via study: the study of media, in particular, aims to uncover what these artifacts can reveal about what beliefs about our world are transmitted through interaction with them. This concerns not only what creators and authors may themselves believe, but also what is believed about the audiences, and the presumptions about what audiences want or need. Christopher Paul uses a modified, rhetorically-based approach (which he terms "wordplay") to study discourses in games, saying that:

> Wordplay uses the tools of rhetorical criticism to examine various elements of games, from the words found within and around them to the design, play, and coding of them. By looking at these elements, wordplay facilitates analysis of how games persuade, create identifications, and circulate meanings. (p. 2)

While this thesis does not employ rhetorical criticism as its framework, the goals that Paul names are similar. Both studies search for the meanings that games produce and circulate, unearthing what discourses are at play. For example, what do the overwhelming number of male protagonists relative to female protagonists tell us about the perceived relatability of male characters and stories? Do the high number of queer characters with tragic backstories indicate a discourse of queerness as existing in tandem with hardship and survival over leisure and acceptance? Studying games can give us, as scholars, insight into these dilemmas.

These ideas are produced via game design as well. Choice-based gameplay will lead

to actions that have specific consequences, and this specificity reflects, to some degree,

the world-view of the designer (Folkerts, 2010, p. 111). Folkerts asks "what does the

designer want to express about reality by connecting this choice to that particular

outcome?" (p. 113). The narrative formation of BioWare games are constructed around

this formula, and the notion of certain scenarios having to lead to very specific outcomes

often raises significant questions – especially when it comes to the explicitly queer

storylines. The scholars I examine here maintain that it is important to remember that

interactivity in games is never limitless, for that would be impossible, and that in

analyzing interactive processes we must remember that "interactivity is therefore an

extremely, maybe necessarily, structured experience" (Kirkland, 2005, p. 170). The belief

that representations in games mirror elements of the offline world is shared by the authors

in this section as well: "The definition of what can be 'real' or possible in the video

games always corresponds, to a lesser or greater degree, intentionally or unintentionally,

to a certain worldview" (Latorre, 2010, p. 419).


**1.4 Gaming as Politics**

*1.4.1 Politicizing the Game Space*

In *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998), an early

essay by Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered

Play Spaces" (1998), conceptualizes how the game space has been gendered and

constructed toward fulfilling the fantasies of boys, and how it remains so in contemporary

games. This discussion arose out of response to a movement in gaming's early years wherein developers were looking for ways to draw in girls, believing the demographic to be overwhelmingly male. In doing so, developers tried to craft games consciously oriented toward girls. An issue arose with these "girls' games"; they played into rigidly defined, sexist notions about what these kinds of games should be based on ideas about what girls were like and would benefit the most from (1998, p. 358). Jenkins' analysis of gendered game space is a promising model of how feminist-oriented cultural studies have been applied to gaming, and how such a project is to be conducted while in keeping with the goals of keeping game studies focused on its specificities.

Moreover, Jenkins also addresses the politics of game development; he posits that it is important for girls to be considered with the same level of importance as boys when it comes to developing games. Not only that, but girls' games should not be faced with being constructed according to stereotypes that limits the kinds of games they can play:

We need to open up more space for girls to join – or play alongside – the traditional boy culture down by the river, in the old vacant lot, within the bamboo forest. Girls need to learn how to explore the "unsafe" and "unfriendly" spaces. Girls need to experience the "complete freedom of movement" promised by the boys games, if not all the time, then at least some of the time, if they are going to develop the self confidence and competitiveness demanded of contemporary professional women. Girls need to learn how to, in the words of a contemporary best-seller, "run with the wolves" and not just follow the butterflies along the Secret Paths. Girls need to be able to play games where Barbie gets to kick some butt. (p. 358).

Jenkins later goes on to say that boys should also be able to play games that are crafted according to the ideology that go into "girls' games", and that a playspace that incorporates both would be socially beneficial rather than the segregated construction that goes into games now. While written in 1998, the heart of his argument still applies today – not only in terms of gendered space, but spaces contextualized by heterosexism. To echo Jenkins' sentiment, queer players need to be able to play games where they can experience "complete freedom of movement" in a space that is theirs too, not only just peripherally accommodating them but actively inviting them.

Jenkins' work here has significant implications. If he posits that the game space is a gendered phenomenon, we can also extend this notion to a reformulated framework that these spaces are also informed and shaped by heterosexist cultural standards. The goal of this thesis is to examine queer subjects as they are constructed across *Mass Effect* – and this concept of game space is foundational to the understanding of this analysis. Additionally, I posit that game space not only reflects narrative functions, but also generates discourse and in particular, discourses about and of queerness. Like Kirkland, Jenkins' work serves as a useful model in this project's effort to balance the multiple demands of feminist critique and critical analysis, while retaining its essence as a game study.

*1.4.2 Immersion and Investment*

Players are thrust into worlds that are built from the ground up via computer technology, and these worlds take many shapes from fantasy, to science fiction, to horror.

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Many look photorealistic, while others strive to cultivate a particular visual aesthetic. One such example is Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2012), which derives its visual style from the comic book series on which it is it is based. Other formal elements, such as visual aesthetics, camera perspective, soundtrack, and voice acting all work in tandem to pull players in, generating immersion and investment.

These terms – immersion and investment– are significant to my investigation. The notion of immersion relates to other arts such as theatre or film, but also constitutes focused research in the game studies field on its own (Black 2017; Bouvier et al 2014; Calleja 2007; Calleja 2010; Ermi & Mäyrä 2005; Frasca 2001; Jennett et al 2008; McMahan 2003; Waern 2011). Game design generally seeks to generate an immersive environment and atmosphere for players; anything that constitutes a "break" in that immersion is considered undesirable, much in the same way that the flow of images is prized in film viewing (Black, 2017, p. 191). For instance, using music that fits the tone of a scene or environment works to heighten atmospheric cohesion – somber moments and comedic moments will naturally have different musical accompaniments from each other. Writing is expected to be consistent: characters behaving out of character or plots veering off course will often break immersion. Even "acting" – especially in modern games – is carefully considered to ensure players can believe in the performances enough to be immersed in the game. Quality voice acting and realistic motion-capture[6] for character movement are staples of many contemporary titles: these elements add a cinematic feel and engage players. Many games, such as *Until Dawn* (Supermassive

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[6] "In brief, it is the technology that enables the process of translating a live performance into a digital performance" (Menache, 2000, p. 1). Similar to how to motion capture is used in film – a live subject's movements and/or shape is mapped and then altered for a character in the film/game.

Games, 2015) or *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), will utilize film actors to not only provide voice and motion to their characters, but even a physical likeness as well, bringing a more human nuance to character presence.

What is accomplished by generating an immersive experience is ensuring a degree of player investment. This could pertain to a more goal-oriented use of the word, where players are focused on the pleasure derived from completing tasks and accomplishing goals. It also refers to players developing a sense of connection to the game via the story and characters, uncovering the world, the emotional and mental attachments that arise from the experience. All of this occurs in the realm of play – of which I have yet to speak to. In *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders* (2006), Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska describe the process: "[p]lay in general is best understood as a *mode* rather than a distinct category of behavior, suggesting a particular attitude toward an activity and how it is situated in relation to what is taken to be the real world." (p. 19). The connections made between player and game, and more specifically, the process whereby immersion is generated, constitutes much of how we can understand play as a mode.

Narrative engagement and the gaming process come together to amplify the power of affect for the player, as Gordon Calleja, a researcher on immersion in online games, writes in his piece "Digital Game Involvement: A Conceptual Model" (2007) that "[g]ame design, like other forms of textual production, is imbued with the rhetorical strategies of affect. But unlike other forms of text, this rhetorical power is emphasized by the conjunction of textual interpretation and the performed practice of gaming" (p. 245). The convergence of narrative investment and physical pleasure is reflected in Calleja's summation of the game design above.

Task completion is often contingent upon players being invested to some degree. In narrative-based games where stories are shaped depending on player input, investment in obtaining particular endings or seeing certain characters survive the story is a major part of the process – especially when we consider that many games are very long, and require hours of attention and work on the part of the player to complete. Investing time into building relationships with non-player characters (NPCs) can yield rewards in the form of gameplay payoffs (such as money or skills) or story benefits, such as friendships or romantic relationships for the player character to engage. It also creates the sense of a "personal narrative". As Calleja writes:

> Personal narrative accounts for the creation of a narrative based on the situated
> actions of the player and the resultant outcomes. The lived experience of game-play is
> stored, like all other lived experience, in the player's memory, with certain episodes
> leaving a stronger imprint than others: spectacular goals in football games,
> overcoming seemingly impossible odds unexpectedly, comic instances in multiplayer
> games, and so on. The accumulation of a personal narrative can heighten the affective
> dimensions of the game. It gives meaning to the player's actions, both in terms of past
> events and future plans, as well as enhancing to different degrees depending on the
> structure of the game and the player's sense of agency. (p. 251)

If there is not enough investment to see it through, there is not much motivation to complete these games. Design and writing elements work to make the game appealing, in order to generate that investment that makes the experience enjoyable (King & Krzywinska, p. 28). Players engage with a desire to be immersed, and this also extends to how they engage with the player character – putting "parts of themselves into the

character encourages them to have an emotional reaction to the things that happen to their avatar" (Harper, 2017, p. 133).

I emphasize these notions of immersion and investment because they are relevant to the power relations within processes of representation. If we consider that on a design level, games attempt to be as immersive as they can, a critical question to consider is, "do games seek to engage queer players as fully as non-queer players?" We understand how immersion functions in terms of technical processes in gaming – direction, music, and so on – but how do the *story* elements work to this end as well? I suggest that the idea of investment, and the intricacies of game construction can complicate this. In attending to these interrogations, it is useful to examine the significant elements of game design that serve immersion and investment the most – such as the player avatar.

*1.4.3 Laura Mulvey: The Default Gaze*

Earlier, I referred to the works of Ewan Kirkland, whose analyses on games invoked Mulvey's formulation of the gendered gaze. Her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989) describes the process of the gaze, and the patriarchal practices that dictate the boundaries of female representations in narrative cinema. Her focus on the gaze exposes the power relations in the act of looking – who is looking, and who is being looked at. Informed by a Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic model, Mulvey describes the mechanisms by which the film spectator looks at, and derives pleasure from, narrative cinema. She outlines a dichotomy wherein the camera mobilizes a male gaze – in that they are the presumed, defaulted spectators of film – and the function of women in film is often to be the objects of their gaze, crafted in a way so as to

signify male desire (p. 11). At the heart of the essay is an argument about the way images, and structures of looking, produce particular conceptualizations of the subject. While Mulvey's work in this piece concerns cinema, a fact that she readily acknowledges (p. 18), I propose that a repurposing of her concepts is valuable to a project pertaining to video games. I do not seek to wrongly conflate the specificities of film and with those of video games, but I do wish to explore the way these media construct pleasure and audience interaction. Additionally, as media that deploy images and narratives (and the complex relationships between the two), there exists an interesting interplay of ideas that has yet to be explored in depth.

Mulvey characterizes narrative film as centered upon structures and characters with which the (male) spectator can identify (p. 12). This alignment of spectator/character serves as the presumed and functional default, and it is in this process of looking (an act of great performative power, in Mulvey's estimation) at the character that the spectator becomes caught up in mechanisms of identification:

> As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (p. 12)

Conversely, no such equivalent exists for women: female characters in this scheme function as objects of the gaze and thus exercise no power (p. 11). It can be presumed that female spectators, who Mulvey does not speak on much in this piece, also fail to reach the omnipotent satisfaction that their male counterparts do in such a process. In

terms of considering the role of the *female* spectator, I will examine bell hooks' use of Mulvey's work later in this section.

Mulvey's notion of a default male gaze is easily imagined, and put to use, in the world of games. That transference of agency and power from the character in the film, to the spectator viewing him, through this process of identification exists between player and avatar as well: "This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify" (p. 12). Video games simply add complexity to this relationship, in that the interactive element and integral need for the player's active involvement represents an additional blurring of boundaries between subject and character. Moreover, the rhetoric of male subject/female object, and notions of the male gaze, apply to the gender politics of video game representations of women as well – that relationship between male player and the female object of the gaze.

According to Mulvey, "cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire" (p. 17)[7]. The construction and deployment of cinematic codes in games (as well as game-specific ones too, when we consider the more ludic elements of game design) also work toward the creation and maintenance of a status quo and is also imbued with power relations of the gaze. One might even consider these codes in gaming to be even more laden with meaning, as the entirety of a game's visual presentation is crafted from a blank slate (with few exceptions). If we interrogate the ways the camera frames the figure in mainstream

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[7] By "cinematic codes" Mulvey is referring to conventional elements of narrative form, such as editing, camera movement, and framing.

cinema, what can be said when we consider that video game women are entirely created via computer graphics, and then also positioned and framed by a "camera" on top of that? The discussion takes on a different dimension as we move closer to the aims of this thesis and perform an analysis that focuses on queer gender and sexuality.

*1.4.4 bell hooks: Oppositional Gaze and Agency*

A related text is bell hooks' "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (1992); hooks critiques and nuances Mulvey's scheme, by bringing it into contact with issues of race. Hooks' analysis insists that Mulvey's model needs to address Black female spectators and the marginalization of the Black female subject. The lack of positive or consistent representation of the Black woman in film and the disavowal of her as possible default spectator creates a degree of distance (p. 118). That distance grants her what hooks terms the "oppositional gaze" – in essence, being able to assess cinema critically, as well as to "choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator" (p. 122). Because she is excluded from conventional looking relations, she can gaze critically.

Further, hooks states that "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (p. 116). She is again referencing the oppositional gaze – that in having the ability to gaze critically leads to a potential for agency. This notion of agency arising out of the ability of a subject to manipulate one's gaze is relevant to what this thesis is examines, and is germane to how power relations via the gaze operates in the game world. Recall the customizable protagonist, and the idea of players having the ability not only to

manipulate their gaze – but also what they are gazing *at*. More specifically, the changeability of a PC's traits on racial, gender, and sexual lines has vast ramifications to the reading of a text and therefore, the power relations at play.

Regarding the position of the subject, hooks states that at the outset, "black female spectators have gone to films with awareness of the way in which race and racism determined the visual construction of gender" (p. 122). By this, she suggests that Black female spectators possess an awareness of the ways in which cinema disenfranchises the status of the Black woman (especially in relation to White womanhood), though every individual will experience it in different ways with differing strategies of interaction (p. 121). Borrowing from hooks, I suggest that queer players come into games with an awareness of how heteronormativity can inform the sexual narratives of the game. Not to make an essentialist claim that every marginalized individual naturally shares the same mindset, but hooks' work emphasizes that this kind of systemic exclusion usually leads to the marginalized forming critical perceptions at the outset, ones that they bring in with them when engaging with media.

I present hooks' essay as a model of how I will conduct my own analyses, using theory and concepts in a similar way. Moreover, I strive to be cognizant of the nuances of certain issues, and not to erase their specificity. In the case of hooks, the politics of black womanhood and white cinema has specificities that are unrelated to politics of queerness and heteronormative gaming. I will emphasize here that while I use hooks (and other scholars) as a model for this particular work, there are political and thematic differences that must be remembered and due respect is paid to the particulars of certain experiences. As demonstrated in hooks' essay, social identities and marginalization are not

interchangeable, and nor are the topical points of discourse always applicable to each other. The onus is on myself as a researcher to be reflexive and accountable to these realities.

## 1.5 Connecting Player and Game

### 1.5.1 Player Avatar: Customization and Camera Formations

Folkerts asserts that the player's character assumes a vital role in the discussion, a core idea important for this thesis. He writes, "if we play a game we not only transfer ourselves into the virtual world, but also our game character, the avatar: we imagine being somewhere else and someone else" (p.107). The ways protagonists are conceived have political implications, because they are representational of ideas around subjectivity and legitimacy – it is an analysis further complicated when we observe games that feature *customizable* protagonists. Folkerts posits that such an avatar is a construction "both the gamer and the game designer" (p.113) in terms of player input and identification, as well as the structural limitations and choices imparted by the designers. There is also much to unpack when it comes to the social implications of character customization as well: as analysts we must ask, what conventions are still in place in the presence of this mechanism of "choice" and "customization"? Is the character still bound by gender normative conventions, and to what extent is racial diversity accounted for? Is it possible to play a character that shows physical disability?

These kinds of conversations are especially important because escapism is one of the primary draws of playing video games (Calleja, 2010; Messerly, 2004). As John Messerly states:

> Escapism is the primary appeal. Moreover, as the graphics get better and the game play more sophisticated, playing becomes even more engrossing. It is easy to understand why anyone would want to escape our difficult and complicated world and fall into a vivid, compelling game environment. One can live there with little or no interaction with the ordinary world. (p. 29)

In other words: games offer an immersive environment in which a player can leave behind her problems, engaging in a pleasurable activity away from the complications of offline life. This process becomes complicated however, if we consider where the player is coming from, what marginalization(s) she brings with her and how this interrupts the notion of pleasure and escapism. Remembering that queerness is still at the margins of cultural acceptance, what does it mean when developers create game worlds that still reproduce structures of marginalization? How does escaping from discrimination into more discrimination complicate "escapism"? When fantasy worlds are still homophobic, science fiction still patriarchal?

*Saints Row 2* (2008) was a game that utilized an aesthetic of gangster violence in its setting, but allowed for a groundbreaking and diverse range of possibilities when it came to customizing the avatar. All features were available to all kinds of avatars – a male-designated character could wear makeup or have visible breasts, a female-designated character could have facial hair and a low voice, for example. That these configurations have no effect on how the character is perceived in the diegesis is an even

more significant effect. If we consider the previously mentioned notions of how escapism

is made complex, such freedom to play a character that could approximate almost any

kind of individual[8] and without fear of "real world" issues, such as gender normativity, is

quite progressive. This is not to assume that the developers behind this system set out

with a progressive agenda in mind; it is just as likely that this freedom was granted out of

technological convenience – it would be extra work to construct different scenes and

record different lines of dialogue just to account for the possibility that a player has

chosen these specific attributes out of a variety of offered choices. In any case, this level

of player freedom is still an anomaly today: in most games, features are locked to certain

gender categories. Thus game design and game space assume and represent normative

constructions of gender.

This leads us to the avatar, or "player character" (PC). The primary function of an

avatar is to act as the vehicle through which the player experiences the game. They are

incorporated differently in a game depending on developer motivation and the needs the

game seeks to fulfill. Some are blank canvases with little by way of characterization or

presence, in order to facilitate a degree of immersion – to create the illusion that the

player *is* the avatar. Others will be fully-formed characters, with names, identities, and

personal histories. They will feel like people that inhabit the game's world, with players

acting more akin to guides that direct that character's journey.

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[8] To qualify this statement – as far as the *Saints Row 2* character customization goes in terms of gender and body type, players are still unable to attribute physical disabilities of any kind. Absolute freedom in games can only be approximated to a certain degree, and while this thesis is focused on social positions in terms of gender/sexuality, and acknowledgement must be made that these arguments do tend to exclude other social positions.

Firstly, as Adrienne Shaw points to in *Gaming at the Edge* (2014), the rhetorical usefulness of the term "avatar" is limited – since it specifically tends to imply self-representation (p. 102), and not all PCs are created to represent the player's self in such a way. To specify, avatars in this sense are typically understood to be the kind of PCs that are crafted in a way that allows the players to represent themselves in the game – typically through a degree of customization. In many games, PCs are pre-created, and therefore self-representation is limited or not applicable. For the purposes of this project, the term avatar will be used as the default to refer to the PC in any capacity – especially taking into consideration the tenuous boundary between "avatar" and "character" when it specifically comes to Commander Shepard, which I expand on below.

Careful consideration must be given to how an avatar is constructed in all senses, including the game's camera perspective, whether they are named, voiced-acted, or customizable. Sensory input is a vital part of creating immersion between the player and the game, and all the moving parts of the game design process work to cultivate a strong degree of immersion (King & Krzywinska, p. 28). A first-person game places the player inside the PC's body, with the camera acting as the eyes through which the players can see and interact with the game's world. Sometimes the character's hands or weapons are visible in the frame, intensifying the feeling of occupying the character's physicality. First-person perspective is often popular in "First Person Shooter" games – a genre often characterized by gun-based combat (Pinchbeck, 2009, p. 79). A third-person game allows the PC's body to be visible, and players feel as though they are physically moving the character through the space rather than occupying that space themselves. Considering the

relationship between players and avatars, the camera perspective can offer useful insights – as the camera is often at the locus of what determines the game's spatial parameters.

A useful place to look is in the genre of survival horror, as it is a type of game genre that illuminates how the camera intrinsically affects the experience and perceptual qualities of a game. Many survival horror games have utilized third-person perspective in the past, with a few having opted for a first-person camera structure as well (Pinchbeck, p. 79) [9]. Horror games are electing to use a first-person camera more in contemporary games. While there are many reasons for this choice, the broad consensus is that the first-person perspective immerses the player in the game's world – and therefore heightens the sense of immediacy (Rouse III, 2009, p. 21). Dangers in the game become a threat to the *player* rather than the character. If a character is crawling in ventilation ducts to sneak away from a dangerous murderer, it is indeed effective to present a screen that mimics the character's vision, to simulate visual claustrophobia, reduced visibility, and the trembling of the PC's hands at the corners of the screen. First-person cameras have typically been conceptualized as the more "immersive" camera format – but usually at the cost of playing a clearly-defined character with personality (Black, 2015). Recalling Mulvey, cameras are the primary means through which the gaze operates, and in games the process is much the same. Thus, it is useful to consider the role of the camera in any analyses that focuses on the gaze.

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[9] Survival horror is a genre of video games that are based in horror, but will emphasize "surviving" the conflicts the game presents to the player rather than fighting. Comparatively to most standard horror, survival horror also tends to be more story-heavy and will prioritize a degree of narrative justification for the events of the game (Kirkland, 2009, p. 63).

*1.5.2 Seeing and Identification*

Games provide a sense of gratification that comes with overcoming obstacles, even if the accomplishments are strictly virtual, and even if the narrative justifications for completing those goals are vague (Belman et al, 2014, p. 35). Games tend to be understood as a goal-oriented medium – though not all games are constructed around goals, and some aim to provide different kinds of enjoyment, such as the *Sims* franchise or the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (Juul, 2007 p. 191). In general, however, players strive to avoid failure, or the experience of losing. The fear of failure in games is something that is linked closely to preserving the wellbeing and success of the PC. In the majority of games, the character's death terminates the game – from the early days of *Pac-Man* (1980) to contemporary games, with their complex goal systems. Players must have an invested interest in their PC – keeping the character alive and seeing her through the obstacles to reach the end. In the case of first-person perspective games, conflating the identity of the PC and the player creates this investment as a natural end result.

This brings us to the third-person camera. With third-person games, where a PC's physical body is visible and is a crucial aspect of the game experience, other considerations come into play (especially true when customization becomes a feature) when discussing investment and identification. In this structure, there exists a more distinct physical gap between character and player (Nitsche, 2008, p. 107). When the PC is a central fixture on the screen, there is a clearer boundary between player and PC. If the character becomes hurt, the player will see the physical effects on the body of the avatar. In this way, playing third-person games resembles the process of viewing films – a connection that Daniel Black explores in "Why Can I See My Avatar? Embodied

Visual Engagement in the Third-Person Video Game" (2015). After all, as much as I (and the authors in this section) point to the unique ability of games to offer immersive experiences, cinema, in its decades-long history, also creates and sustains immersion as a core feature. When players are given more control over the game's camera, the relationship between player and character is further nuanced, as Michael Nitsche elucidates in *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (2008). He writes,

> While the film camera offers a fixed image, the virtual camera can team up with
>
> the player during the game. Both can be seen as actors collaborating during the
>
> creation and narration of an event. With the growing control of the player over the
>
> camera entity, the performance for the player becomes a dual one, simultaneously
>
> controlling the main actor as well as the camera's point of view. (p. 113)

I emphasize Nitsche's point here because the formal elements of gaming and mechanics are salient. His summation here resonates with the ludologist conception of how formal game elements can shape and form narrative readings on their own terms.

Games that contain extensive dialogue on the part on the PC will necessarily result in a set of parameters for PC personality. This is true for *Mass Effect* where Commander Shepard, while malleable to a certain degree, behaves according to a set of available personalities and thus isn't a completely blank space for players to insert themselves into the story. This is not to say that this kind of character design results in less investment part of the player, but rather that it facilitates a different kind of investment. Just as viewers of a film may form strong attachments to characters,

engaging processes of identification – recalling the discussion with Mulvey and hooks – players can also develop similar identificatory relationships to the characters they play (Waern 2011). If anything, facilitating character growth and completing goals throughout the course of a game, a process through which the player is an integral element, comprises its own unique form of attachment.

To further examine this notion of "attachment", consider the journey of the may gaming experiences. The character begins the game at a necessary "beginning" stage – for instance, "level 1" – and over the course of the game, via player guidance, grows stronger, gains more skills, and perhaps even forms relationships. This development is attributed to player time and effort, and cannot be accomplished independent of the player. This is not the voyeuristic exercise of watching a character go through a narrative, but rather a relationship predicated on active input, which therefore produces a sense of responsibility – and through this, identification. This relationship does not necessarily have to depend strictly on the textual elements of the game design, as Shaw (2014) notes:

> Part of what scholars (and game makers) must be more willing to embrace is that the text alone does not define how the player interacts or connects with the characters or avatars. Subjective reasons for play and personal preferences drive the very personal experience of identification much more than textual elements can. (p. 109)

Shaw's point here that the process of identification with gaming – and the avatars/characters – becomes a personal experience is significant. Games can connect with players in a very personal way, and fostering a strong link between player and avatar is one of the ways this occurs.

*1.5.3 "Default" Avatars and its Implications*

Commander Shepard proves to be an interesting case when considering this difference between "avatar" and "character". The customizability of Shepard in tandem with the pre-set personalities and histories (albeit chosen by the player based on preference) results in the character occupying an amorphous middle ground between the two modes. Shaw uses the term "hybrid" (p. 135) to characterize the character's unique position in this dichotomy. Shepard is not a blank slate for players to completely design but neither is the character fully formed outside of player influence. Nearly everything about Shepard is selected by the player – a core gameplay feature. The ability to craft a custom protagonist is one of the primary selling points of the series. *Mass Effect*'s Commander Shepard is customizable to a limited extent: the player can choose options related to racial background, first name (unvoiced), and cosmetic choices. But significantly, certain features always remain in place. The character has one set body type, and is always referred to by the name "Shepard" – which brings certain limitations if one is to consider his or her ancestral roots. "Shepard" is mandatory, as the games are voice-acted and other characters will refer to the PC as Shepard. In addition, there are thematic reasons for the name – the character acts as a shepherd to the galaxy's forces, and becomes a legendary hero.

Shepard, as a surname, is coded as a "neutral" name, which precludes – to a degree – the creation of an "ethnic" player character. What becomes changed if one were to play as Commander Chang? Commander Patil? Not just in terms of script, but the perception of the character. How would conversations or dynamics shift when characters

are racialized a certain way, under a critical reading? Certainly, even if the thematic detail of the "shepherd" was needed, a name meaning something similar from another culture could have sufficed.

Granted, the series takes place in our science-fiction future, where presumably humankind has racially integrated to a larger degree than in our current 21st century. Critically however, we acknowledge these games are being played in our current social climate, created by people informed by our times, and shaped by present ideologies. Furthermore, not only are they shaped by present ideologies, they are also shaped by industry concerns. As Shaw surmises in "Putting the Gay in Games" (2009):

> Game developers create games that they think appeal to their target market. These games are successful and thus the companies continue to produce them over time. As only economically successful genres are reproduced, this results in a narrower vision of what ''gamers'' play. (p. 232)

This industry concern with what is "marketable" and "successful" naturally influences the creation and formation of their product. Naming the avatar in this way codes the character with a degree of Western-ness from the outset, and frames the world around the character in such a way that retains this era's current familiar socio-cultural structures and boundaries. In terms of what this means on a textual and narrative level, it shows that even in an "integrated" or "diverse" future, the concept of the "hero" will not stray from Western or European origins. The future envisioned here erases marks of cultural (and presumably, racial) difference—rather than framing the possibility that Anglo-Western names and cultural status might lose prominence.

A related issue is the way the PC speaks. In conjunction with the naming conventions, the voice acting always employs a North American accent, defaulting to a specific kind of identity. Despite the ability to customize, Shepard is still formulated as a culturally North American, Anglo-named military character. The default version of the Commander Shepard (and therefore the image of the character that is featured on promotional materials and box art) is named John. He is a white male with a shaved head – a Western, normative image of what a "military character" looks like. To "customize", even though the game presents this as an option, in a sense also means to "deviate" from a very specific kind of template. This template is white, Western, male and heterosexual.

Adrienne Shaw's work on game audiences and culture demonstrates a strong market focus on this particular demographic (Shaw 2009; Shaw 2012; Shaw 2014). Industry notions of marketability and social conceptions of a "default" tie into each other, and discursively inform one another – we see this reflected in the formation of Commander Shepard. Shepard's default identity being what it is, is reflective of industry perceptions of their main player base being people along the same identity formations.

This focus on the "default" echoes notions of the "Other", a concept relating to self-perception and social identity via relations between the oppressor and the marginalized, a central concept in Gayatri Spivak's influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Dominant groups understand and establish their own identities placing themselves in relation to a designated "Other" – men to women, or White to racialized, for example. The idea of there existing a "default" state of being is problematized by this concept of the Other, because even defaults necessitate the existence of diverging states in order to actualize its own existence. This process manifests itself differently in games,

wherein the design choice in default brings to mind the categories that are excluded, when under close scrutiny.

Having the ability to customize, a mechanism that simultaneously produces the conception of a default in the first place, means that the default is designed to also have the capability to represent the Other. Put simply, Commander Shepard is figure that is designed to be able to be understood as a heterosexual White male, but also potentially a queer woman of colour *at the same time*. This is a character that is designed to be able to occupy a multitude of different social categories, anticipating the possibilities that players will bring with them when they create their character, and this must be accomplished without the character's authenticity coming into question. It is through the unique capabilities of video games that such a theoretically rich situation exists.

This portrayal of a futuristic hero, one that is "neutral" and seeks to escape the baggage of history – "all inclusive", as it were – echoes Spivak's summation of the relationship between the default and the Other, in an different way. This almost-utopian conception of person that can cross all kinds of cultural and embodied formations, a "one size fits all" type of design philosophy, runs into similar complications that Spivak observes in the work of post-colonialist discourse, wherein the end result is usually a reinforcement of previous issues despite intentions to escape them[10]. Portraying a character in this manner comes with issues we must consider, such as a dominant, defaulted identity standing in for others, despite the perception of all inclusiveness.

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[10] In Spivak's piece, these issues are specifically about colonialism.

The defaulting of whiteness, maleness, and Western-ness has thematic ties to this project. These concerns are central to the political aim of this thesis, precisely because this notion of a "default" extends to issues of queerness. Just as the game defaults to a whiteness, it also orients the player (and player character) to a kind of heteronormativity, and therefore privileging of non-queer identities. Whether it accomplishes this by the way conversations are constructed, by limiting the ability to verbally self-disclose, or by the way the avatar's actions are constrained or given freedom, will be analyzed in this thesis.

**CHAPTER TWO: THEORY**

## 2.1 Queer Theory

It is imperative to define what is meant when I deploy the term "queer". This is especially pertinent considering the term's historical usage as a pejorative slur (Halperin, 2003, p. 339), and its contested usage to this day. This is not only an issue in terms of everyday language, but especially in terms of the word's entrenchment in the academy as "queer studies," both in countries where "queer" was understood as a slur, and in countries where it was devoid of such association and came into usage without the historical baggage (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 5). Let me respectfully preface this section by acknowledging the historical and politically-charged nature of the term and the contested nature of its appropriation by academics.

Defining queerness remains a difficult task, even with the rise of "queer studies." Within queer studies itself the term, its conceptualization, and the work undertaken in its name resists clear boundaries of definition:

> Much of the most exciting work in this new moment of queer studies refuses to see sexuality as a singular mode of inquiry and instead makes sexuality a central category of analysis in the study of racialization, transnationalism and globalization (Halberstam, 2003, p. 361).

Here, prominent queer theorist Jack Halberstam[11] refers to the ways the study of queer sexuality has emerged in conjunction with other disciplines; sometimes this interdisciplinary approach can beget new fields, such as "queer ethnic studies, queer

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[11] Jack Halberstam was previously known, and published, as Judith Halberstam.

postcolonial studies and transgender studies." (p. 361) This diversity comes from what Halberstam noted as the refusal to theorize sexuality in a unitary way. Instead, sexuality is understood as complex and exists in a multiplicity of modes. This is considered one of the strengths of queer academic inquiry; it easily permits a multidisciplinary approach that places the study of queerness in dialogue with a vast array of fields. It can also be considered a shortcoming, as well. Intra-community discussions have shed light on the issue of queer studies becoming more prominent, and therefore becoming more and more removed from what many perceived were its core principles (Halperin, 2008, p. 341).

In, "The Normalization of Queer Theory", theorist David Halperin outlines the progression of queer theory/queer studies from its emergence to the field it is today. He eventually discusses how "queer theory proper is often abstracted from the quotidian realities of lesbian and gay male life." (p.343) To specify, he is stating that contemporary queer theory is often seemingly removed from its roots. For Halperin, queer theory as we understand it now has moved far from its beginnings as being derivative from gay and lesbian studies, and in the process, has worked to "despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness, thereby abstracting 'queer' and turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness…" (p. 341). By this, Halperin suggests that queer studies/theory has moved away from the particular and sharp focus on the experience(s) of LGBT people and identities to more broad theorizing, to conceptions that may not necessarily come from specifically LGBT identities and histories. The kinds of queer studies Halperin is pointing to very likely includes some of the works found in this thesis – wherein "queerness" is often located in a general disruption of heteronormativity, still constituting an othered category, rather than strictly pertaining to

44

same-sex attraction as the only locus of "queer" as concept (for instance, queer gender forms a large part of my analysis). This is pertinent to how I formulate my own analysis, as I utilize these more "broad" understandings of queerness as conceptualized by Halperin, and may run into the issues that he critiques here. I take care to denote where the term "queer" becomes complicated – such as where queerness is invoked or becomes a useful analytical lens, but otherwise lacks the specificities of LGBT experiences (analyzing ostensibly heterosexual characters that still disrupt the heterosexist model in other ways, for example). As this project concerns discourses of queerness rather than queerness specifically as a lived, embodied identity, however, I argue that the conception of queerness that Halperin argues against here is absolutely necessary to this project. Ultimately, I am suggesting a difference be made when conceptualizing "queer" (LGBT specificity in embodied experiences) versus "queerness" (that which disrupts or renegotiates heterosexist models of gender and sexuality), when considering the terms used within the boundary of this paper.

Halperin also suggests that because of this issue, queer studies – a discipline that came out of attitudes around anti-assimilation (that is, assimilation into heteronormative societal structures and formations of thinking) – has been granted entry into academic discussion more easily than gay and lesbian studies ever has. In so doing, it has become tied to the very conventions it originally sought to critique. This critique has been shared by other scholars as well, especially when concerning the perception of queer studies as having been diminished in terms of political importance and impact (Giffney, 2004, p. 73).

Much of this tension comes with the "queer" in queer studies/theory often being conflated with "gay and lesbian" studies, a practice that has been critiqued as "reductive" and lies at the heart of much of the intra-community tension (p. 74). A solution (if one exists) is not so simple as to merely separate these categories as two distinct fields – due to the highly entwined practices of theorizing, the shared histories between them, and the derivative nature of queer studies from gay and lesbian studies. Additionally, even conflating gay and lesbian as identities that need to be studied together can be problematic as well, as Halberstam (2003) indicates, because while the two social positions do have overlapping and shared histories, they are not the same – and the same rhetoric applies to transgender identity and history as well (p. 363). This complexity is particularly germane to our understanding of the term/concept "queer", as I deploy it in this thesis.

Along with this difficulty of defining the term comes a reluctance as well, on the part of many scholars. As described by Halperin (2008), "Even to define queer, we now think, is to limit its potential, its magical power to usher in a new age of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities" (p. 339). Halperin is touching upon the desire to have a term that will not fall victim to theoretical stagnation or quickly become outmoded. Understanding, and relying on, the term to be ever-evolving and ever-*relevant* comes with a pressure to keep it conceptually flexible. Judith Butler discusses this idea in "Critically Queer" (1993):

If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted,

queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political

purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do political work more

effectively (p. 19).

Clearly Butler does not see a need to lock down the term into an uncontestable definition.

She acknowledges the debate around the word, and refers to its tenuous position of

acceptability and changeability with LGBT. She concludes that we need not move toward

a unified conception of the word at all. When she claims we never fully "own" the term,

she is speaking to the lack of a stable definition. A more rigid category might entrench

the idea more fully into academic and everyday understanding, perhaps granting the

credence and clarity that some scholars desire from the field. According to Butler

however, the changing nature of "queerness" – in its usage, political motivation, and

conception – is at the center of what makes such a term valuable, that its function is

determined by what is needed by the scholar using it.

The definition of queerness I utilize in this thesis, and the sentiment with which it

is deployed, will primarily be adopted from Butler's conceptualization. I will also take

measures to indicate where I utilize queer theorizing on subjects that complicate the

term's usage (as critiqued by Halperin). Queerness, as understood in this project, refers to

the experiences and identities that are historically, socially, and politically conceptualized

as specific to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people – with respect to the

multiplicity of ways that these categories exhibit queerness within themselves, and the

potential ways they can be made tenuous and resist clear categorization. As I will explore

in my analysis – the ways these identities are discursively enacted via *Mass Effect*'s game

mechanics and narrative construction often presents complications when it comes to

categorization (for example, what do we read of a character who is "functionally" heterosexual one game, and then is presented as bisexual the next?) or how we gauge the ability of choice-making and notion of player agency against the backdrop of pre-crafted scenarios that may or may not fall into heteronormative conventions anyway? Using frameworks from Foucault and Butler in the coming section, I will examine these questions in depth.

**2.2 Michel Foucault**

This thesis draws upon French theorist Michel Foucault's work in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1978). Several of the theorists I point to in this thesis draw on Foucault's work, so it is useful to go back to the "source", as it were. Fundamentally, this project speaks to notions of freedom and choice through a close investigation of the ways queer gender and sexuality are represented and performed in video gaming. Specifically, I am concerned with the boundaries of play, and how these are presented through the queer characters and queer narratives in *Mass Effect*. How are power relations structured in these games, and how do their functions relate to discourses of queer sexuality? Enlisting the work of Foucault and Judith Butler is a productive trajectory that will facilitate our understanding of how the games produce and reinforce particular discourses of queerness. For this discussion, these concepts derive from Foucauldian theories of discourse and power.

Near the end of Part 1 of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault clarifies his overall aim of his work as follows:

In short, I would like to disengage my analysis from the privileges generally

accorded to the economy of scarcity and the principles of rarefaction, to search

instead for instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to

be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of

prohibiting), of the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs

or systematic misconceptions to circulate); I would like to write the history of

these instances and their transformations. (p. 12)

Here Foucault emphasizes that *History of Sexuality* will take a new approach to its topic.

He focuses on the discursive operations around sex. As he writes in an earlier segment:

To account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking,

the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which

prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are

said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which

sex is "put into discourse." (p. 11)

What this project takes from Foucault is his concern with discursive production,

productions of power, and the propagation of knowledge. In the context of this thesis, I

will focus on the ways these operations are exercised via *Mass Effect*'s structuring of

narrative and gameplay with reference to queer gender and sexuality. In part, this is also

to interrogate the notion that contemporary discourses of sexuality are always moving

toward progressive outcomes. The repression of sex in history is not refuted by Foucault,

but he does interrogate the notion that true resistance comes from our modern tendency of

always seeking to oppose this repression (Gutting, 2005, p. 92). Specifically, resistance

and liberation does not arise from notions of anti-repression in and of itself, but rather it

becomes *another form* of discourse. This thesis seeks to remain true to this assertion, not falling into the trappings of equating anti-repression with resistance or being subversive. In sum, to speak of sexuality freely does not mean a complete refutation of past practices, and does not equal a progressive liberation from the repressed, but rather embodies a new way sex is put into discourse.

In my analysis of discourses of sexuality in the *Mass Effect* games, I also endeavor not to fall into the trap of Foucault's "repressive hypothesis." He refers to the appeal for many, of conceptualizing an authentic, pre-existent notion of sex and sexuality that then underwent a process of social and cultural repression. A deception occurs when this happens: "If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (1978, p. 6). He posits that this reason is why it is so "gratifying" for us to constitute the sex-power relationship in this way – so that when we speak plainly of sex, we deceive ourselves into believing the act is a positive transgression, or "outside the reach of power" (p. 6). In fact it is not, but rather becomes another kind of "sermon" as he puts it, and works to produce sexuality as another kind of discourse. This new discourse is not necessarily "free" from the repressive patterns of the past. I strive to avoid this pitfall – particularly because the ways games represent sexuality may fall into the same trap Foucault warns against: as a sexually progressive and liberated departure from the repressed confines of the past. Foucault's work here guides to understand that discussions and thinking about sexuality must involve thinking about them in their dynamic and complex ways, not reducible to simplistic modes of thinking. Foucault speaks to the rather illusory (and complicated) nature of this notion of freedom and

choice, wherein perceiving an act as freeing does not necessarily make it so, and that choices in themselves do not always constitute a reach outside of power. Foucault prioritized moving away from binary or reductive thinking in his work, and my intention here is to honor that tradition.

First, what exactly is meant when we deploy the term "discourse" or "power"? I will be pointing to Foucault's connection between power and discourse at length, but would be remiss not to elucidate what exactly is meant when we encounter these terms. Discourse tells us that how we can speak about things is formed in context. In terms of the production and exchange of language and ideas, of concepts and ideologies, discussion and dialogue – discourse (as discussed by Foucault) refers to all the conditions that make discussion possible – in essence, what Foucault described above as constituting the "discursive formations". Morrish describes Foucault's project as, "a kind of genealogical investigation into why, at a particular point in time, one set of sentences about a particular topic is more likely to occur than any other" (Morrish, 1997, p. 336). Discourse refers to more than just verbal discussion, but also to the network, or system, of ideas and conditions that surround discussion.

In this thesis, I explore the discursive operations of *Mass Effect*. This will first involve analyzing the 'overt' discourse that the game produces, or the things that characters say in conversations and dialogue. I will discuss and examine the ways in which certain terms are deployed (specifically, the absence of them), the readings that are possible, as well as the implications that already exist. Next is a consideration of the broader discourses that the game engages. This aspect of the analysis concerns some of the ways games are speaking to conventional conceptions of queerness, by reproducing

them in a new way. Outside of dialogue, in terms of narrative themes and mechanisms, I analyze how discourse informs the events of the game, and also how the game produces discourse in its own way – the extent of it, the discursive operations therein, the production and reproduction of power, and the potential for "resistance" (if there indeed is any).

Another important idea from Foucault is his concept of "power." Foucault takes care to preface his discussion by explaining that the use of this term tends to garner misunderstandings "with respect to its nature, its form, and its unity" (p. 92). Foucault's conception of power does not necessarily restrict itself to notions of authority and institutions, as per standard ideas. He clarifies that such things, as well as law and the state, are simply forms that power can take, but not necessarily what power *is* (p. 92). The existence of power is not centralized in any place, thing, or concept; rather, it is everywhere. He writes:

> The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. (p. 93).

This understanding of power is as something produced everywhere and at every moment, as a nexus that is ever producing and reproducing, as a mobile force. It is dynamic. Neither is power positioned as merely an external factor that presides over us – Foucault uses economics and sexual relations as examples – but rather, it can also be located internally, produced by these structures themselves (p. 94). While power has objectives, it cannot ever be located to a single originating source (p. 87). Foucault uses the word

"plurality" in his discussion, and it reflects his thinking well. To conceptualize power as a *plurality* helps us break away from the more traditional models of power as a *duality*, as a structure or presence functioning in a top-down capacity and located as a singular force (p. 87). Here, we can better understand the more complicated and amorphous form power takes, and keeps us from reductive thinking.

In Foucault's estimation, power and discourse have a much more complex relationship that is normally considered. He writes that "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable" (p. 100). Here is an example where he emphasizes that we must do away with conceptions of discourse and power as occupying easily-understood and static positions, both on their own and also relative to one another. Instead, he urges a different understanding, more akin to a network or an existence characterized by multiplicity, existing in various modes all at once. To consider discourse and power in linear or oppositional terms would therefore be a mistake:

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (p. 100 – 101)

Here, Foucault carefully explains the multiple and complex relationship between discourse and power – not a binary, oppositional relationship but rather one that occupies different strategies all at once. Not only does discourse sustain and also create power, it

carries the simultaneous potential to push back – what will later be named as, "reverse discourse".

What Foucault does for this project is to pull us away from understood, or "received", notions sexuality, of discourse, and power. He invites us to conceptualize these ideas in an altogether different way, as something less static. I aim to take a related approach with this study of *Mass Effect*, though not only as it pertains to this trilogy – but to pull us away from received notions about video games as a medium, and about the discursive potential of gaming. I discuss gaming in terms of discursive practices, but also in terms of possibilities, including possibilities of resistance. To this end, closely analyzing conversation and dialogue is a core element of *Mass Effect*'s gameplay, and so it provides a unique opportunity to study how discourse functions in a very specific context, and through a unique medium. While contemporary electronic entertainment might seem distant from Foucault's genealogy, I argue that his framework here is useful in studying video games as an object that is produced by, and produces discourses of power.

Foucault's conception of how silence functions in discourse is of particular interest to this project, and particularly in the analysis of the *Mass Effect* games. According to Foucault, discourse also produces what we cannot say: "silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance" (p. 101) – and this notion of the unspoken plays out in particularly illuminating ways when it comes to dialogue and script at work in the game. Power and its relationship to discourse is the locus of Foucault's project. He describes the ways that silence functions not only to provide footholds for

power relations, but at the same time to produce ways for these relations to be complicated. Foucault provides an example in the historically policed practice of sodomy. In this context, silence (the hesitance and lack of openness in discussing it) worked to maintain its harsh punishments and taboo status, while at the same time allowing it to remain a widespread and continuing practice (p. 101).

How does silence relate to a discussion about video games? A relevant example is considering Shepard's inability to self-disclose her sexuality, or with sexual orientations never being named and labelled by any character. In examining how the game generates discourse, I will also explore in my analysis how silence facilitates power relations.

There is opportunity for what Foucault calls, "reverse discourse" (p. 101). He states, "There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it" (p. 101), which is, once again, to say that we should not conceptualize discourse (and resistance) in such a dualistic fashion. Discourse can serve to consolidate power, but also offers opportunities to hinder it by that very same design. Here, Foucault makes it apparent that there is potential for change, or reclamation – transgression is a possibility, that it is possible to "thwart it" (p. 101). He develops the example of homosexuality being pathologized by the emergence of terms and literature created to subdue it – and the rise of resistance whereby people used those very same terms initially deployed against them (p. 101). Concepts and terms created to marginalize also armed individuals with the ability to counter such language, using a reverse discourse. Contradictory discourses can, and will, run in the same "strategy" (p. 102), which is why it is beneficial to conceptualize them in this multiple, dynamic, and mobile

way that Foucault outlines. My thesis aims to consider the extent to which reverse

discourse is possible within the *Mass Effect* games.

## 2.3 Judith Butler

Another important theorist for this thesis is Judith Butler. Butler's work draws on

Foucault, but retools his ideas and directs them toward issues of gender, and thus offers a

compelling framework through which to examine the discursive operations of *Mass

Effect*. While it is necessary to outline Foucault's work as contextualization, this thesis is

more closely aligned with Butler's concepts and priorities.

I will put in simple terms what Butler means for this project: games can reveal the

ways in which identities are constructed by and through discourse, which also includes

the ways that the choices given to us as players are constrained. If Foucault provides the

foundations for understanding the nature(s) of discourse, Butler lets us see how

discourses of gender and sexuality (specifically) operate procedurally in game play, how

they are performed and construed, what can be read from them, and consequently, the

extent to which they allow transgression, subversion, or resistance.

The notion of "subversion" has run through this thesis up until this point without

much elucidation, and here I will clarify the parameters of this term. Butler makes it clear

in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble* that she does not endeavor to craft a guideline to

subversion: "I am not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the

subversive from the unsubversive" (Butler, 2004, p. 99). She explains that judgments as

to what constitutes "subversion" cannot be made infallibly, and not in ways that can

"endure though time" (p. 99). This is because, as with most aspects of the social

condition, things evolve and change meaning and/or significance over time. Foucault has

pointed to the unstable and changing nature of discourse, a point echoed here by Butler.

In studying discourse, we must not fall into traps of reductive thinking: "The effort to

name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to" (p. 99). Here Butler

not only addresses the changing and dynamic nature of subversion, but also to the

necessity of moving away from singular, reductive models of understanding power and

discourse.

In 1992, Butler conducted an interview with Liz Kotz for *Artforum*, in which she

discussed and clarified some of the confusion around her work – particularly when it

came to *Gender Trouble*. Specifically, she addressed the frequent misinterpretations of

her concept of performativity. Many readers came away from *Gender Trouble*

misunderstanding certain concepts – such as the notion of gender being performative

means that subjects must have total agency and freedom of gender choice. Butler clarifies

that "'performativity' is not a radical choice and it's not voluntarism" (p. 84). Butler

states:

> Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of
>
> oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not
>
> freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in. (p. 84)

This notion of inescapability echoes the conceptions formed by Foucault, wherein all

things are informed by power. Butler urges against viewing gender performance as

something akin to a stylistic choice, or as a kind of theatre that is informed by

voluntariness or complete agency. In the above excerpt, she indicates that performativity

refers to a *process*, not an intention. Gender norms become norms and re-establish

themselves through performative repetition. Her use of the drag performance example in "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions" (1990) did not suggest that gender is something always willingly chosen and enacted (and entirely construed) through acts. Instead, it pointed to the fallacy of gender existing as something essential and inherent. It pointed to the ways in which the naturalized understanding of gender can be interrupted, and its constructedness brought to light, demonstrating its nature as performative:

> If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity. (Butler, 1990, p. 417)

Here Butler problematizes the concept of "identity" as well, and posits it as something produced (and informed) by discourse, rather than a stable category unto itself. She refers to this as being a drawback of contemporary feminism (that tends toward being identity-based) in the *Artforum* interview, "some of the difficulties emerging from identity politics can be traced to the prevailing fiction that how you desire determines who you are…" (1992, p. 86). Recalling the Foucauldian conception of power and discourse, Butler says, "I don't believe that gender, race, or sexuality have to be identities, I think that they're vectors of power" (p. 85).

The misreadings of Butler's work examined here also constitute a tonal shift from what she originally intended with it. By this I mean it is a liberating notion, that performance could entail that much agency, but the truth is much less so, as Butler explains her intentions in *Gender Trouble*: "I was trying to interrogate the *painful* ironies of being implicated in the very forms of power that one explicitly opposes, and trying to

58

understand what kinds of agency might be derived from that situation" (p. 84). Once

again, we hear the echoes of Foucault in her arguments. Her remarks suggest that one is

never outside of discourse, but exists within in and is always produced by it. The point to

take away from this is what Butler says about agency. When we speak of possibilities for

subversion or resistance, inevitably the discussion must come back to notions of agency.

In terms of games, player agency is always central to the conversation, and here Butler's

goal is similar to mine: uncovering the role of agency in the discursive processes of

gaming.

Thinking about agency is particularly salient when Butler speaks on the

relationship between fantasy and the "real":

It's not enough to make these clear-cut distinctions – between fantasy and the real

– since it's clear that fantasy is not free from relations of social power. However,

what fantasy can do, in its various rehearsals of the scenes of social power, is to

expose the tenuousness, moments of inversion, and the emotional valence –

anxiety, fear, desire – that get occluded in the description of 'structures'. (p. 86 –

87)

Although in the interview Butler is speaking more specifically about pornography, the

processes she speaks of still apply because games are another form of fantasy. Her

phrasing here – "rehearsals" – is especially useful because of the nature of games as

imitative and reproductive. They tell stories, and these stories are products of discursive

procedures that aim to replicate or reproduce some kind of existing social structure(s), as

well as the power relations that accompany them. Butler states that fantasy has the ability

to expose the inner workings, as it were, of these machinations that have otherwise

become naturalized. For instance, the theoretical center of "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions" is about how drag exposes the performative nature of gender. This concept of the exposing nature of fantasy is integral to the analysis produced by this thesis.

Butler's concern with unsettling entrenched categories, such as gender, ties back to misconceptions that there exists an "original" in any sense, which in turn harkens back to Foucault. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) she states simply, "Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (p. 522). There is a prevalent belief in a "source", an original from which current social constructions arise, but Butler asserts that this is not the case. Here we can make a connection to Foucault's earlier notion of the "repressive hypothesis": it is problematic to assume that there exists a stable, pre-existing sexuality in the first place, that then undergoes a process of "repression." As Butler says of drag in "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions", "Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original." (1990, p. 418).

Significantly, games have the ability to show us these discursive processes in a way that can bring forth an *awareness* of them as processes. Here I am drawing on Butler's remarks about theatre, where she states: "In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real" (1988, p. 527). Games do this in a way that is similar to theatre, and also in ways that are unique to the medium. Players understand that what they are looking at is not "real", it is a performance, albeit in a medium that cultivates immersion, inviting player participation. The point Butler makes above relates to the ideas of performance and

context, and what can happen when performance is placed in different contexts. For instance, a drag performance on stage is quite different than on a bus (p. 527). There exists room for play, but limitations are placed upon that play. In certain contexts, the act is removed from the "real" and therefore, exists in a certain realm of acceptability that is not present when the same act is presented in a context where it is perceived as more "real".

Bearing all of this in mind, Butler urges us not to conceive of the body as a completely blank slate upon which scripts are coded: "The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies" (p. 526). We are once again urged to take on a more dynamic and more complex understanding of how these processes work, rather than believing in a reductive model that places these categories at one end, opposite one another.

Understanding these processes and examining the role of discourse in producing social reality highlights the issue of legitimacy. As Butler states in "Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics" (2009), "The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be read or understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility" (p. iv). It is not a leap to suggest that at the end of all analyses of sex and sexuality in queer studies and gender studies, is the wish to understand how marginalization and oppression come to be and are sustained. Butler's conception of performativity helps us understand how some subjects come to occupy a realm of legitimacy while others flounder at the margins, particularly when it comes to gender. She writes: "The performativity of gender is thus

bound up with the differential ways in which subjects become eligible for recognition." (p. iv)

My project also seeks to understand this question of recognition, of legitimacy, as it relates to identity and representation, and of course – power. Power is at the heart of both Foucault's and Butler's works, and as Butler points out: "power cannot stay in power without reproducing itself in some way" (p. ii – iii). Seeking to find the ways that power is discursively produced and reproduced in these games is an end goal of this thesis. With performativity being such a core tenet of modern queer theory, it is a useful tool in which to analyze queer representations in media.

In what follows I will outline the methodological parameters of this thesis and the framework used for performing the analysis. I will elaborate on the trajectory I have taken and the choices I have made both as a scholar and as a gamer, explaining the ways this thesis serves as an intersection of both activities. I foreground the work of scholars whose work has been influential, in terms of how to approach applying theory to text, as well as how to structure such a project (such as knowing what kinds of elements in the text to look for, and how to talk about them). I also clearly position myself in the debate of ludology versus narratology, reiterating the aims of this thesis and how my approach assumes the priorities of both.

The methodological framework of this thesis synthesizes features of multiple methods: most notably, I take up critical discourse analysis, especially as informed by Norman Fairclough's conception of it. I also repurpose certain strands of film theory as a lens through which game tropes and visuals can be examined – and point to the connection between films and video games as an example of intertextual practices. I

define critical discourse analysis and its uses, as well as specify its particular application in this project – in particular, its political valence and ideological focus on scholarship with a political center.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Overview

In the literature review I emphasized the distinction between narratology and ludology as broad conceptual models with which game scholars align themselves. Here, I will reiterate that I identify as a scholar who is working in between the two modes – and will explain how this hybrid approach proceeds methodologically. My priority is in keeping with the ludologist directive that games must be studied in their specificity, through analysis of mechanisms and formal qualities, while also maintaining that games are culturally mediated and can be fruitfully compared to other media, which makes a study of narrative meaningful.

It is not only the interactive nature of video games, but the particular way in which this is enacted in *Mass Effect*, that keeps this thesis from veering entirely into the narratological. I will acknowledge that I primarily engage with games through their narrative structures; much of my analysis is centered on characters and plot. Compared to other visual media, however, these narrative elements present themselves in ways that are unique because they are inflected by player choice and interactivity. Moreover, the particulars of where and how players are allowed to make choices, and where these choices are constrained or branch off are ludic elements that I examine in depth. Thus both narrative and ludic game structures inform my research interests, and I answer to both modes in my analysis.

In terms of this project's form, I pattern much of my analysis on the works of Ewan Kirkland, whose work is detailed in the literature review. Kirkland's method serves as a model for this project in terms of how a researcher can approach game narratives both

broadly and in detail. For example, his essay "Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of Silent Hill" (2009) provides a concise, theoretically-rich and sound model for conducting research on gender through analyzing game design and formal features. Kirkland also engages a more narratively-focused research goal with "Storytelling in survival horror video games" (2009). It was vital for this thesis to find scholarship on specific games (and not just speaking to games in a more generalized way) even if those games differed from *Mass Effect*. Notably, *Mass Effect* incorporates player choice and branching plotlines in a way that Kirkland's texts did not, thus this thesis necessarily diverges from his model to suit the unique needs of my chosen texts.

**3.2 Methodology for Game Analysis**

How does one approach an analysis of video games? Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton in "Game Analysis: Developing a Methodological Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games" (2006) map out a framework of potential methods for researchers to approach studying games qualitatively. They point to the trends in game studies up to recent times, where most of the analytical focus has either been on audience or game critique (p. 1). Approaching games as text is a more complicated endeavor, one without much in the way of canonical or foundational methods as found in other fields. Consalvo and Dutton set out to provide a provisional look at how researchers can approach games as texts, but acknowledge that at this "beginning" stage there is always room for change (p. 3). Their framework demonstrates the need to appreciate and understand the ludological side of game scholarship – wherein formal game elements provide an arena

for rich investigation, and at the same time not privileging narrative and thematic examination over form.

The authors point to four areas where researchers can conduct their research: object inventory, interface study, interaction map, and gameplay log (p. 3). Each area can be studied on its own, but Consalvo and Dutton insist that more fruitful research can come out of taking into account all of these aspects of game design. While object inventory and interface study are primarily concerned with ludic elements – studying objects or the player interface – it is in the interaction map that the ludic and narratological elements begin to come together. Interaction mapping is described as "examining the choices that the player is offered in regards to interaction – not with objects, but with other player characters, and/or with Non-Player Characters (NPCs)[12]" (p. 7).

When doing interaction mapping, the authors ask researchers to consider some of the following questions: "Are interactions limited (is there only one or two responses offered to answer a question)? Do interactions change over time (as Sims get to know one another, and like one another, are more choices for interaction are offered)? What is the range of interaction? Are NPCs present, and what dialogue options are offered to them? Can they be interacted with? How? How variable are their interactions?" (p. 7). Once again, these are not meant to be rules set in stone, but rather a starting point that can aid researchers in conducting their game study. While most of these questions pertain to examining games on a more structural level (relating more to mapping out data and statistics rather than a narrative reading) I believe this sort of model raises useful questions for my project as well. For instance: what does the range of romantic choices

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[12] NPCs are characters that are not controlled by a human player.

available for Shepard imply about allowable identity performances? This sort of narrative consideration was also highlighted by Consalvo and Dutton as follows: "The overall "story" of the game can be discerned here, if there is one, in order to raise questions about narrative or the ideological implications of the plot" (p. 8).

The last is "gameplay log," which the authors describe as the "final area that the researcher must consider is the most nebulous – the overall 'world' of the game and the emergent gameplay that can come into being" (p. 8). Here, the larger game system is explored – such as the game world, character avatars, or even intertextuality (p. 8 – 9). The interest here is also in "unexpected" gameplay – which includes gameplay elements or moments that are unintended (outside the bounds of choice). These are not necessarily glitches, but rather moments that can produce readings that are not *explicitly intended* by the game's text or functions. One of the more famous examples of this, as supplied by Consalvo and Dutton, comes from *Grand Theft Auto 3* (Rockstar Games, 2001) wherein players combined two different and unrelated gameplay elements – acquiring the services of a sex worker, and attacking NPCs for their money – and produced what would later become the well-publicized "beating/killing prostitutes to get your money back" controversy (p. 9)[13].

Here we can begin to think about the degree to which games permit subversive or transgressive play. While my analysis does not significantly focus on emergent gameplay, I argue that a similar process occurs with how players can "read" the game as

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[13] To be specific – *Grand Theft Auto 3* allows the player to attack NPCs, who will in turn drop money that the player can then pick up. Among the groups of NPCs in the game are sex workers, whom the player can receive services from in exchange for money. The game does not distinguish the sex workers differently from other NPCs, and so players found that by attacking the sex workers after enlisting their services they could essentially receive their funds back – a narrative not necessarily intended by the game but one players unfortunately crafted themselves by merging two unrelated mechanics.

a text. I present the notion of "emergent reading", using Consalvo and Dutton's methodology to examine how the games offer unexpected readings of narratives instead. In sum, this thesis uses Consalvo and Dutton's model to approach the analysis, particularly the interaction mapping and gameplay logging. I diverge when necessary in order to approach game study in a way that respects the unique form of medium, while also serving the theoretical needs of this thesis.

## 3.3 On BioWare – Selecting an Appropriate Case Study

The focus of this thesis concerns the inclusion of queer representation in mainstream video games. While many games permit the exploration of this issue, a question soon arises concerning the prominence of such representations. Many games feature long hours of gameplay, and there does not exist a standard format for how narratives should appear in games. This extends to the degree of character involvement as well. Balancing a story with gameplay is still a consistent issue within game development to this day (Greer, 2013, p. 7). For instance, some may ask how long is too long for a cutscene? How can a character retain a distinct personality and narrative arc when the game mechanics purport to prioritize player choice and decisions? These are among many questions developers must consider, and are important for this thesis as well.

For some titles, the story and characters function as a backdrop that provides narrative reasons for the player to fulfill his or her virtual duties. For others, the story is crafted as the prime motivation to engage with the game in the first place. For this case study, title selection was focused on two conditions: first, the amount of online press and discussion generated around the specific game's inclusion of queer characters (publicity);

and second, how prominently the characters and themes were featured in the game's

narrative (content). Some major releases see substantial media discussion, but the game's

story content is minimal or focused in a direction that would result in the game not being

very useful as a text. One such example is *Mortal Kombat X* (NetherRealm Studios,

2015), a title in a long line of fighting games that has recently featured its first openly gay

combatant, Kung Jin, in the franchise's long history (Pitcher, 2015). Other titles are

physically constructed in a way that renders their textual quality unequal to others, such

as *Grand Theft Auto: The Ballad of Gay Tony* (Rockstar North, 2009) or *The Last of Us:*

*Left Behind* (Naughty Dog, 2014), which were released as expansion packs[14] rather than

full standalone games.

In the interest of choosing games that provide the richest analysis, I chose from

Canadian developer BioWare for my series of case studies. As a developer of significant

titles in the industry since 1995, BioWare has traditionally maintained a focus on

developing games with a strong emphasis on narrative and character development.

Additionally, they have consistently been one of the developers at the forefront of

prominent queer representation (McDonald, 2015, p. 34). In Heidi McDonald's 2015

survey on what gamers remembered to be the best titles to feature queer romance

storylines and overall presence, 3 out of the top 5 titles were from BioWare (McDonald,

p. 44). In terms of company reputation, BioWare is largely uncontested as the innovators

and leaders in this area, and McDonald strongly supports this notion in the same study:

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[14] An expansion pack is a supplementary extension of an already completed game. They can serve as
continuations of the story or feature completely new plotlines/characters that work to add to the
experience of the main game. Expansions are typically sold separately and are generally an optional
experience rather than a compulsory one, and their content is usually too small to constitute a full game
release. They also necessitate the purchase of the main game in order to play.

Any conversation about romance in single-player RPGs[15] must contain BioWare

games, because they dominate players' minds and memories as being the most

played and the most enjoyed romances (as found in my first survey) and in terms

of their evolution towards more choice and inclusivity. (p. 44).

BioWare's reputation is well earned, especially as the industry continues to grow and

diversity becomes more prevalent in game development. Some may attribute these

industry changes to the work BioWare has done in the years past, and the many instances

of backlash the developer faced as a result. One such incident in Spring 2011 quickly

gained notoriety on the Internet, wherein the release of their fantasy RPG *Dragon Age II*

(2011) had prompted intense discussion over its handling of romance subplots[16]. One

particular user on BioWare's forum claimed that the developer was neglecting its primary

demographic – heterosexual males – in order to cater to what he claimed was only a small

subset of the player base (Condis, 2015, p. 208). What separated this incident from many

others was the rebuttal given by *Dragon Age II*'s lead writer David Gaider, who

responded that, "The romances in the game are not for the 'straight male gamer'. They're

for everyone. We have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and

they deserve no less attention" (as cited in Condis, 2015, p. 208). Gaider would go on to

speak about the backlash as being a result of inherent privilege possessed by the

"majority", who were used to being catered to as the primary demographic until now. He

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[15] RPG stands for "Role-Playing Game", which is a genre of game that typically involves the player taking on a character role and playing through a story. The focus of RPGs is typically oriented toward story and plot.
[16] To summarize, the player had the option to pursue a romantic subplot with one of four characters (one other character was available, but only through additional content), all of which were available to the player regardless of gender – for many, this meant all characters were functionally bisexual. This was a departure from the process in the past, wherein the characters had set sexual orientations and therefore availability was contingent upon playing as the compatible gender.

stated that it was their goal as writers and developers to give all kinds of players choices. Casey Hudson, director of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, also commented in an interview that BioWare always had a goal to "always be inclusive." (Kies, 2015, p. 215).

Such a response and point of view is largely unusual in an industry that is still perceived have a near-exclusive heterosexual and male consumer base. New research has since shed light on the diverse range of demographics who engage with video games, with women and queer gamers making up significant percentages of consumers – more than previously assumed (Nielsen, 2015, p. 46). Gaider's response is resonant, then, and it follows that developers would want to make a product that appeals to a wider range of players. It is noteworthy to encounter a major game developer who speaks to issues of male privilege while calling for the inclusion of queer identities. This is not to assume that such actions come from a place motivated entirely by progressive politics. There are also industry-mandated financial imperatives to consider as a developer of an entertainment product: it is profitable to expand the market and have products that contain content players are seeking. This is true even at the risk of upsetting more conservative crowds, as "BioWare believed that inclusiveness was a money-making proposition" (Condis, p. 209).

What makes BioWare's games a strong choice for analysis concerns how prominent and pertinent its queer characters and themes are to the narrative. In the field of queer theory and video games, there is a consistent dialogue around the notion of the proper way to incorporate LGBT identities and the benefits of inclusivity. In some games, such as *The Sims* series (Maxis, 2000 – present) or the *Fable* series (Lionhead Studios, 2004 – present), these identities are little more than differing lines of text to

denote its existence with little else to distinguish them from their heterosexual counterpart. Some see this as a beneficial form of escapism, a way for individuals to remove themselves from the stigmas and oppression that exist offline. Others see this as detrimental, in that is does not acknowledge queer identities as distinct and possessing their own socio-cultural nuances and modes of conduct – that queer identities should not be interchangeable with heterosexual ones at the press of a button. BioWare's practices with regard to their inclusion of queerness match the second line of thinking, in that their individual narratives are specifically written with queer socio-cultural experiences and nuances in mind. Even the process of romancing the characters takes on an approach that prioritizes a connection and an attachment to the characters (Kice, 2015, p. 261). Stephen Greer remarks in his piece, "Playing queer: Affordances for sexuality in *Fable* and *Dragon Age*" (2013) that a "designed neutrality towards gender and sexuality, then, describes a kind of inconsequentiality that marks the border of meaningful inclusion – where the act of inclusion may be ignored without penalty" (p. 7). BioWare's queer characters mark a departure from the safe approach of "sameness" (p. 8) toward LGBT identities, and provides a rich text for analysis.

BioWare's queer characters tend to invoke the nuances and experiences of offline LGBT life, though often with a science fiction or fantasy dressing, and this sets them apart from many other companies that Greer describes as marking that "border of meaningful inclusion." (p. 7) Meaning that sexuality being treated with neutrality – one that does not account for the differences of experience that comes with being queer – makes queer inclusion nearly inconsequential. While this is not to claim that the results are free of problematic elements – they are not – it is to assert that BioWare's

"gameography" is worthwhile to examine in the context of queer and visual media analysis because it does not subsume queerness into a neutral zone that erases all difference from heterosexuality (Kies 2015; Glassie 2015; Hart 2015; Krzywinska 2015; Greer 2013). BioWare games make narrative and aesthetic choices that construct queerness in specific ways – such as drawing from stereotypes and tropes, or visual cues, for example. This discussion seeks to produce an understanding of what these choices entail, without foreclosing their possibilities. I will consider whether such elements simply reproduce heterosexist modes of thinking, or conversely, whether they might potentially facilitate a radical queer subversion of convention. How are some of these narrative decisions reinforcing a marginalizing status quo? Alternatively, how are they opening up areas for unconventional queer storytelling, action, and play?

### 3.4 Pilot Study: Sizing the Project

Before undertaking the project in full, I conducted a small pilot study in order to have a sense of how an analysis of the game would appear on the page. The study exclusively focused on examining the broad strokes of how LGBT content was represented in the first *Mass Effect* game. A major element I focused on was the construction of the fictional alien race, the "asari", which is entirely comprised of "mono-gendered" female, blue-skinned humanoids. Centering on the asari is useful because they represent the most prominent instance of queering gender in the series, and one of the primary love interests – Liara T'soni – is an alien of this race.

In the pilot study I touched upon the asari lore and general conception of them in the game, while here I intend to also utilize in-game text – such as the codex and referential

73

dialogues from other characters – to offer insight as to how exactly these characters are situated in the game via the language used to describe them, and what can be read from this text in terms of how they exist in the game world and also outside the game world. I touched upon Foucaultian and Butlerian theory in this study, examining and linking elements of the game's visuals, to communicative processes that take place outside of the game. This process is known as intertextuality, where "discourse…is always historical, connected synchronically and diachronically with other communicative events that are happening at the same time or that have happened before" (Wodak, p. 186 – 187). While intertextuality is not a focus in this thesis, it informs some significant elements in my analysis – especially in regards to the relationship between cinematic tropes and games.

I also examined the broad strokes of the Liara romance, how it is positioned relative to the heterosexual romances in the game, and the implications of this positioning. I outlined how the romance functioned as a game mechanic, and then conducted a short reading of the material through the framework of performativity. In my playthrough of the first game for the pilot study, Liara is the character my Shepard conducted a romance with, and I use that character file in this version of the project as well. I played through the trilogy having my Shepard remain "faithful" to Liara (i.e. not conducting romances with other characters and therefore "cheating"), and tracked the evolution of that relationship.

Conducting the pilot study served me well, and much of the procedures I undertook for the pilot I ended up utilizing in the final analysis. I began by playing through the trilogy in its entirety, taking notes along the way and recording the major scenes that contained queer content: most of the scenes in questions were entirely related to the

romantic subplots. In the first *Mass Effect*, this was a simple processes, as Liara was the

only character to whom any queer content was regulated. The significant findings in my

pilot study were transferred over to the final version of my analysis. To have a full grasp

of the different branches via dialogue choices, after I completed one branch, I would

reload a save file and play the conversations again and make different choices. Any

conversations or scenes that proved too difficult I would find the scene on the internet –

notably through YouTube.

Similarly, in the following two games *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, the majority

of the queer content was regulated to specific characters or situations, which made

tracking content and recording them an efficient process. Given that queer-related content

across the trilogy accounts for a very small percentage of the total range of material, I

was able to cover most of the very prominent and "important" examples in my analysis.

When it came to deciding the lens with which to examine and discuss this content, I had

some choices to make.

For some characters and story elements, the narrative tropes borrowed from other

media (film) that informed the character provided a more salient discussion point, so I

focused on that element of the character rather than a step-by-step analysis of the plot

trajectory. For others, the specificities of character arcs or visual presentations occurred

in such a way that provided fodder for substantial analysis. Of course, in the interests of

space and scope of this project, I could not discuss every element that was relevant, only

the ones that would provide the most discussion.

In terms of how I decided what "counted" more than others, I chose the elements that

carried the most discursive weight. By this I mean anything that resembled current (or

persistent) dialogue emerging from queer communities in the offline world. Queer characters playing secondary roles in media or queer-coded villains dying in films, are some examples. Some of the examples speak for themselves – the obvious discrepancy between heterosexual characters and queer characters in terms of content itself (such as amount of dialogue, screen time, or narrative import) are such examples.

Ultimately, the pilot study provided some points of analysis that I retained and transferred over to the final version of the project, and demonstrated to me where I needed to diverge and observe the content that was outside of the Liara romance path in order to conduct the richest analysis. This is where my thesis differs from the pilot study. My analysis here does not strictly focus on the material in my specific playthrough; some of my most significant points of analysis comes from elsewhere (such as the male same-sex romance options, for example), and so I divide my analysis according to categories of specific concepts or characters.

## 3.5 Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis

In contrast to much of discourse analysis, which focuses on discourses *around* a text (such as news media or fan communities), the focus of this project is on the discursive operations of the games themselves. More specifically, I consider the ways that play itself is discursively conditioned and is in dialogue with queer gender and sexual identities and larger notions of otherness. This thesis conducts research that in certain ways resembles the textual analysis of films or literature, and studies the way game features produce and contextualize a certain kind of experience, as well as certain kinds of knowledge and meaning (and meaning-*making*) about queerness. At the same time, I retain the

76

ludological focus of examining the elements that are unique to games, such as the interactivity and gameplay mechanics, that also introduce or reinforce queer discourse in specific ways.

As an approach to analyzing text, "discourse analysis" has been used a variety of ways, and is known for its diverse applications from many different fields and disciplines. Despite the many different styles of this methodology, most agree that the crux of discourse analysis lies in its focus on language as a site of theoretical exploration – and the staunch rejection of language as a neutral communicative tool (Fairclough, 2003; Gill, 2000; Huckin, 1997; Janks, 2006; Wodak, 2011). When we speak of critical discourse analysis (CDA), there is a less unified agreement of what such a methodology looks like, as the practice continues to evolve and take different forms.

CDA arose in the 1980s to become one of the more influential forms of discourse analysis, developed from researchers like Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, among others (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 447). The focus on language points to its affinity with linguistics, but like discourse analysis, it finds applications in many disciplines. Outside of linguistics, "categories and concepts have also been borrowed from more mainstream discourse analysis and text linguistics, stylistics, social semiotics, social cognition, rhetoric, and, more recently, conversation analysis" (p. 450). When inquiring into the general aims, forms, and elements of a CDA, an answer would be to "presuppose a study of the relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationships" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 249).

CDA does not place itself as an intellectual exercise that is detached from political aims, since "critical discourse analysts (should) take an explicit sociopolitical stance: they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large" (p. 252). There is no expectation that the researcher be ideologically or politically removed from a CDA, and self-reflexivity is a vital part of the process (Wodak, 2011, p. 186). It is even said that this is why the term "critical" is used in the descriptor (Huckin, 1997, p. 88). There is a need for a degree of professional distance, otherwise the research results in becoming "political action…or becomes an attempt to prove what the researcher already believes" (Wodak, p. 186). This balance between politicizing one's work without falling into traps of uncritical or un-reflexive posturing is important to the work of a CDA. It must be said that I locate myself, and this project, as oriented toward a framework of feminist politics. More precisely, as a project that places my actions (my "play") at the centre of data production and consequently at the theoretical heart of the thesis, it is important to be transparent about my own role in the work.

Conducting a CDA in line with Foucaultian and Butlerian frameworks is a beneficial move. When researchers speak of what constitutes the "critical" element of a CDA there arises the familiar Foucaultian approach of pulling away from dualistic, oppressor-oppressed based models of theorizing. Here, critical means "distinguishing complexity and denying easy, dichotomous explanations" (Wodak, p. 186). This viewpoint works well in tandem with the theories of Foucault and Butler I will be discussing in the coming section, and is an objective of this project. The nuance of discourses as they relate to

78

queerness in video games, especially in BioWare games, resists simplified and singular understanding, and so CDA finds a methodological fit with this thesis.

The leading figure in CDA is Norman Fairclough, a linguistics professor at Lancaster University. His work has been cited across many studies in CDA – and he has published alongside some of the writers I have cited here, such as Wodak and Teun van Dijk. His works take a firm stance on the importance and contributions CDA can make in social science research. In his particular examination of textual analysis (that works within a discourse analysis framework) and its use, he states, "[t]exts constitute one important form of social action. As a consequence, even social scientists who have such apparently macro interest as class relations or gender relations cannot justify entirely ignoring texts" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 211). Specifically, it is not entirely beneficial to focus simply on phenomena without also analyzing texts that relate – a relationship that Fairclough here which constructs texts as a form of "social action". Indeed, this is true for this thesis – where I am clear about my approaching the games as texts, and therefore social action. The discursive practices that inform the creation and reading of those texts constitute them as social action, not far removed from what Fairclough declares here. He emphasizes that "texts constitute a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations and processes. The evidence we have for these constructs comes from the various material forms of social action, including texts" (p. 211).

Of course, Fairclough prioritizes a linguistics-centered approach when discussing CDA and its applications. He does present the notion that as a method, it is useful for cross-disciplinary work – he suggests that CDA is in a "dialogical relationship with other social theories and methods" and "should engage with them in a 'transdisciplinary' rather

than just an interdisciplinary way" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 121). Essentially, these disciplines should be "open to the theoretical logics of others" and have the allowance that the relationships between them can be "transformed" (p. 122). This opens up Fairclough's conception of CDA to be particularly useful for a communications and media-based thesis, despite its origins being rooted in linguistics.

This is not to suggest that linguistics does not have any theoretical qualities that resonate with this project. Fairclough insists that CDA is "as much theory as method" (p. 121) and offers a theoretical perspective especially in regard to semiosis – which he defines as, "[s]emiosis includes all forms of meaning making – visual images, body language, as well as language. We can see social life as interconnected networks of social practices of diverse sorts…" (p. 122). The way that Fairclough describes and connects semiotics to CDA supports the direction of this thesis:

> [E]very practice has a semiotic element. The motivation for focusing on social practices is that it allows one to combine the perspective of structure and the perspective of action – a practice is on the one hand a relatively permanent way of acting socially which is defined by its position within a structure network of practices, and a domain *of social action and interaction which both reproduces structures and has the potential to transform them*. All practices are practices of production – they are the arenas within which social life is produced, be it economic, political, cultural, or everyday life. (p. 122) [emphasis added]

This mode of thinking connects to how Foucault conceptualizes discourse functioning in society. While semiosis is not an integral element of this project's method, its

foundations of meaning-making and emphasis on language provides a useful perspective when it comes to CDA and the tenets that formulate it.

In her piece "Critical Discourse Analysis as a Research Tool" (1997), Hilary Janks outlines and utilizes a CDA model (originally proposed by Fairclough). In sum, there are three processes to the method that are tied to different forms of discourse:

1.    the object of analysis (including verbal, visual or verbal and visual texts);

2.    the processes by which the object is produced and received (writing/speaking/designing and reading/listening/viewing) by human subjects;

3.    the socio-historical conditions that govern these processes. (p. 329)

Additionally, there are different analytical approaches that corresponds to each of these dimensions: "text analysis (description)", "processing analysis (interpretation)", and "social analysis (explanation)" (p. 329). While the model that Janks examines here takes roots in linguistics, I feel it is a useful map of how a CDA approach can work for this project. Janks insists that Fairclough's model is useful because it "provides multiple points of analytic entry" (p. 329), which is especially useful because of the nature of the *Mass Effect* games' construction and the way(s) I must approach them to unearth data. The goal of most CDA approaches is to "unite" at least those three levels of analysis as outlined above (Huckin, p.87) and so, too will this project – even though the form may deviate from the linguistic model.

Gillian Rose, in her book *Visual Methodologies* (2001) examines how discourse analysis can work in the field of visual culture – such as working with film, in particular. As a part of that she touches on intertextuality. She explains:

81

[t]he diversity of forms through which a discourse can be articulated means that

intertextuality is important to understanding discourse. Intertextuality refers to the

way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that

one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts (p.

136).

In my analysis I identify the ways that *Mass Effect* takes cues – visually and narratively –

from film and pop culture to characterize some of the games' story and visual elements.

The interaction of these cues and the choices made in terms of their implementation are a

discursive operation that produces and reproduces meaning. Much of the way we can

read games comes from understanding how intertextuality often informs these readings.

CDA works as a method that examines text and the discursive practices that arise

from, constitute, and produce the text. Video games are also text, and "a text is assumed

to be the product of discursive practices, including production, distribution, and

interpretation, which themselves are embedded in a complex mosaic of social practices"

(Huckin, p. 88). Here I must acknowledge some of the parameters of this project as a

CDA. This thesis does not touch upon the games on the level of production/development

or distribution; it does concern itself with games at the level of interpretation. In order to

maintain a certain level of focus, the background and production stages of the game are

not going to be under evaluation – in hopes of developing an extensive, fruitful analysis

of games on the interpretive and textual level.

In conducting a CDA, it is useful to first consider the text as a whole. This

includes examining the text as a product of a certain genre, one "that manifests a

characteristic set of formal features serving a characteristic purpose" (p. 90). Science

fiction as a genre contains elements that differ from fantasy, and so on – and with *Mass Effect* being a series very steeped in certain conventional science fiction narratives (as well as actively subverting others) – it is beneficial to examine the text within its generic formations. In my analysis, I will begin with analyzing the games in their generalities before narrowing down the focus to specific data threads – such as romance, character arcs, codex's, and so on. Such a task was completed before the writing of this thesis, in which I conducted a pilot study of the first *Mass Effect* game.

### 3.6 Limitations of CDA, and Use of Case Studies

Fairclough acknowledges some of the limitations of CDA as a method. He states, "the identification of configurations of genres and discourses in a text is obviously an interpretive exercise which depends upon the analyst's experience of and sensitivity to relevant orders of discourse, as well as the analyst's interpretive and strategic biases" (1992, p. 214). He also acknowledges the "slipperiness" of studying and analyzing discourse and emphasizes the importance of framing research adequately (p. 214 – 215). Here I will also speak to these same issues also presenting limitations on my own project, as the nature of discourse and work in such analysis can be rather amorphous in nature, and therefore, will be transparent about it in this thesis and practice self-reflexivity.

This thesis is a CDA conducted through the use of *Mass Effect* as a case study – an examination of issues contained within a bounded system. I include in this project transcriptions of select dialogues, track narrative paths and character arcs, character interactions, as well as in-game codexes which provide exposition about the games'

world and lore. All the text relating to the games are found within the game and not outside of it.

Among the sources I have consulted for this project are several analyses of games using the case study method (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Kirkland, 2009; Kirkland 2005; Latorre, 2015; Zakowski, 2014; Zekany, 2016). The primary defining way to consider cases studies is that they are analyses that work with a specific "setting" – single or otherwise, and explore the dynamics within (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534). As described in John W. Creswell's *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (2007), case study research "involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context)" (p. 73). Case study as a research methodology has seen popular usage in a wide variety of disciplines over many decades, and as such, has taken on different forms and parameters.

Additionally, qualitatively based case studies take on different forms, and Creswell outlines three variations of these forms based on intent: the instrumental case study, the collective case study, and the intrinsic case study (p. 74). This project situates itself as an intrinsic case study – whereas the other two are formed based on interest in a particular concern or issue, the intrinsic case study differs in that "the focus is on the case itself…because the case presents an unusual or unique situation" (p. 74). There are other forms of case study in popular usage, some conceptions which overlap with the ones just outlined, but the distinctions that separate them are understood along similar lines (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548 – 549).

I place this project as "intrinsic" because of my belief that games, and in particular the *Mass Effect* trilogy, present a unique look into discourse that has yet to be explored in

abundance. Though the distinction, in practice, might not be so rigid, as the issue and

politics of queer representation are the motivating concern that drove this project in the

first place – structurally speaking, the intent of this case study (as posited by Creswell) is

formed around considering the uniqueness of these games.

# CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

## 4.1 Overview

In my analysis, I conduct an examination of the significant examples of queer content across the *Mass Effect* games. Primarily, my analysis is conducted via observation of the games' dialogue, codex descriptions, and interactions – both from my playthrough of the games and from researching the games' content that I am unable to access due to the gender and sexuality of my particular Shepard. First, I observe the state of the queer-identified characters (including Shepard) and the ways they have been constructed in terms of their sexuality/gender, and as being informed by discourses of sexuality/gender that have also circulated in other media such as cinema. I examine their importance to the game's narrative relative to other characters, and where legitimacy is granted and where it is withheld, as demonstrated by how the gameplay mechanisms form around them.

Second, I examine how the games' visual design choices are also informed by the male gaze, recalling Laura Mulvey's work, and how this works to package queer inclusion in a way that appeals to mainstream consumption – casting focus on queer female sexuality while obscuring queer male sexualities.

Third, I observe the ways that *Mass Effect* introduces subversive elements in its content, either through its heterosexual characters or through the ways that player choice destabilizes canonicity in narratives. Across this analysis, I explore the queer content in relation to the following questions: when video games incorporate queerness into their stories, to what extent are these portrayals reproducing, and produced by, mainstream

social and cultural discourses about queerness? How can games complicate these representations of queerness, and in turn prompt opportunities for subversion?

**4.2 *Mass Effect* (2007)**

*4.2.1 Queer Self-Disclosure, Silence, and Heteronormativity*

The first *Mass Effect* establishes the world-building that will contextualize the narrative landscape of the trilogy, including introducing the player character, Commander Shepard. In addition to customizing the physical characteristics of the character, I am also able to choose from a selection of possible character "histories" in order to characterize Shepard in the world: for example, was Shepard an orphan on Earth or did she grow up on a colony with family? Alternatively, did she live from spaceship to spaceship all her life? Along with picking from a selection of possible military histories, this process creates a space for Shepard to exist in the world as I begin the game. More precisely, it places the character in the world very directly, rather than simply coalescing her into existence in that moment. There is a sense of Shepard having been a person, a realized character in the world, before I came to control her. Other characters will occasionally refer to Shepard's personal history in conversations, emphasizing the experience of the character as a customized and unique part of my game, rather than something uniform and experienced the same way by all players.

Conversations are key to the gameplay and narrative structure of *Mass Effect*. Speaking to other characters constitutes the core appeal of the experience. Nearly all interactions allow me to select how Shepard responds to a given situation through the use of a wheel that displays all available options as points for selection. The purpose of the

wheel allows me to direct what type of approach Shepard takes in the conversation –
being kind and diplomatic, or aggressive and ruthless. This also extends to a gameplay
mechanic that tracks Shepard's responses along a "morality" scale – diplomatic responses
will paint the character as a "paragon", while violent responses shape them as
"renegade". Fully dedicating Shepard to either type will lead toward gameplay rewards –
such as being given access to additional lines of dialogue that can only be selected
because the player has accrued enough points on either side. In sum, I can play Shepard
either as a good-hearted hero, or an angry anti-hero. As Bizzochi and Tanenbaum write:
"the specific personality traits of Shepard are mutable: the player interacts with the
character at the level of *attitude* rather than *identity*" (Bizzochi and Tanenbaum, p. 397).
Simply put, Shepard does not represent a complete sublimation of the player into the
game, but rather a vehicle that the player can guide through the story. The importance of
this point extends to the other characters and their own development as well; Shepard's
behaviour can have the effect of influencing party members' personalities and
worldviews. A hot-tempered character can be persuaded to learn to respect rules and
boundaries, for example. Neutral responses are also offered but lead to no rewards in
gameplay, which incentivizes the player toward choosing a personality.

   Characterizing Shepard in this way does not greatly interfere with the game's
narrative path, as all significant events that happen will happen regardless of the
character's personality and actions. Directing Shepard's personality affects the game's
narrative on a small scale – in terms of character relationships, primarily. In the first
game, Shepard has the option to pursue a romantic relationship with one character from a
selection of three: Kaidan Alenko (male human, female Shepards only); Ashley Williams

(female human, male Shepards only); and Liara T'Soni (asari, male or female Shepards). Since queer romance is only an option for female player characters in the first game, the playthrough I conducted is done with a female Shepard.

Instigating a relationship relies on speaking to the love interests often and being friendly or receptive to them: aggressive dialogue tends to read as disinterest. Additionally, not all paths will begin the same way, as variables in the game will often work to influence the course of the conversation(s). For example, expressing romantic interest in a character but not directly initiating a relationship will prompt that character to take the lead at the next round of dialogue.

I highlight the function of speech here because of its importance in the game's mechanics, being the primary means by which queerness exerts its presence in the game. Queerness is demonstrated through text and dialogue, rather than by wordless action, and so studying the game's script becomes a necessary part of this analysis. Knowing this, it is significant that Shepard makes no acknowledgement of her own sexuality, not even to confirm or deny sexual interest based on gender; she refers to her feelings for the love interest only in terms of that particular character. Shepard is thus "unmarked" as queer, and the way this move relates to the power of language and denomination that exists for current queer discourse is central to my aims. Labeling and naming, in regards to queer identities and queer bodies, can be constructed as an inherent politicization – especially when recalling Butler's conception of performativity – with the absence of those terms possibly being seen as de-politicization. Though this is not to suggest that only queerness is political while heterosexual identity is not, because the two categories inform one another: "By virtue of this constitutive definition against that which it refuses,

heterosexuality and the symbolic order it sustains and is sustained by are radically

dependent upon the homosexual outside" (Loftus, p. 29). This is to say that

heterosexuality necessitates the existence of queerness to maintain its own stability, the

perceived politicization of queerness allows heterosexuality the "neutral", or default, state

it occupies.

By virtue of being the default identity category, heterosexuality is not conceptualized

as political in the way that queer identities are. Queer labels carry with them the

association of a certain set of histories, communities, and social positions that were (and

still are) marked by a tradition of marginalization and oppression. "Queer" implies a

connection (whether actively felt by the individual or not) to a specific kind of struggle

that identifying as heterosexual does not.

While there is no speech option allowed to me to self-disclose Shepard as queer, there

are instances of dialogue that imply a default heterosexuality, or at least position Shepard

as oblivious to the possibility of queer relationships. When being propositioned by Liara,

I am given the option to question her interest – if I select, "but you're female!" Shepard

will respond to Liara with: "You want a relationship with me? Even though we're both

women?" This line of questioning implicitly places Shepard as, if not heterosexual, then

as not queer-identifying at the outset. It becomes difficult for me to imagine that the

character I am playing has actively identified as queer *prior to my influence*.

This marks an instance where the character is actively directed away from a position

of defaulted heterosexuality. More precisely, my intervention moves the character away

from one path onto another. In this case, Shepard is clearly conceived as heterosexual by

default. Should players not choose to pursue anyone, we can still assume that Shepard is

defaulted to a heterosexual identity because of this. Queer sexuality here is highlighted in its difference, in being something enacted or selected, even in the absence of labels or terminology to denote it as such. Implications of Shepard's sexuality do not arise when rejecting, or questioning, the advances of the opposite sex human love interest – flirtations do not touch on past experiences or acknowledge gender in any way, so it is significant when such a line of dialogue appears in the only queer romance in the game.

Queer identity has been marked by language in a way that is distinguished from the way we conceptualize and speak of heterosexual identity. Language occupies a complicated and tumultuous position in queer history. Even the term "queer" – used liberally here in this paper – is still not entirely reclaimed by the community at large, and its entrenchment in the academic institution is a source of contention for many scholars (Halperin, 2003, p. 339). Queer began as a slur and remains one in some circles. The practice of reclaiming slurs represents on a small, linguistic scale a larger set of political practices on the part of the queer community; indeed, reclaiming slurs and challenging the discourse is a practice seen in other marginalized groups as well, such as racial minorities and women (p. 340). In essence, we can see that marking someone as "queer" – especially through self-disclosure – is a political act, tying one to notions of community and history, and placing oneself in the hierarchy of power relations. So when I cannot self-disclose Shepard in *Mass Effect*, we must consider the argument that this limitation results in a kind of de-politicization – in distancing queerness from political and historical contextualization that has marked queer existence for decades (Greer, p. 11). This recalls the discussion earlier in this paper about the notion of the default – more specifically, the image of a "neutral" hero. Neutrality here is conceptualized as not being informed by

obvious politics or community origins. As we have discussed, however, this concept of neutrality is problematized by the fact that there is no such thing as a neutral or default subjectivity. This perception occurs because the default is contrasted to a hyper-visible, marked Other.

This conception of de-politicizing a queer subject is complex – because the desire to keep intact the political underpinnings of queer identity is understandable: queer histories are not straight histories, and not acknowledging difference here carries the fear of erasure, or sublimation – and even affirming the status quo by equating progress with "sameness" (Greer, p. 16). On the other hand, we need to have a conversation about how queerness is always *marked*, noted for its difference and the difficulty in seeing it "normalized" – when can queer stories be "stories", and not "*queer* stories"? BioWare's *Mass Effect* trilogy demonstrates instances of both kinds of representation throughout – in its refusal to utilize sexuality labels, the games simultaneously put a point on queerness as a marked and political category and also subsume it into a normative narrative without constituting it any differently.

Attributing a political value to representation in a case such as this is difficult then, as there has yet to be a consensus as to which constitutes the "right" kind of representation. We can argue that both kinds are useful and would enrich the media landscape by existing and allowing each other to exist, but each case is still problematized by the nuances I outlined above: respect the politics and the history that inform the queer subject position, or be granted access to mainstream, normative narratives not bound by contentious politics.

These details recall Foucault's suggestion that silence, in its own way, also constitutes discourse. This is certainly the case with how silence operates in the game. Ultimately, silence is integral to the discussion here. What Shepard cannot say ("I am queer/bisexual/lesbian"), compared to what Shepard *can* say ("but you're female!"), constructs a certain conception of queerness in the game: one that plays a secondary role to the default state of heterosexuality – queerness is not presumed, it is chosen, it moves me away from the default, it marks my character. This is true not only when it comes to Shepard, but also with regard to how we approach queerness as a game mechanism. More precisely, queerness is an enacted process – it is a move to be made by me, rather than functioning as a default state of being.

## 4.3 Aliens, Gender, and Queer Sexuality

### *4.3.1 Male Gaze and Objectification*

In this section I examine one of the most prominent world-building elements of the games – which takes the form of a fictional alien race, the asari. Here, I examine their design as reflecting the principles of Laura Mulvey's male gaze. The objectification, I will argue, serves the purpose of not only appealing to the heterosexual male player, but also to dress the queer romance in the game as consumable to the heterosexist male gaze. Put plainly, the queer romance (in this woman/"woman" configuration) is allowed to exist partly because of its ability to be consumed by a heterosexual consumer base. I also analyze the game's representation and treatment of an alternate (queer) gender via this fictionalized, non-human race – and the relationship between the non-human and the queer as a recurring connection in fiction.

The asari are one of the most prominent alien races that appear throughout the series. They appear as blue-skinned, exclusively female humanoids with tentacle-like protrusions on their heads in lieu of hair. An anomaly among the other alien designs in the franchise, they are the closest in appearance to humans. All asari encountered in the game are coded as feminine and all use feminine pronouns, aesthetic styling, and voice acting – this is notable, as the in-universe lore around their species has them as "mono-gendered" (appendix i).

In-universe, the asari are established via the game's lore to be near universally attractive to all species. This emphasis on attractiveness is a staple of the species' design, as Summer Glassie writes in "'Embraced Eternity Lately?': Mislabeling and Subversion of Sexuality Labels Through the Asari in the *Mass Effect* Trilogy" (2015): "It is the Asari, then, who are the only species willing to cross all boundaries of sex, sexuality, and interspecies relationships throughout the entirety of the series, but even they fit within the image of sexualized, humanoid females" (p. 164)[17]. The visual aesthetic around the asari is sexualized; many of them populate the nightclub area in the game as exotic dancers, and the focus of the game's camera often takes on an eroticized quality whenever there is an asari non-playable character (NPC)[18] on screen – harkening back to Mulvey's conception of the male gaze, as discussed earlier, wherein men are the active bearers of the gaze, and women are the passive objects of the gaze (Mulvey, p. 17). Women here, alien or not, function as decorative – first, they are decorative in the way that all NPCs are decorative by virtue of the fact that they are not playable and therefore, are

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[17] While there are examples across the trilogy of other alien characters engaging with interspecies romance, the asari are notable in that it is in intrinsic part of their design and conception.

[18] NPCs are the characters that populate the game's world, and are characters that the player does not directly control or play with (in case of party members).

implemented to give the world a sense of being lived-in. Secondly, they are decorative because their stylization and implementation speak to conventional notions of women as objects to be looked at – especially in the scenes containing dancers in a club.

In terms of how the gaze operates in video games, in certain ways it resembles the foundational elements of Mulvey's examination on the gaze in film studies, taken a step further. Mulvey suggests that "the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which is has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy." (p. 9) She is writing here specifically of the function of scopophilia, a Freudian concept that describes the pleasure that comes from the act of looking – and here, Mulvey stresses that film as a medium offers this pleasure via its form. Video games interrupt that separation between spectator and the visual world – the interactive aspect of games necessitates player involvement directly within its world. The game then, is not "indifferent" to the audience, but beckons to the audience, it speaks to the audience and needs the audience to speak back. How does this complicate Mulvey's notion of the voyeuristic process of the gaze? It does not – ceding control of the world to the whims of the player means maintaining control of the gaze in a more pronounced way than ever. The player is empowered by the feeling of being able to control his own gazing – but ultimately, the game still has crafted what is being looked at, and the player cannot look beyond the bounds of what the game has created. There is the element of fantasy here – being invited into a fantasy, with the immersive nature of interaction an even deeper draw than raw spectatorship, but the more control seemingly given to the player also means the more of a hold the game has in

95

drawing in the player in this voyeuristic process. Mulvey points to the narcissistic nature

of pleasurable looking, as follows:

> The conventions of mainstream film focus on the human form. Scale, space,
> stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle
> with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body,
> the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible
> presence of the person in the world. (p. 9)

The appeal of gaming and its visuals find much in common here, even in the very simple

act of evaluating a game for its graphical fidelity to photorealism. This concern over

graphical quality has existed for a long time, and always comes back into the community

dialogue, as technology has allowed games to become more photorealistic. Not only that,

but this fidelity can tend to put scrutiny on games that depict subject matter that might be

considered problematic or controversial: "[g]ames whose localized modality markers lean

toward the realism/authenticity end of the scale are, on balance, more likely to become

subjects of controversy in debates about real-world issues" (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p.

22). New, upcoming games are touted in all their cutting edge graphical glory at

conventions and shows, wherein they are often presented in the form of visual teasers and

trailers, and one can see the voyeuristic elements of looking at play in the way developers

and announcers painstakingly take the time to show every detail of what the technology

can do: for example, it can render individual eyelashes on a character's face, blades of

grass parting when a foot steps through, sweat on a character's skin, and clothing

becoming realistically wet from rain effects. Developers on stage holding a controller and

slowly turning the camera this way and that to show the audience the way light cuts

around buildings or the sheer size of the land players can anticipate exploring themselves later.

This display and desire for graphical and stylistic quality recalls what Mulvey deemed above as the fascination with "likeness" and "recognition". Recognition occupies a special place in games, because it is a medium so defined by its technical prowess at a given time. Games technology has been ever evolving for the past few decades, and the results are the characters in games look more photorealistic than ever. More and more they approximate the likeness of people in life, and the same is true of the environments players are invited to play in. I suggest here that Mulvey's (film-based) conception of recognition may become especially relevant as games continue to grow. Potentially, the more fidelity to "real life" that these images have, the more powerful the discursive effects are.

We can keep Mulvey's point about the focus on the human form in mind, especially when we consider the importance of the player avatar. A powerful appeal of gaming is being able to customize the avatar – the vehicle through which the player will do the gazing. The additional appeal of being able to create an avatar that resembles the player is apparent: the player can look, and even participate in the illusion of being within the fantasy, without consequences in the real world. Or, one can even eroticize the avatar, turn him or her into an object of the gaze. This practice is common among male players when playing a character who is female, such as *Tomb Raider* (Schleiner, p. 224).

In my game conducted for this analysis, I customized Shepard to approximate my own appearance (as far as the options allowed). Mostly, out of the usual desire to see myself reflected in the game I'm playing, but also to play a character that represented

several marginalized subjectivities at once – being a woman, queer, and racialized. Even if this thesis does not touch on the particulars of how race comes into the equation, for example, it seemed politically appropriate to conduct a study such as this from the most politically-charged position possible, to deviate heavily from the "default" state.

This fascination with the human form explains the creative decision to have the asari resemble humans as closely as possible, despite most of the other alien races in the game showing more science-fiction derived designs. The asari represent the erotic center of the game's world – and it is to them that the gaze is often directed. They appear to be universally slim[19], attractive women – often in elegant, form-fitting clothing with mannerisms fitting conventional standards of femininity. Very few asari NPCs have appearances that challenge traditional femininity or exhibit non-feminine aesthetics. As the player only ever controls Shepard – they remain NPCs without agency, recipients of the gaze but never in control of it. Even the characters that become squadmates and fight alongside Shepard are designed to be gazed upon – such as Samara in *Mass Effect 2*, whose clothing is designed with a plunging neckline that emphasizes her breasts and gold jewelry. This is in spite of the character's personality being largely serious and battle-focused, and so the discrepancy between the sexualized design and the characterization comes into stark focus. Concerning the male gaze, much of the asari, from a design standpoint, falls into the trappings of sexualization. Power is still held within the domain of the male gaze – and so, while instigating a conversation of disrupting notions of

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[19] Note that the games do not do this intentionally – to save on resources/time it is common protocol to use one standard model for most characters of the same type (in this case, humanoid women) and simply change surface textures/features to denote different characters. This can be construed as a limitation of the technology, depending on the generation of gaming technology.

binaries into a such a mainstream title is noteworthy, the trappings of heterosexist, patriarchal conventions still exercise a hold on the games' representations.

*4.3.2 Alien Bodies, and Consuming the Queer*

This sexualization also serves another purpose. If we categorize the entirety of the asari as queer, then the sexualization also functions to make them appealing to a heterosexual consumer base. With queer representation becoming more and more visible in media, discourses about the commodification of queerness have come to light. While it is valid to discuss industry intentions toward progressive politics, we must also be reminded that for many, queer inclusion is often the result of financial concerns: "Not only is much recent gay visibility aimed at producing new and potentially lucrative markets, but as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line" (Hennessy, p. 32). The machinations of making an entire race of queer aliens attractive according to normative – i.e. heterosexist – standards adheres to this idea.

There is a notion of making queerness consumable to a straight audience. Scholars who study queer commodification tend to arrive at similar conclusions – that queer representation in the mainstream media becomes problematic when considering the inevitable outcome, which is that queerness starts to become defined by those representations (Graff, 2001; Hennessy, 1994; Milde, 2001; Peters, 2011; Porfido, 2011; Yaksich, 2005). That these representations exist in accordance to heterosexist conceptions of acceptability also becomes an issue:

 The cultural space defining the limits for the representation of gay/queer

practices and identities is characterized by a highly disturbing paradox…In a way,

they counter the deessentializing potential of queer political and cultural practices

by a gay identity politics fabricated from the perspective of heterosexuality,

capitalism, and the family. (Graff, p. 24)

Put simply, this is to say that the form of queer identity that arises out of these

"approved" representations can begin to counter the qualities and practices that are

associated with queer audiences who do not adhere to these. For a relevant example, if

we accept *Mass Effect*'s conception of queer women as largely fitting into conventional

feminine ideals nearly across the board, queer women who do not fit the formation are

(once again) pushed to the margins. The asari represent a mode of queer inclusion that

seeks to achieve a dual purpose of genuine incorporation, but also to make that

incorporation fall into an acceptable range of heterosexist standards.

Bridget Kies discusses the complicated nature of queer inclusion in games in

"Death by Scissors: *Gay Fighter Supreme* and the Sexuality That Isn't Sexual" (2015).

Queer characters have existed in gaming for decades, but early depictions have often

been characterized by stereotypes – and more significantly, these characters have never

been playable. She writes, "[b]ecause games rely upon user input and interactivity, games

that do not feature the ability to play a gay or lesbian character – to embody him or her –

assume the heterosexuality of the player and reduce the gay character to a spectacle for

the gaze" (p. 213). She draws upon Mulvey and emphasizes the usefulness of utilizing the

theory of the gaze in analyzing games, their approach to queerness, and how the way the

gaze operates in many of these games "presume the heterosexuality of the player,

regardless of who is actually playing" (p. 213). Making queerness consumable is heavily

tied to the operations of the gaze, as the presumption of the player heterosexuality is a

fundamental element. The way the gaze operates in the female/female love scenes presumes a heterosexual male player, according to Krzywinska, who characterizes the love scene between Shepard and Liara in the first game as "a classic pornographic trope designed mainly for male consumption" (2015, p. 109), a sentiment echoed by other scholars in this thesis (Kies 2015; Glassie 2015). The prevalence of the male gaze interrupts what is otherwise an interesting and unconventional approach to gender and nonbinary depictions of gender. This poses considerations as to what a model such as the asari might look like without these trappings, and their potential in the future of games.

The player can choose to glean more information about the lore by speaking to characters. According to Liara, asari are "monogendered", and that "'male' and 'female' have no real meaning for us." When I speak of queer gender, this is an instance of such – as BioWare have taken steps here to disrupt the notion of a binary system of gender. While such terms are more colloquial than sociological, and do not aim to convey the degree of critical nuance associated with academic uses, there is much to unpack here. More to the point, arguably it is in "everyday" conversations – the ones that are widespread and see more integration with the mass public, society at large – that power forms and functions. Conventional and everyday understandings of gender are what form the way it's integrated into games, especially *Mass Effect*, and so examining these particular discourses are where we will find the most fruitful discussion. It also speaks to the political reach of the thesis – after all, what use is an analysis of the political implications of games that does not extend to larger social contexts and concerns? For a thesis that positions itself in queer studies, it is imperative to speak to the "everyday".

The lore also tells us that asari reproduce by randomizing their own DNA with traits taken from a partner (appendix i) – whom Liara stresses can be of any race or gender, which comes across as a sexual, science-fiction fantasy, yet poses relevant critical perspectives for us to consider when it comes to place reproduction has in discourses of queer sexuality. Conventional conceptions of homophobia presume a queer state that precludes the ability to reproduce, one of the many reasons for the de-legitimization of homosexuality. The existence of the asari in the fictional world of *Mass Effect* presents a scenario in which (unassisted) reproduction no longer becomes an obstacle for queer relationships. So a question to consider is, would the asari occupy a different kind of discursive space if their queerness also precluded the ability to reproduce?

Glassie links her examination of the asari to the work of Veronica Hollinger (whose work I also utilize later in this chapter) and Annamarie Jagose, in particular the notion of queer as a "zone of possibilities" (2015, p. 162), when concerning the alien body in science fiction. Hollinger wrote that "queer is both an exclusive and excessive space", and "[a]t its most inclusive, it can incorporate heterosexuality, but a heterosexuality stripped of its conventional privileges: no gendered or sexed identities in this utopian space are compulsory, or universal, or natural; and none, certainly, are invisible" (1999, p. 33). Queer, then, is a space of exploration – and presents a space where discourses of gender and sexuality can be interrogated. In this case, *Mass Effect* takes the concept of reproduction – which is a central facet of the project of heteronormativity (Thibodeau, 2012, p. 162) – and reconstitutes it in a queer formation, one that complicates its "essential" linkage to the heterosexual binary.

The inclusion of the alien body in science fiction – and queering that body– is a discursive move that is a particularly salient point of analysis for a researcher. As Amanda Thibodeau discusses in "Alien Bodies and a Queer Future: Sexual Revision in Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild' and James Tiptree, Jr.'s 'With Delicate Mad Hands'" (2012):

> If aliens always already exist outside the normal, and if 'queer' means that which is outside or resists regimes of the normal, *a queer reading of speculative alien bodies and relationships is a useful and organic approach to analyzing their utopian implications*. (p. 265) [emphasis added]

While this thesis is not explicitly concerned with the notion of utopia, as Thibodeau is, the potential linkage of positive representation to subversive or reverse discourse is evident. In Thibodeau's estimation, the alien body presents an interesting potential site of queer positivity, and there are vestiges of this notion to be found when we examine *Mass Effect*'s asari concept. She links the inherent connection to "otherness" with alien bodies, and the space they offer in the realm of imagination for challenging heteronormative conceptions that tend to be built into these genres and narratives (p. 263).

Moreoever, the inclusion of the asari *at its core* presents a significant exploration into representing queerness in a mainstream video game. As Glassie writes:

> By creating a species whose sex and sexuality collapse the heterosexual binary, despite those same characters being portrayed within the sphere of conventional gender markings and language of the heterosexual dichotomy, BioWare developers are pressing at the boundaries of their own industry and the heteronormative foundation of traditional science fiction. (p. 170)

As much as the falling into the trappings of heteronormativity and the male gaze complicate an entirely positive evaluation of their inclusion, the existence of the asari in a such a mainstream franchise represents an active desire on the part of game developers to explore queerness is a new and complex ways, and beyond the cursory. Indeed, queer inclusion is always inherently complicated by the hold of heteronormativity in our society (Glassie 2015; Hollinger 1999), but the measures taken by BioWare here have demonstrated that even instigating the *conversation* of queerness in such a game is a significant, bold step.

## 4.4 *Mass Effect 2* (2010)

### 4.4.1　Queer Sexuality in Gaming Functions

*Mass Effect 2* introduces the NPC Kelly Chambers, yeoman of Commander Shepard's ship. She is not a battle companion, instead serving a secretarial function among the crew – letting me know when Shepard has in-game mail, or whenever a companion character wishes to speak with Shepard about something critical. She will even feed Shepard's pet fish if a high enough friendship level has been reached. She can be spoken to for supplementary dialogue about the other characters or the situation at the time.

I select Kelly as a subject for analysis because she can be romantically pursued, akin to a romantic subplot, but functionally speaking this relationship does not actually "count" – according to both the game's narrative and formal game mechanics. For instance, if the player pursued a character romantically in the first *Mass Effect*, then instigates a romantic relationship with a different character in *Mass Effect 2*, this will be remarked upon by the characters in question in *Mass Effect 3* – framed in-universe as

Shepard having been unfaithful. Additionally, minor visual elements in the game reflect this change – a framed photograph of the previous love interest in Shepard's bedroom will be turned facedown at the end of the game to indicate Shepard's change of heart.

What is unique about Kelly is that instigating a relationship with her does not trigger any reactions from previous partners, nor does Shepard turn down the photograph at the end. Moreover, pursuing her does not earn the player an "achievement" or "trophy"[20], whereas romancing any other character does. Conducting a purely textually-based reading of the game would not offer much in explaining why there is such a differential in treatment to Kelly's subplot comparatively to the other characters, and this is where is it beneficial to observe the ludic elements, paying attention to the game structures and mechanics that form around this character. Recalling the discussion of ludology, mechanics and gameplay also constitute narrative meanings in their own unique ways and much can be read from a game by focusing on them. Here, it is almost exclusively though these formal structures (the achievement system being one of them) that we understand that Kelly does not constitute the same level of significance as a romantic interest, relative to the others.

Achievements are construed as rewards to players, and earning a high number of achievements boosts a player's rank on her gaming profile. The other love interests offer achievements for successfully romancing them, which from a standpoint of player reward makes them more beneficial to pursue than Kelly. Casey Hart, in "Sexual Favors: Using Casual Sex as Currency Within Video Games" (2015), offers an alternate way of

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[20] Achievements (trophies, when playing on the PlayStation console) are markers of the player having accomplished special/noteworthy tasks in the game, and are awarded to the player's external gaming profile on their system – either console, or personal computer – as a type of badge to show to other players.

considering the achievement system in *Mass Effect*, writing that having an achievement for romance actually offers a more reductive experience:

> Still, it illustrates that players are rewarded for simply having sex regardless of their partner. Thus, in addition to vicariously experiencing sex within the game, players are encouraged to pursue sex as a means by which to achieve some other goal. This reduces sex from an intimate experience and transforms it into a means to another end where partners are interchangeable. (p. 153)

Following this framework, we could conclude that having the option to pursue Kelly – despite the lack of external reward – offers a more organic romantic experience, removed from the pressures of the achievement system. We would understand players as having chosen Kelly out of genuine connection to her character, rather than an ulterior motive. In this conception, Kelly exists *outside* of the commodifying schema of the achievement system.

Regardless, these details are significant because Kelly is the only same sex partner in *Mass Effect 2* for a female Shepard. Liara is absent from most of the game and is not a party member, occupying a more peripheral NPC role. This is unless the player has purchased the additional downloadable content (DLC)[21], *Lair of the Shadow Broker*, which contains more of her content and allows the player to briefly play with Liara again as a team member. Male Shepards, once again, do not have a same sex option in *Mass Effect 2* – an exclusion that is conspicuous, and supports the discourse of queer female sexuality being consumable in ways that queer male sexuality is not.

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[21] DLC are optional, extra content (such as characters or side-stories) that are available for purchase to accompany the main game. They are not integral to the base game, and not necessary for the completion of the base game.

In *Mass Effect 3*, another character, by the name of Diana Allers, appears and largely resembles Kelly in terms of her non-legitimate, sexual function; she can be pursued by either a male Shepard or female Shepard as a conquest, and doing so does not constitute a true romance the way the other characters do. The presence of two ostensibly bisexual women who offer non-committal, sexual "flings" in the trilogy provide me with a very specific finding. The handling of these two characters, in conjunction with how queer male romance is so restrained, once again recalls and emphasizes the conception of queer female sexuality as being an unthreatening commodity, whereas queer male sexuality must be approached cautiously. The added dimension of their subordinate and narratively-loose connection amplify this.

We must consider what is being said, what ideas are being produced – and reproduced – when the only queer presence in the game is relegated to a side-plot even more peripheral than the other side-plots? We may even term Kelly's involvement as a "side-mechanic" rather than a side-plot, as she has very little narrative impact. She can die as a casualty at the end of the game if the player is not quick enough in rescuing Shepard's crew after they are kidnapped by the enemy. Her death here is shown as one amongst a few other nameless characters from Shepard's crew – this portion is designed as a passive "punishment" for the player if she chose to do other things rather than prioritize rescuing the crew immediately after abduction. The particular gameplay markers as discussed above construct the other romances according to a degree of "legitimacy" – and the absence of them here is striking. In concerning questions of legitimacy in politics of queerness, this particular feature provides a unique look into how games can constitute discourses via game mechanics. The discourses here being that

queer romances are less "legitimate" than straight romances, they matter less, and are functionally "extra", existing in excess.

Kelly is also representative of queerness as commodity, as previously discussed. Her existence marks a very concerted effort at queer inclusiveness, all the while adhering to very specific standards of acceptability and discourses of queer visibility:

> Visibility in commodity culture is in this sense a limited victory for gays who are welcome to be visible as *consumer subjects but not as social subjects*. The increasing circulation of gay and lesbian images in consumer culture has the effect of consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences. (Hennessy, p. 32) [emphasis added]

While this point is speaking to a gay subjectivity as it exists in television, it is a resonant with gaming as well. Queer inclusion in video games exists in a finely controlled state – opening up the medium to a broader consumer base, but also delineating the hierarchy of subjectivity that has always existed, of heterosexual subjects and queerness at the margins. Kelly represents a certain kind of queer subjectivity in games – optional and periphery, consumable without the threat of too much subjectivity or personhood. The question of subjectivity and personhood comes into play again, when we consider the relationship between representations of queerness, and monstrousness, in the history of cinema.

### 4.4.2    *Queer Vampires of Cinema Reconstituted*

In the following section I bridge the gap between film and games, demonstrating how games can (and often do) borrow from cinema. For example, archetypes in film have

been a topic of study for years, because they can be seen as representational of a given

era's socio-political concerns. One such archetype is the vampire – of which a prolific

amount of study has been done with regard to queer reading and analysis (Benshoff,

1997; Benshoff, 2002; Dyer, 2002; Weiss, 1992), which I cover below. *Mass Effect 2*

contains a storyline that demonstrates a kind of retread of the "vampire as queer"

discourse, but with the interactivity adding a new layer of complication to that reading

and providing a new perspective. Its inclusion here is to show, through a very widely

studied phenomenon (queering cinema's vampires), how games on a very simple level

can reproduce discourses and in the same vein, counter them via gameplay mechanics.

This is vital to the heart of this thesis because it is a unique feature of this medium, and is

what sets its reality and its possibilities apart from others.

   *Mass Effect 2* introduces a new dimension to asari lore, with the addition of the

Ardat-Yakshi (appendix ii). They are described as individuals who have a condition that

is likened to a rare genetic defect: "When she mates with you, there is no gentle melding

of nervous systems. She overpowers yours, burns it out and hemorrhages your brain. You

end up a mindless shell, and soon after you are dead." One of the battle companions in

this installment is Samara, the mother of a character who has this condition, and part of

her personal mission (which Shepard must complete in order to maximize Samara's

"loyalty" and gain access to her full skillset)[22] is to eliminate her daughter lest she be free

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[22] *Mass Effect 2* features a gameplay component called "loyalty missions" – in which the player can choose to temporarily diverge from the main plot line to help out the secondary characters with their personal missions. Doing so is vital to obtaining the most positive ending in the game – and ensuring the survival of the companion characters in the final mission. The in-game justification is that characters who embark on the final mission with other problems on their minds will not perform at their best, and thus increase their chances of dying. In gameplay terms, completing loyalty missions means securing resources (characters) as well as unlocking bonus character abilities (additional functions) and outfits (cosmetic changes). Doing these missions grants rewards functionally and narratively.

to cause destruction and mayhem across the galaxy. The daughter is named Morinth, and at a vital moment in the mission (assuming certain steps were taken), I am given the choice between taking on Morinth as a companion for the rest of the game or remaining with Samara – this choice results in the death of the other character.

Morinth – and by extension, the Ardat-Yakshi – provides an interesting dimension to the asari as characters. The characteristics of Morinth's lust for power and sexual predation (through the use of abilities that are coded supernatural, or at least, non-mundane) are reminiscent of vampirism in form and in function, and along with the inherent asari bisexuality recalls the discourse on vampirism as coded queer sexuality present in the early days of horror cinema. Even Samara's descriptions of her evoke familiar tropes of the cinematic vampire: "She impresses with sophistication and sex appeal. Then she strikes." The sexual allure of the vampire figure combined with subtexts of queer sexuality was a topic of much discussion among film scholars. Richard Dyer, in *The Culture of Queers* (2001), speaks to this formula:

> Vampirism is not merely, like all our sexuality, private; it is also secret. It is something to be hidden, to be done without anyone knowing. The narrative structure of the vampire tale frequently consists of two parts, the first leading up to the discovery of the vampire's hidden nature, the second concerned with his/her destruction. (p. 78)

Dyer's observations here provide more ways to think about the connection between queer sexuality and the non-human with Samara's personal mission. When I speak to Samara about it, she exposits about the Ardat-Yakshi condition and the features that constitute it. Eventually, she makes it clear that Morinth must be destroyed, as she is beyond

redemption and cannot be reasoned with. Samara also speaks to the secret nature of this condition, the lack of the widespread knowledge about it in in-universe lore, and how it is seen as something stigmatized and monstrous: "Now the asari have a place in the galaxy, and they don't wish this defect to be widely known." This secrecy and stigmatization recalls the place queerness has in normative society very plainly. Moreover, much like in Dyer's model above, the narrative structure of this mission ends with Morinth's destruction.

Unless I choose otherwise; if I align with Morinth in the final confrontation, Samara is killed and Morinth effectively takes over her role in the game – with most of the same skillset, even assuming her appearance so as not to arouse suspicion from other characters. Choosing this path is constituted as a "renegade" choice by the game's morality meter. After her recruitment, Shepard can visit Morinth and agree to a sexual encounter – which humorously results in a "game over" screen. This is not a dire consequence as the game will be reloaded and the player will know not to instigate the encounter again.

The significant role of player choice here provides an alternative to the more conventional ways film handles its vampires. An integral element to the queer-reading and queer-coding of the vampire was that the monster is always killed at the end of the narrative, positioning queer sexuality as monstrous and unable to survive (Benshoff, 1997, p. 37). The added layer of secrecy and hiding from mainstream notice also recalls the similar trajectories of queer presence in history. Indeed this reading is strengthened when the player learns that Ardat-Yakshi are sterile as well, so while they are not undead in the way of the traditional vampire, they still arrive at a reproductive dead end as with

the vampires of film or literature (Halberstam, 1993, p. 345)[23]. Player choice here

provides a chance for the monster to *escape* destruction – and indeed grants a semblance

of "triumph" to the monster in question, even if the game itself presents this as moral

negative. The existence of this option is enough to destabilize the canon, as it were.

In *Vampires & Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (1992), Andrea Weiss examines

the particular figure of the lesbian vampire, and writes:

> Merging two kinds of sexual outlaws, the lesbian vampire is more than simply a
>
> negative stereotype. She is a complex and ambiguous figure, *at once an image of*
>
> *death and an object of desire*, drawing on profound subconscious fears that the living
>
> have toward the dead and that men have toward women, while serving as a focus for
>
> repressed fantasies. The generic vampire image both expresses and represses
>
> sexuality, but the lesbian vampire especially occupies the sexual rather than the
>
> supernatural realm. (p. 84) [emphasis added]

Weiss speaks to the particulars of the lesbian experience and the relationship between

lesbianism and vampires in cinema (note that Morinth is able to prey on male and female

Shepards alike), and the crux of this analysis is useful here as well. As a part of Samara's

mission to hunt down Morinth, I am led to investigate the bedroom of Morinth's most

recent victim: a young human woman named Nef. We see the threads of connection

between Nef's diary entries (appendix iii) about her relationship with Morinth to Weiss's

examination of the allure of the lesbian vampire: "Am I a freak? Morinth is a girl like me,

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[23] Halberstam's analysis points to the dual interpretation of vampire sexuality as both homoerotic/deviant and heterosexual exogamy – in that vampires do reproduce other vampires by the act of the bite, which is coded as sexual (p. 344). However, it is notably only male vampires that have this ability, while female vampires are non-reproductive. As the asari from *Mass Effect* are entirely female by design, my analysis in tandem with Halberstam's is emphasized.

and she's definitely not human". The terms used by Nef in her diary entries recalls familiar terms used to describe vampires – such as "trance" and "hunger" – as well as invoking a sense of queer awakening. The homage is clear, and its deployment in this case is a fascinating exercise in how discourses are learned and reproduced across media forms.

Samara's description of Morinth's near-supernatural appeal to her victims can find its thematic footholds in the queer vampire narratives of the cinema:

> Morinth speaks to you on many levels. Her body tells yours that she'll bring unimaginable ecstasy. Her scent evokes emotions long hidden. Her eyes promise you things you were always scared to ask of another. Her voice whispers to you after she is done speaking.

We see similarities between Morinth's supernatural appeal here and the hypnotic appeal of vampires past – even to the most iconic of them all, Dracula. There are clear implications in the description above, and throughout, as to the correlation between a perceived "decadent" sexuality and monstrousness – a connection that Dyer points to as one of the ways and reasons queerness can be read in vampire narratives (p. 74). To specify – queer sexuality historically being linked to "decadence" was one of the many ways in which to justify other-ing attitudes and discrimination, and consequently, cinema would reuse this rhetoric in the presentation of its vampires and thus, leads to a natural reading of vampires as queer-coded. There is also the point that the Ardat-Yakshi condition manifests only in terms of sexual acts and one's sexual nature, and when we consider Dyer's point of relationship between vampirism and the secret nature of sexuality, we see a thread of connection:

Moreover, it is not just what the vampire does that makes vampirism so readable in sexual terms but the social space that it occupies. The act of vampirism takes place in private, at night, most archetypally in a bedroom, that is, the same space as our society accords the sex act. (p. 76)

The penultimate interaction between Shepard and Morinth in Samara's loyalty mission is Shepard having to stall Morinth, under the guise of being interested in her seduction, to buy Samara time to travel to their location. Incidentally, as per Dyer's analysis, this interaction takes place in the privacy of Morinth's dimly lit and secluded apartment. If a player has not accrued enough points toward conversation skills, Shepard will be temporarily at Morinth's hypnotic mercy until she is saved by Samara's timely arrival. If this is the case, the choice to recruit Morinth at the expense of Samara's life is not available – as Shepard will automatically side with Samara. The narrative implication here is that Shepard will not consider siding with someone who almost kills her.

If the player *has* accrued the necessary skills however, then the choice will present itself at the crucial moment. This is a particular set of circumstances that provide a significant point of analysis – the game implicitly *rewards* players who have demonstrated a degree of mastery (here gauged and calculated through points), by granting more choices that direct the narrative to their particular tastes. In this case, my investment of time and skill into the game grants me access to more choices. The vampire figure can live and emerge triumphant – evading the destruction that has shaped the vampire narrative since its inception, if I decide that this is to my taste.

While it would be complicated to argue that this as is instance of positive queer representation due to the negative correlation between queer sexuality and

114

monstrousness, it is an instance where the game has presented the existence of counter-narratives and the forms they can take. The linkage between mastery and narrative reward – and the notion of replacing normative narratives with counter-narratives is an appealing one. Furthermore, we see an example of a reverse discourse (as proposed by Foucault) in practical action, as well as a demonstrating of the shifting nature of power in a mechanical sense.

In this instance, *Mass Effect* has reclaimed the monstrous queer vampire, and validated this reclamation via player choice. Players who chose her, enacted a power of authorial control over a narrative that otherwise would have gone a more conventional route in a different medium – not only because of constraints over the physical capabilities of the medium, but also because conventional attitudes would demand that the vampire be slain. For players that desire an engagement with this kind of character that does not lead to the character's destruction, video games offer an opportunity to see this sort of narrative become canonical.

## 4.5 *Mass Effect 3* (2012)

### 4.5.1　*Signaling the Queer, and Normalization*

*Mass Effect 3* sees a significant change for queer inclusion in the trilogy. Many new characters join the cast, most notably Samantha Traynor and Steve Cortez. Neither join Shepard's party as playable combatants, but rather work on the ship as a data analyst and shuttle mechanic, respectively. Their addition is meaningful because they are the first exclusively lesbian and gay romantic interests in the trilogy. This also marks the first, and only, time a male Shepard is able to engage in same-sex romance.

The way these two characters are integrated into the game, and subsequently, the ways in which their respective sexualities are "marked" for the player are salient. Once again, labels are never directly used. Upon first meeting Cortez, I can inquire about his personal history before the events of *Mass Effect 3*, and he will mention having had a husband:

SHEPARD: You were stationed on Earth. Do you have family there?

CORTEZ: I'm an only child. Lost my parents years ago. I had a husband, back when I was stationed at Ferris Fields. The Collectors took out the whole colony…I'd rather not talk about it.

It is significant to note that there is never any option, despite the array of responses the game allows me in most situations, to be verbally homophobic either to Cortez or Traynor. This presents a unique point of analysis in a game that constructs itself on player choice and freedom. The ability to disapprove of a character's orientation has been present in an older BioWare game, *Dragon Age: Origins* (2008), so its absence here marks a change. While the political implications of ensuring that queer sexualities cannot be constituted as negative in the game are very obviously positive, the purpose of analyzing it here and is to understand the discursive implications of such a choice.

We understand games to reflect cultural attitudes, and I have explored ways in which this occurs. Here, we come to see a way games in turn shape discourse. *Mass Effect 3*'s purposeful decision to limit homophobia is built into the game's very mechanics and marks a politically significant choice – that is, the game is aware of, and delineates, power relations in a certain way. It is not simply a case of condemning being homophobic: rather, the choice to do so simply *does not exist*. This absence is rooted in

creator choice and with it we witness a process of normalization, with clear intent on the part of the writers. In our current social climate, queerness is still marked as Other, and integration into heterosexist, "normative" spaces is still fraught with complications. Withholding the ability to comment on a character's sexuality – signaling its "difference" from typically unmarked heterosexuality – as well as integrating orientation into casual conversation, as with Cortez, is something *Mass Effect 3* does to produce a discourse of normalized queer sexuality.

Silence needs to be further considered for its discursive function as well, as outlined here, a theoretical trajectory recalls Foucault:

> In this light, we can view the tension between silence and subject, oppression and expression, not as simple and clear-cut oppositions to resist or embrace but rather as complex negotiations of cultural codes and categories that do not operate stably or consistently between differently positioned subjects or even in the same subject. By recognizing silence as a semiotic product rather than as an innocent absence, the various relations of power and valuation accorded the various determinants of the simultaneous subject can be explored precisely in and by means of the structures that otherwise naturalize them." (Loftus, p. 43)

Simply, silence is not an absence of discourse, but also the product – as well as arbiter – of discourse. In *Mass Effect 3*, silence is used as a tool to impart a discourse of queer acceptability not only within the game's world, but also speaking its formations outside of the text as well.

Traynor has a similar introduction, hinting at her sexuality through dialogue. She can be seen speaking to the spaceship's artificial intelligence – EDI (coded feminine) –

and remarks, after learning that EDI is an AI with sentience: "Thanks, EDI. And I apologize for all those times I talked about how…attractive your voice was." The games directly label which characters are romantic interests or not, leaving players to figure it out via interacting with them, and so the onus is entirely on the dialogue to signal that a particular individual is open to that kind of attention. This becomes doubly true when it comes to characters who are queer – stemming from the defaulting of heterosexuality in these instances, and the generally higher number of heterosexual characters comparatively to queer characters. That Cortez and Traynor's introductions are immediately marked with verbal cues signaling their sexualities is a particularly strong instance of this. Playing a queer Shepard and navigating the subtleties of interaction to figure out who is open to queer attention here even echoes true life.

While neither character discloses their sexuality via standard labels such as "gay" or "lesbian" – their absence can possibly be read as an extension of this attempt at normalization. Even if a male Shepard mistakenly flirts with Traynor, she will simply hint that he is, "not really my type. Remember how I liked *EDI's* voice?" More precisely, navigating heteronormative spaces (including fiction) does not require subjects to mark themselves as heterosexual by deploying the term, "straight". The privilege of the default is that default does not have to identify itself as such, as Hollinger affirms in "(Re)reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender" (1999): "All too often, heteronormativity is embedded in both theory and fiction as 'natural' and 'universal,' a kind of barely glimpsed default gender setting which remains unquestioned and untheorized" (p. 23-24). Referring to a past spouse or remarking on the attractiveness of another character's voice would be completely passable in a

heteronormative context. Does this lead to an assumption that, as a natural extension of normalizing queerness, developers can proceed in a similar way with queer sexualities?

The question is much more complicated. In such instances there is the concern that, in treating queerness similarly to heterosexuality, we run the risk of de-contextualizing and de-politicizing queerness (Greer, p. 9), and inevitably, de-historicizing, as discussed earlier. Moreover, Foucault's notion of silence as another form of discourse comes to mind here. Is it a matter of finding a balance between "normalization" and a more "marked" method of inclusion? Does such a balance exist? At what point do we adhere too much to political history, and not enough to envisioning meaningful queer inclusion that speaks to future goals? These questions consistently appear because there is no consensus, and arguably there should not be. The multiplicity of the queer experience means that the variety in these representations should therefore speak to a variety of desires and experiences. What is problematized is the allocation of political value (or not) to these representations, and the question of whether or not these inclusions are harmful to the project of progressiveness.

**4.6 Disrupting the Default, and Orientation as Mechanics**

*4.6.1 Reimagining the Default*

EDI is a character that appeared in *Mass Effect 2* as an artificial intelligence that served as an embodiment of the Normandy, the spaceship Shepard commands. She initially had the appearance of a spherical hologram. In the third installment, she acquires a new body that more closely resembles a chrome, human female android. Her design reflects the male gaze as discussed by Mulvey, with her sleek, chrome curves recalling

iconic and culturally-ingrained sexualized images of science fiction robots of past media, such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), and the iconic style of artists such as Hajime Sorayama. Her feet are even elevated at the heels, to give the impression of standing on high heels, and there are dark bands around her thighs that evoke the imagery of garter stockings.

The sexualized design is not the only point of interest her character brings in the third game, as she enters into a romantic relationship with a human male character – Jeff Moreau ("Joker"). Joker has been a staple of the game's cast since the first title, acting as the spaceship's pilot, and friend to Shepard across her adventures. EDI and Joker meet in the second game, wherein they progress from hostile coworkers to friends with a mutual respect for each other (and with flirtatious overtones to their dialogue) by the game's end. It is only in the third game, specifically with EDI obtaining a more humanoid appearance, does the romance become more concrete beyond verbal banter.

Sexualizing and applying sexuality to robots/androids is not a new practice. Science fiction has explored this territory before, in literature and in film. Cyborgs have been used as figures to convey commentaries on sex and gender, such as in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), and academics have been speaking to this for decades (Silvio, p. 56). Films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Metropolis* have had works dedicated to exploring how the films present the connection between technology and sexuality (Hanson, 1993; Huyssen, 1981). What is interesting to discuss here is the application of heterosexuality onto the android/gynoid figure. While nothing in the game would point to EDI being "heterosexual" or averse to queer "attraction", she is implied in the game as being

exclusively interested in Joker based on their shared experiences and camaraderie in running the ship.

In his analysis of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ellis Hanson examines the film according to a queer reading of the film's themes and characters – principally, the non-human computer HAL. He contextualizes his usage of the term queer as:

the odd, the uncanny, the undecidable. But, more importantly, I refer to 'queer' sexuality, that no-man's land beyond the heterosexual norm, that categorical domain virtually synonymous with homosexuality and yet wonderfully suggestive of a whole range of sexual possibilities (deemed perverse or deviant in classical psychoanalysis) that challenge the familiar distinctions between normal and pathological, straight and gay, masculine men and feminine women. (p. 137 – 138)

Hanson ties this particular notion of queerness into his analysis of Kubrick's film, and how it is an example of an "eroticization of technology" (p. 139) and ultimately, his discussion of "technology as a sexual prosthetic device" (p. 138). I point to Hanson's piece here because its echoes can be heard in the depiction of EDI's sexuality in *Mass Effect*.

EDI's sexualized design and induction into a heterosexual romantic subplot would normally resist queer interpretation, and could even been argued as an unnecessary reification of heterosexuality – a return to heterosexuality as default. I want to propose however, evaluating this inclusion in terms of how *Mass Effect*'s queer representation is characterized not only by its queer characters, but also through the way it conceives its ostensibly "heterosexual" characters. Especially in regard to Hanson's notion of queer as "challenging familiar distinctions". Here, we do not speak of queerness – in terms of the

121

usual connections to LGBT-specific identities, experiences, and political conceptualization – so much as how queerness converges with notions of "difference". Joker is notable in that he is physically disabled, with a condition that gives him very brittle bones, and is the only disabled character in the series. While the games treat the romance with some measure of humour – much of the humour coming from the strangeness of the two of them together – the couple are still presented with a sense of legitimacy, and the affection between the two is demonstrated as genuine. They are the most prominent secondary couple in the game, after Shepard and her love interest (should the player choose to have one). It is significant that the most prominent heterosexual couple in the series does not fit standard conventions of heterosexuality – particularly of able-bodied, cisgender couples. They in fact challenge them in their own way, especially taking into consideration that disability is never categorized alongside "normative" conceptions of heterosexuality. The defaulting of the these two secondary characters into a presumed heterosexual sphere becomes complicated by the non-normative bodies that inhabit it. Here, *Mass Effect* offers a challenge to what conventional heterosexuality can look like in a piece of action-oriented, science-fiction media that has so far relied upon established and comfortably normative tropes and dressings.

There is an especially pertinent element to this relationship that challenges the notion of heteronormativity: Joker and EDI's relationship leads to a reproductive "dead end". As Thibodeau discusses, much of science fiction is steeped in heteronormativity, echoing the framework purposed by Hollinger. The most basic tenets of much science fiction is deeply ingrained in the heteronormative mindset:

The impulse to 'discover' and colonize is deeply connected to reproductive and erotic

drives, rendering the project of imperialism one of the most heteronormative forces in

history…While science fiction has the potential to offer alternatives to the divide-

and-conquer mentality of expansion, it often repeats many of the same old tropes:

*feminizing the alien, colonizing 'empty' planets, fetishizing phallic weapons and*

*ships, penetrating the unknown*. (2012, p. 268) [emphasis added]

Thibodeau's point here not only recalls how *Mass Effect* conceptualizes its asari

characters, but is also germane to how we observe EDI. As mentioned before, EDI is

literally an embodiment of the spaceship – Joker's pride in his pilot skills having

manifested in a literal romantic relationship with his ship's A.I is an ironic theme played

across their relationship. What Joker and EDI represent here is an interesting interplay

between replicating heteronormativity by their conception (fetishized ship, heterosexual

romantic subplot) and at the same time, presenting the most antithetical complication in

the project of heteronormativity – non-reproduction. Thibodeau draws on the works of

Lee Edelman, and references "a politics of the future always invested in heterosexual

reproduction", and subsequently, queerness as a resistance to it (p. 274). Thibodeau's

analysis highlights the non-reproductivity counterpoint as a way to do a queer reading of

conventional science fiction: "This resistance ultimately queers heteronormative utopian

impulses such as reproduction and the avoidance of death" (p. 274). This, in tandem with

the asari characters as queer bodies able to reproduce, populate *Mass Effect* with a

multitude of subversive and defiant queer themes.

Evaluating EDI's design also necessarily recalls Butler's concept of performativity.

When it comes to performance theory, we have come to understand that "[i]n individual

performances, the subject reiterates social ideals of gender behavior and it is these re-citations, these active repetitions of previously existent models, which are constitutive of the individual as a gendered subject" (Hollinger, p. 32). This re-citation of established gender norms is reflected in the character's visual design, and is also conceptualized in accordance with the male gaze. EDI is coded in feminine aesthetics, and this is reflected visually. EDI's feminine gender performance is exercised through her visual style, and also the ways she engages her relationship with Joker, in accordance to a femininity that is informed by heteronormativity.

BioWare is aware of cultural and social notions associated the performance of femininity. Some of EDI's dialogue purposefully draws attention to these notions with humour, and in doing so, also highlight their performative nature:

SHEPARD: It seemed like you two might make a good match.

EDI: I was not so certain. When I first presented this body to Jeff, he seemed aloof.

SHEPARD: Really? What did Joker say?

EDI: He said I didn't have to conform to some feminine ideal in order to impress him.

I then called him out on his bullshit, and we then proceeded to talk normally.

In this scenario the characters are aware of the social script they are expected to adhere to, however, they do not proceed as if this awareness inherently begets subversion. There is a subtle acknowledgement that speaking plainly of sex does not equal subversion, a notion that recalls Foucault's warnings of the repressive hypothesis. Similarly, spotlighting the performative nature of gender does not in fact render the significations meaningless or necessarily reconstitute the power relations in any way.

The language is also utilized in a very specific way in this example. EDI's speech patterns are generally formal, a standard conception of being based in technology, and so the use of the rather informal "bullshit" brings attention to the line it was used in. Significantly, it marks a degree of transparency – everyone (EDI, the writers, the player) knows that Joker is impressed by the new humanoid body, not only because it was demonstrated in the earlier parts of the game, but because we are all beings informed by discourse and understand the dynamics at play regarding the favorability of sexually-attractive bodies – and in particular, what conventional conceptions of desirability look like.

My interactions with EDI are largely characterized by her asking Shepard questions about human behavior, and the most salient are ones where she requests advice concerning her relationship with Joker. These conversations tend to take on comedic tones, the humor serving to undercut the procedural nature of romance to a context-less subject:

EDI: I believe he has a strong affectionate attachment to me, but he has not stated it to anyone yet. Shepard, you have firsthand sexual experience. How do you know when someone is romantically invested?

SHEPARD: [Uh…they pay attention?] They'll usually show signs they can't stop thinking about you. You know: asking you out, giving you presents, maybe playing music…[24]

(pause)

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[24] This particular response is chosen by the player, and represents the paragon (or "kind") choice – the other response is more dismissive in tone. The brackets denote the paraphrase that is present on the dialogue wheel.

EDI: I lack material wants other than hardware and software upgrades, and my core

programming does not assign values to music. Perhaps we could discuss how to

provoke Jeff into an emotional commitment.

SHEPARD: That's not how to think of it. It's got to be natural. You need chemistry.

EDI: I see. There are a number of pharmaceuticals I could inject to simulate the

desired emotional state.

There is an investigation here into the performative nature of heteronormative romance, one that is also demonstrated through the way the script is structured as well. The above interaction is between EDI and a female Shepard; the same conversation with a male Shepard has slight alterations to the dialogue in the first half. Instead of asking a male Shepard, "How do you know when someone is romantically invested?" she asks, "When you are sexually interested in another, what kind of advances do you make?" framing a male Shepard as the sexual aggressor, and a female Shepard as not. It is one of the differences in gameplay that would be missed by a majority of players who only play through once, but under examination reveals cultural conceptions of gender and romance that come through in the game's writing. The discourse of men as being sexual aggressors and women as receivers of sexual attention is being reproduced via this small change in dialogue, despite the PC playing largely the same role in the game's narrative regardless of being a man or woman.

There are also insights that can be gleaned from the syntax itself. EDI asks a female Shepard about "romantic investment", and a male Shepard about "sexual interest" and "advances". Concerning the conversation in its totality, there is a conflation of the

two – but that these two lines are specifically different here speaks to much about the conception of sexuality and romance and the roles that men and women are perceived to the play. Female Shepard's response also recalls familiar notions about romance by speaking of presents and flowers, of "heterosexual" courtship in which a woman is the receiver of attention and action. EDI's conversation with female Shepard evokes an image of two "women" commiserating on romance, a dynamic that is lost with a male Shepard. It also subtly reinforces the perception of EDI as woman-identified.

As Hollinger states, "science fiction is an overwhelmingly *straight* discourse, not least because of the covert yet almost completely totalizing ideological hold heterosexuality has on our culture's ability to imagine itself otherwise" (p. 24). While EDI's inclusion into the games and her plotline with Joker represents an interesting approach to de-naturalizing heteronormativity in the narrative by complicating the "default" state of the parties involved (as well as signaling their departure from these normative conceptions), ultimately this inclusion still operates within a "naturalized heterosexual binary", to borrow from Hollinger (p. 24).

### 4.6.2 *"Flipping the Switch" Orientation*

Kaidan Alenko has been noted as being one of the human love interests available to a female Shepard in the first game. His character takes a significant turn in *Mass Effect 3*, wherein he becomes available for romance with male Shepards as well. He and Ashley Williams (the female human love interest in the first game) are put into a situation in the first game wherein Shepard must sacrifice one of them on a mission, and whoever remains (dubbed the "Virmire Survivor") will continue to be active in the plot for the rest

of the trilogy. Narratively and mechanically, Kaidan and Ashley occupy parallel roles and serve the same function in the plot thereafter.

Across the trilogy, there is a mechanism in place to keep player data consistent across the games; this involves transferring saved files over from the previous game(s) to the new title. This ensures all the details, from Shepard's customized appearance to the choices the player has made, are kept intact as the story progresses. For those who play the games out of order – say, beginning with *Mass Effect 2* – the game will automatically place the player into a narrative context wherein all the significant choices from the previous game are pre-generated. I highlight this feature because one of these choices manifests in a way that highlights the games' heteronormativity: players who skip the first title are given a Virmire Survivor of the opposite gender. Female Shepards will have a game state where Kaidan is the surviving character, and male Shepards will have Ashley. We can infer that this is done to maximize the potential number of love interests available to players, as neither Kaidan nor Ashley are able to be romanced by a same-sex Shepard in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*. What becomes incredibly significant however, is that in the third installment, Kaidan "becomes" bisexual and Ashley does not.

Once again, no terms are deployed when Kaidan contextualizes his romantic life – no mention of his sexuality when he confesses his attraction to a male Shepard:

KAIDAN: We've been friends a long time, Shepard. Ever known me to be with anyone? Guess I'm just choosey, or patient, or…I don't know. Maybe what I've never found – what I want – is something deeper with someone that I already…care about.

(pause)

KAIDAN: That's what I want. What do you want?

The language of Kaidan's confession here is important; he utilizes many words that could supplement many different interpretations. "Choosey" is a different concept that "patient", but both are present to give the player a choice in determining what to infer from Kaidan's delayed romance. Both flatter the individuality of male Shepard, implying his special status in Kaidan's life – and if one were to read into it with a queer lens, it marks Shepard as a particularly special *man*. Kaidan's admittance of "I don't know" grants room for speculation, even when more well-informed players understand that this is mostly a diegetic contrivance to account for the developers' lack of commitment to observing male queerness in the trilogy's earlier years.

What is clearly intended as the way to read the scene is that either Kaidan has never fully realized his attraction to (male) Shepard until the third game, or has at least never chosen to act on his feelings until this point, even though a female Shepard can instigate a relationship with him in the first.[25] Reading Kaidan's romance in this way extends to how we can then read (male) Commander Shepard as well. In "Role-Play as Queer Lens: How 'ClosetShep' Changed My Vision of *Mass Effect*" (2017), Todd Harper explores a queer reading of the games while playing as a male Commander Shepard, and poses a significant question: "Given the real-life facts – that a cisgendered gay male Shepard having same-sex romance wasn't possible until *Mass Effect 3* – how could adjusting the lens to 'well, he was in the closet' shape how those experiences were consumed and interpreted?" (p. 127). Challenging the restrictions placed on a male Shepard's romantic options in the first two games by reading the character as "in the closet" (as opposed to

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[25] Though we understand that this is a retroactive decision rather than a purposeful one.

heterosexual) is an overt example of what is meant by queer reading. The process takes place in the domain of the player's thinking, outside the bounds of the game. Earlier, I proposed repurposing Consalvo and Dutton's concept of emergent play to emergent reading, describing this very process here – of unexpected readings players can conduct in games that arise in tandem with unexpected play.

Across the games there are also a few other instances of interaction between Shepard (regardless of gender) and Kaidan that lend themselves to particular readings. Harper points to the only instance in *Mass Effect 2* where the player gets to speak with Kaidan again[26]. In the scene, the two of them argue over what Kaidan perceives to be Shepard's change of loyalty and defection to an enemy faction[27]. Harper notes that Kaidan's angry, confused dialogue with a female Shepard (especially when romanced) seemed natural for a character that believes he has been betrayed – but when the same scene is played with a male Shepard "the deep notes of betrayal and hurt in Kaidan's dialogue suddenly took on a different tone" (p. 129). Kaidan having the same dialogue/line delivery toward both female and male Shepard carried "a note of confused betrayal that seemed to transcend friendship" (p. 129).

This is among many instances wherein retaining the same dialogue and voice acting makes certain scenes read as queer. Among the cast is a character named Tali, another alien female, romanceable by a male Shepard (from the second game onwards). Despite her ostensible heterosexuality, once I attain a high enough friendship with Tali a

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[26] The scene occurs with either Kaidan or Ashley, depending on who survived the first game. The argument with Shepard always occurs regardless of the relationship between the two, or the dialogue chosen in the interaction.
[27] *Mass Effect 2* has Shepard temporarily working with an extremist faction in galactic politics, out of necessity.

scene occurs that is very clearly a lead-in to a romantic path with male Shepard. In the

female version of this scene, things cut off before they can progress in that direction

(along with some small adjustments to dialogue), but what is noteworthy is that the tone

and dialogue largely remains the same, and so the flirtatious overtones bleed over:

> TALI: We're in our suits even among family. The most intimate thing we can do
> with another quarian is link our suit environments[28].

> TALI: We get sick at first, and then we adapt. It's our most important gesture of
> trust, of acceptance.

> TALI: I haven't trusted anyone enough for that, though. Except…well, no
> quarians. Um. You know what I mean.

> SHEPARD: [I trust you, too.] I appreciate the thought, Tali, and I feel the same
> way. But you don't have to prove anything to me.

> TALI: I know. Nevertheless, I'd be honored to link suits with you, Shepard.

> TALI: You know, if you were a quarian, and we weren't already on a suicide
> mission.

> TALI: I'm going to tinker a bit more. Thanks for coming by!

With a male Shepard, the latter portions of this bit of dialogue ends differently (appendix

iv), and can diverge into an additional scene if the player chooses to romance her. Tali's

nervousness and stumbling is the same across both scenes, and so it is the context of

either a male or a female Shepard that is supposed to steer the reading of the scene.

Through a queer lens, however, Tali's flustered tone registers as an infatuation – at the

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[28] The context here is that Tali is a quarian, an alien race where individuals live inside suits to protect their compromised immune systems. This portion of dialogue is amidst a larger conversation about the trilogy's worldbuilding.

very least, bordering on non-platonic. Scenes such as this echo what Harper observed earlier with Kaidan.

Back in Kaidan's case, Harper highlights the key differences in the confession scene between a male Shepard and a female Shepard. He notes that for a female Shepard that has not had a prior romance with Kaidan, the confession scene plays out differently: "[a]t first the small talk is the same, but once the issue of the relationship arises there's no hesitance, no sense that he might be rejected. *Heterosexual Kaidan is considerably more assertive*" (p. 13) [emphasis added]. Observing the scene in question supports Harper's assessment (appendix v):

KAIDAN: You know what, though? I feel good about our chances.

SHEPARD: Yeah?

KAIDAN: Yeah. Lets me sleep better at night.

SHEPARD: You not sleeping, Kaidan?

KAIDAN: Maybe a little restless…

KAIDAN: The war isn't the only thing keeping me up at night…I wonder about us.

SHEPARD: Us?

KAIDAN: I…I have feelings for you, Shepard. And I want more.

KAIDAN: I want to understand what this is between us…and make it real.

KAIDAN: That's what I want. What do you want?

Comparatively to the confession scene with a male Shepard, it is very clear what Harper means. The language is considerably less self-conscious and leaves little room for interpretation. The use of "us" presents the notion that Kaidan has already considered the

132

potentiality of his and Shepard's relationship shifting into something romantic, whereas there is no sense of such a foundation in his thinking when it comes to male Shepard. The conversation with female Shepard is framed in terms of "us", whereas the one with male Shepard is framed in terms of "I" – the result is that a Kaidan speaking to male Shepard reads as more passive and open to rejection, and a Kaidan speaking to female Shepard, at least, already considers their relationship to be on the way there hence, saying "make it real" just before he essentially asks her to confirm it.

This assertiveness can also be seen where he states, "I have feelings for you, Shepard." Compare this to how frames male Shepard as "someone that I already care about" and the difference is stark. In one conversation he engages with Shepard directly, in another he puts a degree of separation between the two. These kinds of variances in dialogue aid in players reading scenes according to the desires of the writers, and with such a difference as the one Harper outlines here, it becomes natural to read Kaidan with a male Shepard as more hesitant *on the basis of sexuality*; true to life, Kaidan has no way to know if a male Shepard would be open to his advances even regardless of Shepard's sexuality.

It is also significant that the confession plays out in this manner because the scene must also take the player into account. Recalling what Kies wrote about games presuming the heterosexuality of the player, this scenario also speaks to that idea. It can be argued that not only is Kaidan more hesitant with a male Shepard for narrative reasons, but also because the developers are taking into account the likelihood of a heterosexual male player behind in the controller. The discourses around the acceptability of queer male sexuality and queer female sexuality are nuanced differently, and this is reflected in *Mass*

*Effect* as well. Same-sex female romances (Liara and Traynor) across the games come with love scenes, akin to the heterosexual ones, while the romance with Cortez (the sole male romance option for male Shepards outside of Kaidan) culminates in a fade-to-black. Earlier I have explored how queerness is packaged to be consumable by a (male) heterosexual audience, and this hesitation on Kaidan's part in the confession scene coincides with that mode of presentation. Queer female representation can be shaped to appeal to the heterosexual male gaze, which is not the case with queer male representation (Krzywinska, 2015, p. 109). Kaidan's hesitation, then, presents as a move on the part of the developer to preserve the comfort of the heterosexual male player.

The differing ways in which the Kaidan confession is handled speaks where power moves in this scenario. Even in this universe where queerness is largely unquestioned and, presumably, is not marginalized – there are pains taken to ensure that heterosexist sensibilities are not infringed upon. Kaidan's confession to a female Shepard operates on an assumption of permissiveness, even if his feelings are not returned; the confession to a male Shepard carefully navigates around a presumed potential for resistance, not only on the part of Shepard himself, but also the heterosexual male player. Here, it is clear to see how formations of power favor heterosexuality over queerness.

Doing a narrative interpretation of Kaidan's orientation poses an interesting question – do we now read Kaidan as a character that has *always* been queer, or is his queerness conditional and to be marked with footnotes and addendums? Harper writes, "Kaidan's sexuality is defined primarily by his relationship to Shepard, an interesting contrast to the other same-sex male option, Steve Cortez, who is narratively defined as having had a husband who was killed in action" (p. 130). This kind of player-centered

sexuality presents an interesting conundrum when it comes to defining the boundaries of sexuality. In any case, what is significant here in his queerness is how it relates to game mechanics. We understand, from a technical perspective, that games are ultimately reducible to lines of code, just as literature is ink on paper and film is a series of images on celluloid. How queerness is constrained – or liberated – by a few differences in the coding and programming is an interesting notion. The only real difference in Kaidan in *Mass Effect 3*, technically, is that his coding has opened up romantic dialogues and scenes with a male Shepard now. The physicality of his romantic scenes with Shepard are exactly same regardless if Shepard is male or female – Shepard's character model is switched depending on gender. It is the voices and dialogue, in conjunction with the physical image of a man or woman on screen, that completely politicize and contextualize the scenes in a different way. Film studies paved the way for understanding the power of moving images, and so an image-based media that can radically alter and reshape its own content at the behest of the player in such a way poses a compelling arena of study.

I do not mean to reduce the complex and political nature of queer representation to a matter of opening and closing game mechanics – after all, how is this different from queer representation constituting different lines on a page in a book or editing shots in a film? I bring it up to highlight how entire discourses can be formed and reproduced by something so simple as to "flipping a switch", or more precisely, by the changing and shifting of seemingly minor mechanical decisions. The entire political and thematic conception of a character (or idea) can become radically upended at the flip of this "switch".

Kaidan's relationship with a male Shepard is inherently constituted differently from a female Shepard, and not only because of its new queer context. It is also because accounting for the prior limitations results in a different *story*, one of two people who fell in love later. Here, gameplay mechanics and structure impact more than just representation on the socio-political scale: they also inform the finer points of the storytelling itself. Without knowing the background information – that the Kaidan character was *retroactively* conceptualized as queer, a player freshly engaging with the game could leave with a completely different reading of that narrative. Moreover, a male Shepard's story in this scenario becomes a long-term tale of "coming out", if we follow Harper's conception of male Shepard as having been in the closet. This is a critical example of how context becomes critical to a reading a text a certain way.

**CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

*5.1 Final Observations – Feature and Function*

I conclude with one final point of observation: the extent to which these games incorporate and conceptualize sexuality can be considered in terms of feature and function, something I have touched on throughout this paper. Sexuality is not at the core of the *Mass Effect* experience: in terms of genre expectations and structure of play, sexuality is a supplemental feature that enriches the narrative experience and offers new gameplay paths for players to tread. Moreover, as with nearly every element of the game, sexuality is a function of gameplay. It is procedural – an enacted process. This is true regardless of the sexuality in question; heterosexual romance is conducted in much the same fashion as queer romance, beginning with a choice and a press of a button – a choice made by me, the player. It exists in a highly structured and regimented way, presented in terms of scripts and sequences, at the behest of player input, and begins and ends at player leisure.

Across three games, *Mass Effect* has demonstrated how different approaches and implementation strategies produce different discursive results: from giving players the powerful ability to reclaim the narrative of the monstrous queer (Morinth), to a feature-based side-lining that further delegitimatizes an already marginalized group within the game space (Kelly). *Mass Effect* has produced a variety of queer representations, some of which have upheld a heterosexist status quo, and others that have presented opportunities for transgressive politics and reverse discourse.

In observing these texts and considering them in terms of their formal and narrative qualities, and what these designs can possibly tell us about the state of

queerness in games, we turn these functions into something more than its foundations. Pressing buttons becomes more than a part of this mode we call, "play" – it becomes a mechanism for discursive processes. A function of gameplay becomes a function of discourse. As I have explored in this analysis, discourses of queer gender and sexuality are produced and reaffirmed by these functions and what they allow the player.

While the trilogy presents some subversive concepts and dialogue regarding queerness, overall the games fall into many of the pitfalls of most mainstream media. The power that the male gaze exerts over the asari and female same-sex romances is an inescapable part of the games' construction, and interrupts the trajectory of progressive politics that I apply to the games' in my analysis. The games themselves demonstrate an acknowledgment of power relations, and even show changes as the games go on – such as Kaidan's availability for male Shepards, and the addition of a gay male love interest, in *Mass Effect 3*. Overall, however, considering the games in their totality paints a complicated picture. While this thesis argues that the games serve as a preliminary framework for more radical queer depictions in the future, in the present, they remain troubling for the ways in which they adhere to convention and the reach of power.

*5.2 Summary*

*Mass Effect* recalls familiar discourses of queerness across its trilogy of games. Tropes found in other media are reformulated in these games and thus, reconstituted, so the end result is familiar yet all together new. Familiar formulations of gender and sexuality are found across all elements of the narrative – as well as through its visual aesthetics – from the subtle re-scripting of dialogue options based on gender to the way

138

the self-proclaimed "mono-gendered" race of women are stylized and gazed at by the game's camera. Moreover, gender performance is enacted in a way that demonstrates its artificiality while at the same time reaffirming itself, in line with how Butler originally formulated its processes, in a context that does not inherently necessitate its existence. Power relations run across all these operations, often favoring the reiteration of heterosexist standards. The asari, the trilogy's most significant example of gender dialogue, still fall into the trappings of being formed by the male gaze. This sublimation into the male gaze disrupts much of their effectiveness as a means of exploring the question of gender, and complicates what might otherwise have been a radical depiction of nonbinary gender.

Despite this, *Mass Effect* has demonstrated ways that reverse discourse is not only possible, but sanctioned by notions of validity and canonicity: we see an entrenched trope get uprooted and subverted by placing the monstrous queer in a position of victory over what would normally be a narrative of defeat, for instance. Moreover, complex, nuanced queer readings of the text become possible even in the games' limitations – as showcased in the Kaidan analysis.

I have observed how the presence of player choice – the mechanism of interactivity – is an integral element in the discursive operations of games. My agency as a player granted me the ability to select and discard narratives according to my own desires, letting me shape the "canon" message of *Mass Effect* to a degree. Of course, these choices themselves are shaped by design choices and are not limitless, and the decision-making that went into choosing which scenarios I was given control and where I

wasn't – such as the inability for me to have Shepard self-disclose as queer – speak to the discourses of queerness that inform the making of these games.

This discussion highlights how fundamentally layered and complex representation becomes in the context of games. Queer representation in particular takes many forms across the games and occupies many spots on the spectrum of politically radical to upholding long-standing status quos. I have found queer women to be commodified in service of the sensibilities of heterosexual men, while queer male sexuality barely moved from the margins of the game's pool of content. Conversely, I have also found that the game very rarely has instances of heterosexual side plots – and when it does, they also destabilize notions of heteronormativity in their own ways.

There are "mistakes", certainly – such as the asari still adhering conventionally binary conceptions of gender – but *Mass Effect* provides a model that harkens to many possibilities in the future of queer representation in gaming: we see discourse at work, to both reify oppressive systems as well as transgress those boundaries – understanding how discourses operate in a game space presents opportunities for improving the state of representation and its political reach. We have seen how disruptions to normative discourses can occur in games, and these disruptions, while small in the context of this particular trilogy, offer us an insight as to how the medium itself can potentially offer a terrain for much more significant reverse discourses in the future.

*5.2 Limitations of Project*

While my project has offered insight into the potential of games through a concentrated analysis of select samples, the limitations must be made transparent. *Mass*

*Effect*, while rife with content, is representative of only one kind of genre in gaming. Genre, as the concept operates in video games, facilitates a greater degree of differences between titles on the basis of mechanics and aesthetics than it does with other media – to the contention of some (Apperley 2006; King & Krzywinska 2013). The high degree of variance that exists across genre lines – narratively, aesthetically, structurally – makes an analysis that speaks to the larger landscape complicated. A study of queerness in a narrative-heavy title provides much room for analysis, but genres less focused on delivering heavy narratives still have the capacity to deliver significant representation, and should not be conceptualized as lesser in that capacity than games akin to *Mass Effect*. A narrative-based project such as mine makes for an inaccurate account for the possibilities of representation in a less-narrative focused genre. Still, my research speaks to the narrative and thematic potential of game design, and keeping the relative success of the franchise in mind and the popularity of narrative in games, this thesis still provides a discussion that is relevant to the wider landscape of games as a whole.

Moreover, given the size of the games relative to the scale of this project, necessary focus had to be applied. This means that while I accounted for the most significant examples of queerness in my analysis, I could not cover every instance of it. The goal was to provide prominent examples across an array of forms – from narrative to ludic, textual to visual – and so, covering every instance of queer representation that occurs in one category would have resulted in missed opportunities in another. Selecting content based on my particular notions of "significant" might also be contentious, as it means I made conscious choices to select certain examples over others, potentially affirming or producing researcher bias. To mitigate this, I aimed to provide countering

points to my arguments, examining particular examples on "both sides", as it were, and facilitating a nuanced discussion that emphasized each example's complexity.

Following on this desire to acknowledge multiple perspectives, the result is that giving due considerations into the ways that the trilogy "fails" – in regard to its more regressive or problematic elements – became restricted. In considering the size and scope of the project, the need to demonstrate the ways in which the series has provided the beginnings of a framework for radical and interesting ideas with regard to queerness, *despite* its failings, took precedence.

Lastly, in terms of the methodology I employed for this thesis, I strive to be clear about its approach. I primarily structured the analysis in accordance with my playthrough of the games – where I played through as a female, queer Shepard in a faithful relationship with Liara from the first *Mass Effect*, bypassing the romantic paths with other options. There is a point of divergence, however, wherein I made an analytical choice to pull the focus back from the specificity of my own game and instead redirected focus to the queer elements of the game *outside of my playthrough*. I justify this as putting the lens on content that would result in the most rich analysis and discussion, rather than simply yielding points of data. Moreover, I framed this project as adhering to the core principles of critical discourse analysis, but the analysis itself naturally had to diverge to a degree in terms of formula. In keeping with the particular needs of a game study, my approach to the method was much more a repurposing and borrowing of multiple tools than a total adherence to one toolset.

*5.3 Games and the Future*

*Mass Effect* had an initial release in 2007, and since then games have continued to evolve and make progress in social representation. More titles featuring prominent queer representation have since come into the market, some from BioWare themselves, spanning from big-budget, major titles to independent – *Grand Theft Auto: The Ballad of Gay Tony* (2009), *Life is Strange* (2015), *Gone Home* (2016), *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), and *Undertale* (2015) to name a few significant ones. The existence of queer people in games seems more widespread and normalized than ever before. While it might be incorrect to attribute this changing mindset of this industry to any one source, it is fair to suggest that the relative success of *Mass Effect* and the degree to which it featured queerness in such a big-budgeted, science-fiction adventure (developed by a well-known and beloved studio) played a hand in demonstrating to the industry – and community – that queer representation could contribute to a financially and critically successful product.

While the industry still has steps to take, and indeed still falls behind other media in many ways, the trajectory of progression is noteworthy. Games have demonstrated their ability to tell stories in unique, complex ways; being able to customize a main character is just one of a multitude of ways that games can disrupt the machinations of a traditional narrative. The ways that discourse, in particular, operates through *Mass Effect*, as this study has shown, demonstrates the ability of games to produce and reproduce discourses in an entirely unique and complex fashion that can serve many needs. In an industry that is competing with other media in revenue (Hart 2015), discourse in games is an untapped but entirely compelling arena for study for researchers. This thesis has shown the formations and potential of discursive operations regarding queerness, but

there is much potential for work along racial lines, gender, and disability. Social

representation has long been an object of study in media, and video games provide new

and invigorating ways to conceive of those representations – and the power relations that

inform them.

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Appendix I – Description of Asari from *Mass Effect*'s in-game codex

The asari were the first species to discover the Citadel. When the salarians arrived, it was the asari who proposed the establishment of the Citadel Council to maintain peace throughout the galaxy. Since then, the asari have served as the mediators and centrists of the Council.

An all-female race, the asari reproduce through a form of parthenogenesis. They can attune their nervous system to that of another individual of any gender, and of any species, to reproduce. This capability has led to unseemly and inaccurate rumors about asari promiscuity.

Asari can live for over 1,000 years, passing through three stages of life. In the Maiden stage, they wander restlessly, seeking new knowledge and experience. When the Matron stage begins, they "meld" with interesting partners to produce their offspring. This ends when they reach the Matriarch stage, where they assume the roles of leaders and councilors.

Appendix II – Ardat-Yakshi Codex

Ardat-Yakshi ("demon of the night winds") are asari suffering from a genetic disorder preventing conventional melding of nervous systems during mating. Instead, Ardat-Yakshi electro-chemically ravage their partners' systems, in extreme cases leaving victims as vegetative invalids or corpses. Asari psychologists regard this incapacity for mental fusion as preventing the development of empathy, leading to psychopathy. There is no known cure.

The disorder generally begins at infancy, reaching full pathology during Maiden adolescent sexual development. While seductive and sexually-driven as other asari, Ardat-Yakshi are congenitally sterile.

Ancient asari mythology held Ardat-Yakshi as gods of destruction, depicting them as villains of countless legends and as the anti-heroes of numerous asari epics.

Contrary to popular belief, Ardat-Yakshi are neither extremely rare (around one percent of asari dwell on the AY spectrum), nor are they all murderers. Most cultivate and discard countless exploitative or abusive relationships during their legally marginal lives. Despite rumors of Ardat-Yakshi syndicates, by nature Ardat-Yakshi are incapable of long-term cooperation.

As a disproportionately wealthy species, asari employ their economic reach and media ownership to hide the AY pathology from the galactic community, placing most Ardat-Yakshi in monitored work programs or seclusion. Only the most aggressive cases are sentenced to sanitaria and prisons or to the execution

Appendix III – Transcription of Nef's Diary Entries

Oldest Entry:

"Hey, diary. Cycle 34, orbit 671. There's a lot to talk about!

I dropped Jaruut's name, and they let me into the VIP room at Afterlife. I was sure everyone was staring at me.

Then the most beautiful asari starts dancing near me. She moved like water; form and volume but shifting, changing. I'm in a trance.

Then I'm dancing with her. Later, we went for skewers, and I'm supposed to see her again tomorrow."

Middle Entry:

"Cycle 36, orbit 671. Am I a freak? Morinth is a girl like me, and she's definitely not human.

Just…when we dance, and the Hallex is flowing through me…the way she looks at me – with a hunger, a longing…

No one's ever looked at me like that. We kissed tonight."

Newest Entry:

"Cycle 42, orbit 67. She's going to take me to her apartment tonight. Whatever happens, I want to be with her forever.

She can sell my pieces. We can live somewhere glamorous, like the women in Vaenia, that vid Morinth likes.

How did this happen to me? I'm just dumb trash from Omega.

Appendix IV – Male Shepard's dialogue with Tali

TALI: We're in our suits even among family. The most intimate thing we can do with another quarian is link our suit environments.

TALI: We get sick at first, and then we adapt. It's our most important gesture of trust, of acceptance.

TALI: I haven't trusted anyone enough for that, though. Except…well, no quarians. Um. You know what I mean.

SHEPARD: [I trust you, too.] I appreciate the thought, Tali, and I feel the same way. But you don't have to prove anything to me.

TALI: I know. Well, not that I know, but I didn't mean it like that. It's, um…Wow, it is really hot in here.

TALI: It's just that the tradition also signifies a willingness for, um, intimacy.

TALI: I wasn't trying to…it's not always like that. It's more…How did we even end up talking about this?

From here, the player is given the choice to commit to the romantic path with Tali, fully diverging from the similar scene with female Shepard.

KAIDAN: You know, my life flashed in front of my eyes on Mars – and there weren't enough moments like this, with people I care about.

SHEPARD: [What's going on with you?] How are you feeling these days?

KAIDAN: Feeling up to whatever the Reapers throw at me.

KAIDAN: And grateful that I convinced you to sit down for half a second and relax.

SHEPARD: [Glad we're getting to talk] Yeah, I think it's a good time for us to have a heart-to-heart.

SHEPARD: What are you drinking?

KAIDAN: If you're trying to butter me up, it might take a nice steak sandwich, too.

SHEPARD: So…

KAIDAN: Shot of whiskey and a good old Canadian lager. Think they have it?

SHEPARD: More likely to have Batarian Shard Wine.

KAIDAN: At my parents place in Vancouver, drank more than a few beers on their balcony, looking over English Bay.

KAIDAN: Yeah, beautiful view…

KAIDAN: You know what, though? I feel good about our chances.

SHEPARD: Yeah?

KAIDAN: Yeah. Lets me sleep better at night.

SHEPARD: You not sleeping, Kaidan?

KAIDAN: Maybe a little restless…

KAIDAN: The war isn't the only thing keeping me up at night…I wonder about us.

SHEPARD: Us?

KAIDAN: I…I have feelings for you, Shepard. And I want more.

KAIDAN: I want to understand what this is between us…and make it real.

KAIDAN: That's what I want. What do you want?


The player is then given the choice to commit to a romance, or turn him down.